

State of Maine
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Testimony of Rick Wilson, Extended Learning Specialist at the Maine Department of Education

In Support of: L.D. 2131

An Act to Support Extended Learning Opportunities

Before the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs

Sponsored by: Representative Worth and Senator Libby

Date: January 24, 2024

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan, and Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs:

My name is Rick Wilson, and I am here today representing the Department speaking in support of L.D. 2131, An Act to Support Extended Learning Opportunities. I have been an educator for 35 years and have been a champion of service learning and experiential learning since the start of my career. For the past three years I have worked at the DOE as the Extended Learning Opportunity Specialist, and I am also currently working in the field with Brunswick High School as their ELO Coordinator.

LD 2131 creates the definition for Extended Learning Opportunity in Maine statute, as one of multiple pathways for student learning.

Extended Learning Opportunities, or ELOs, are hands-on, credit-bearing experiences outside of the traditional classroom and courses with an emphasis on community-based career exploration. An ELO requires a teacher and a student to determine learning plan that incorporates the Maine Learning Results and involves research, reflection, and a final project or presentation. These programs can include paid meaningful work experiences, work skills development, and can connect to workforce industry standards that carry recognized credentials for students to apply towards professional certification as they graduate. Extended Learning programs also help students connect their curiosity and passions to pathways so they may be able to connect their interests with future education and career goals.

The growth of Extended Learning Opportunities in Maine is a story of relationships and teamwork. State agency collaborations between the Department of Education, Department of Economic and Community Development, and Department of Labor, often in partnership with community-based organizations including Eastern Maine Development Corporation, Aroostook County Action Program, Healthy Acadia along with support from Jobs for Maine Graduates have created an impressive team implementing and elevating this impactful work throughout Maine. Another network, Maine C3 (Community Coordinators Collaborative), which I cofounded five years ago consists of Extended Learning Coordinators throughout Maine that share best practices

and resources. Currently, there are over 50 Extended Learning Programs throughout Maine. I cannot emphasize and highlight enough the work of the coordinators who make these experiences happen and their impacts on school cultures. I hope you are also able to hear directly from those who are doing this life-changing work.

In 2022, grants totaling more than \$5.6 million were provided for 26 programs in 13 Maine counties. These grants were made possible by funds from the Maine Jobs and Recovery Plan and have impacted over 2,000 students throughout Maine by providing relevant, hands-on learning, and valuable work experiences that students will use throughout their adult lives. These programs also engaged over 1,000 community partners with their local schools over the last year which led to paid work experiences, earned academic credit, and increased student engagement-

Defining Extended Learning Opportunities in statute will provide greater awareness and legitimacy of ELOs, helping further encourage their use as an effective and engaging educational practice throughout Maine. Defining Extended Learning Opportunities in statute reflects and supports what is currently happening, and has been happening, over the last decade across the state. Formally acknowledging and recognizing this learning pathway will give educators the ability to promote experiential learning while encouraging community connections and workforce development opportunities. These programs allow students to play an active role in their education by working with their teachers to design the best strategy to meet their learning goals and post-secondary aspirations.

One example I'd like to share that represents the power of extended learning is from a visit I had in Downeast Maine with six ELO students at Three Islands Oyster Company in Beals, Maine. The participating students are not CTE, pre-apprentice, or apprentice students. They are ELO students from the local high school earning elective science credit for helping nearby Downeast Institute with a formal study of raising oysters in a vacant lobster pound. The students are native to Jonesport Beals, and their families are all fishing families. When asked about what this experience has meant to them one student replied, "The lobster industry is kind of shaky right now and I feel like something like this could keep people here. All of us here are in some way connected to the fishing industry, we knew about this farm, and experiencing it and seeing the potential is pretty cool to be a part of." The impact of these experiences is transformative, and not only raises aspirations but creates a sense of self and a sense of place within students forever and connects them to their community and local workforces. Many more examples of ELOs can be found through our website.

Extended Learning Opportunities provide a learning pathway for students to make real-world connections between their interests, their communities, and their education. ELOs give local SAUs, more opportunities to provide credit, especially for nontraditional learners. Extended Learning Opportunities as a pathway to earning high school credit is currently one of the most hopeful and positive initiatives within Maine's educational landscape. It is vital that students can see their education and future possibilities in concert, so they believe in themselves, engage actively in their learning, and feel hopeful about their tomorrows.

The Department of Education proudly supports LD 2131, An Act to Support Extended Learning Opportunities. I look forward to your questions and will be available for the work session.

Maine DOE Extended Learning Opportunities Expansion Project

School Year 2022 – 2023 Data

Participants

The information below shows participants by semester, and not aggregated by the year, to avoid duplication.

	Semester 1	Semester 2	Summer
Total Participants	470	851	193
Number of Disadvantaged Youth Served	295	465	141

ELO Credits Awarded

	Semester 1	Semester 2	Summer	Total
Number of elective credits awarded through ELOs	184	639.55	113.5	937.25
Number of core credits awarded through ELOs	12	24	1	37
Total Credits Awarded	196	663.75	114.5	974.25

ELO Partnerships

	Semester 1	Semester 2	Summer	Total
Business and Community	407	538	94	1039