

Maine Education Association

Grace Leavitt President | Jesse Hargrove Vice President | Beth French Treasurer
Rebecca Cole NEA Director | Rachele Bristol Executive Director

Testimony

Neither For Nor Against

LD 345 An Act Regarding Educational Policies and Programs

Grace Leavitt, President, Maine Education Association

Before the Joint Standing Committee on Education & Cultural Affairs

February 27, 2024

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan, and members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee,

My name is Grace Leavitt. I am serving as President of the Maine Education Association while on leave from teaching Spanish in MSAD 51. The MEA represents nearly 24,000 educators in our Maine system of public education in pre-K-12 schools as well as in our institutions of higher education, along with students in teacher prep programs and many retired educators.

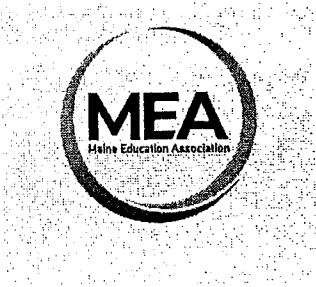
MEA has a position of Neither For Nor Against on LD 345.

The plan for reorganizing oversight and updating practices for serving our children with disabilities from birth to the age of six that is described in LD 345 has been needed for many years, having been under discussion for a long time. The changes described in LD 345 are long overdue if we are to do right by all children and provide what is needed for all children to be supported and to be successful in making progress in their learning. MEA understands the urgency, yet appreciates that the proposed plan is to move forward in phases in order to continue to identify and to try to provide what school districts will require during the transitions that must take place.

That being said, we are deeply concerned about the staffing needed to accomplish this, even as it proceeds in phases. Both Child Development Services as well as pre-K—12 public schools currently are seeing serious staff shortages, shortages that continue to increase. Establishing a minimum wage for educational technicians and other support staff as called for in LD 974 and raising the minimum salary for teachers as proposed in LD 1064 would go a long way towards helping to address these staffing shortages, increasing the potential for the transition of services to school districts to go smoothly and be successful. We feel strongly that LD 974 and LD 1064 must be passed, funded, and enacted for the plan described in LD 345 to be implemented successfully. Without the passage of LD 974 and LD 1064 it is unclear how these known, and increasing, staffing shortages can be addressed.

There are other potential concerns regarding the implementation of what LD 345 calls for: the availability in some areas of the state for some of the services that will be needed; the ongoing funding that will be necessary; the workload that this will add to already overburdened—and understaffed—educators in school districts; as well as other aspects of implementation that we may not be able to foresee until the plans move forward but that will need support in order to be addressed properly.

Again, what LD 345 calls for is needed. We cannot continue to see children go without necessary supports. The impact of not providing these carries on throughout many years. Doing a better job of providing supports early on is important most of all for the children, but also for educators as the students progress through upper grades in our schools.



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MEA is hopeful that the shortages of qualified staff can be appropriately addressed, that LD 974 and LD 1064 will be successfully passed, funded, and implemented, and that as any other concerns arise or needs are identified, attention and support will be given to ensure successful implementation of the plan outlined in LD 345.

Thank you for the Committee's work on this critical issue. Please contact MEA with any questions regarding our position.

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