

Nicole Grohoski
Senator, District 7



P.O. Box 1732
Ellsworth, ME 04605

THE MAINE SENATE
131st Legislature

Testimony of Senator Nicole Grohoski
In Support of LD 2118, "*An Act to Provide Funding to the Maine School of Science and Mathematics Using the School Funding Formula*"

Before the Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs
13 February 2024

Good afternoon Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan, and distinguished members of the Education & Cultural Affairs Committee. My name is Nicole Grohoski and I am honored to represent the 22 coastal and island communities of Senate District 7. Thank you for the opportunity to speak in support of LD 2118, *An Act to Provide Funding to the Maine School of Science and Mathematics* (MSSM) *Using the School Funding Formula*, and the proposed amendment presented by President Jackson.

I am here today as an MSSM graduate and also as a voice for many families in my district who have sent their students to this public high school and who are grateful for the difference it has made in their lives.

Other than a one-time FY24-25 appropriation of \$500,000 made by the Legislature last year, MSSM has been relatively flat-funded since 2017, which means its operating budget is decreasing due to inflation. After this one-time boost runs out, the school will be right back where it started, teetering on the brink of viability. That's why this legislation is so important. We need to invest more in Maine's most unique and outstanding public high school, not less.

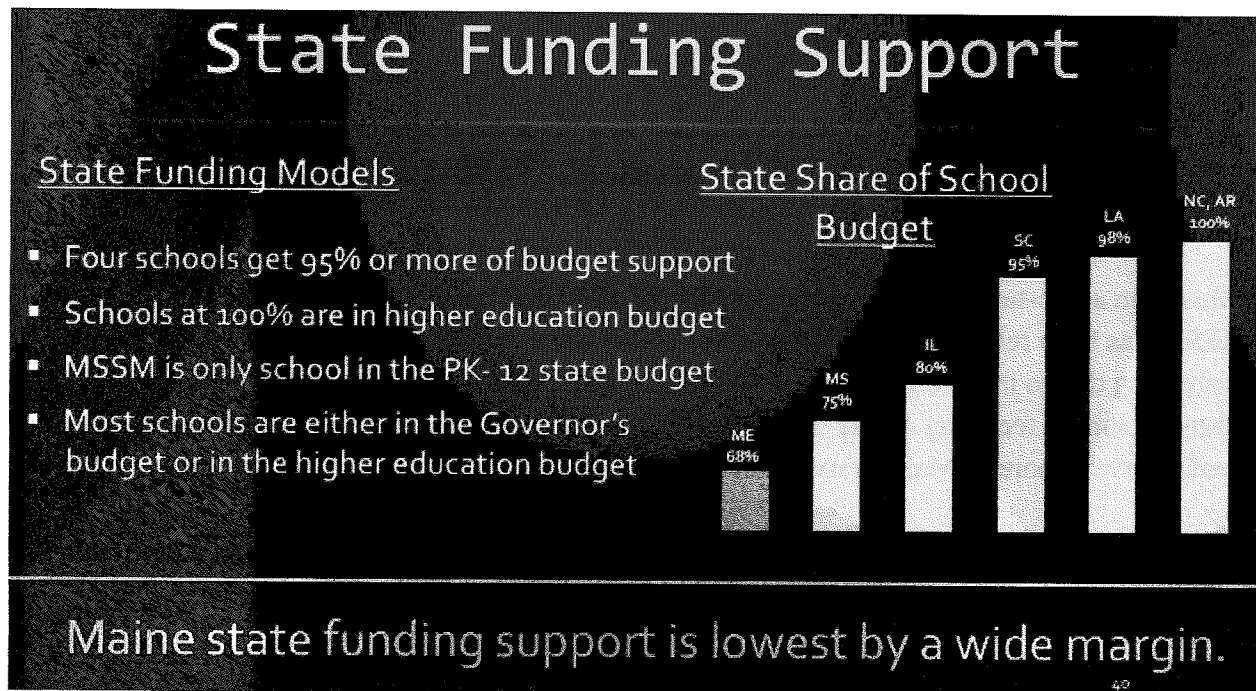
Here is an excerpt of testimony I delivered in January of 2020 in my first term as a legislator in support of a general fund bond for a new dormitory for the school (LD 2060 in the 129th):

The Maine School of Science and Mathematics, or MSSM, is a shining star within Maine's public education system. You may recall that in 2019, MSSM was ranked #2 Best High School in the nation by U.S. News and World Report. Behind this number is more than just smart kids and good test scores. This is an achievement earned by the whole state of Maine. Students at MSSM come from all corners of Maine where they were educated in their local school districts and supported by dedicated family and community members. When they arrive at MSSM, they are met by an enthusiastic and

tireless group of teachers and staff who guide them as they continue on their educational journey. This opportunity is available to any Maine student, regardless of their family's income or location, because of the investment and commitment to MSSM that the Maine Legislature has provided.

Fast forward to 2024 and ongoing funding declines have made it harder to keep excellent faculty and staff and essential positions have been cut. Room and board is \$10,300 and while financial aid is available, sticker shock keeps a lot of families from applying. I am saddened and embarrassed that the state has allowed the school to reach the level of hardship it now faces. However, I am also hopeful that your committee and this Legislature will build on the investment it made last year and take further action to save the school.

In 2020, this committee asked the school to see what it could do to help itself financially, which resulted in the establishment of an ad hoc "Business Planning Committee" of the MSSM Board.¹ At the end of 2020, this committee shared its findings with the Board and the Department of Education.² The committee compared the MSSM funding structure to six states' science and math public residential magnet schools; here are a few slides of particular interest:



In 2020, Maine ranked lowest for the state share of the school budget at 68%, with Mississippi second lowest at 75% and North Carolina and Arkansas at 100% (Slide 40).

¹ The Business Planning Committee Charter is available here: bit.ly/MSSM-business-plan-charter

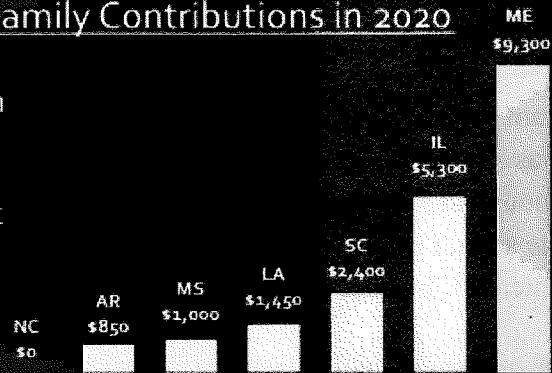
² The Committee's presentation can be viewed here: bit.ly/MSSM-presentation

Sending Family Costs

Family Funding Models

- Most states require small family contribution
- Meal fees are the largest family contribution
- Small, rural, southern states charge the least
- All schools provide support to low income students to reduce costs

Family Contributions in 2020



Maine is the only state that charges full room & board.

Maine also charged families significantly more for room and board, which is now up to \$10,300 (Slide 41). As you can see, most states charge nominal amounts, including \$0 in North Carolina.

The long and short of the Business Planning Committee effort is this – MSSM is an outlier when it comes to its school funding model. If we want it to stay in the same location and offer the excellent education it is known for – which by all accounts continues despite the dwindling funding – the state needs to step up in with resources.

I attended MSSM in my junior and senior years of high school, seeking a rigorous education in math and science, at a price my family could afford (room and board was less expensive back then). I found the curricular options and rigor to be beyond my imagination. I worked harder than I had ever needed to before and gained real knowledge and a new confidence in myself and what I could achieve.

There's more to life at MSSM than just academics. For me, this was the first time I was surrounded by a group of students who I really connected with. No one made fun of me for wanting to dig deeper into a tough topic, instead, they'd often join in. I competed in sports and played music in the band at the University of Maine Presque Isle. As members of the Key Club, my friends and I were reading mentors to young students in nearby schools. I was an officer in the student senate and set up the school's first recycling program. I mention all of this to show the diversity of experiences one student can have at MSSM, beyond just the excellent academic opportunities.

When I graduated from MSSM, I left with the skills to learn tough subjects and a solid academic base that made my transition to college seamless. I made lifelong friends, who are contributing to this state and country in incredible ways. I cannot say where I would be today without having attended MSSM, but I am certain that it was an opportunity that changed my life significantly and positively.

I am grateful that the state had the vision to create such an institution of excellence. I know that it was life-changing for so many of my peers who came from small, rural schools that lacked large enough student bodies to support high-level courses available at MSSM. Now in its 29th year, the school needs our financial support to continue to help Maine students reach their full potential. Investing in these students and the school is an investment in our state's future.

Thank you for your time and consideration of my testimony. I would be happy to answer any questions.