

# EDUCATE MAINE



**TESTIMONY BY KATHERINE HOWELL  
DIRECTOR OF WORKFORCE PARTNERSHIPS, EDUCATE MAINE**

**TO THE JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS AND FINANCIAL  
AFFAIRS AND THE JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND  
CULTURAL AFFAIRS**

**IN SUPPORT OF LD 210, THE FY 26/27 BIENNIAL BUDGET PROPOSAL BY  
GOVERNOR MILLS**

**Friday, February 7, 2025, 10 A.M.**

Chairs Rotundo, Rafferty, Gattine and Murphy, and distinguished members of both the Appropriations and Financial Affairs Committee and the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee, I am Katherine Howell, Director of Workforce Partnerships for Educate Maine. Educate Maine is a business-led education organization focused on increasing educational attainment of Maine people to help make sure young people and adults have the skills needed to thrive in the workforce.

I am testifying today in support of the Governor's proposed biennial budget in terms of support for Maine's higher education institutions.

In 2019, Maine launched its first 10-year economic development strategy in two decades, shaped by over 1,500 voices. A key goal of this plan is to expand Maine's talent pool by 75,000 through both local growth and attraction of new talent. Our higher education institutions are essential to achieving this, and we must support proposed investments to ensure all learners gain the skills, credentials, and degrees necessary for Maine's workforce.

Maine's public colleges and universities play a critical role in this effort. Together, they enroll nearly 47,000 students and provide short-term training, early college, and extension programs to thousands more. Enrollment is rising, and institutions are responding with new initiatives like a statewide transfer agreement and the widely celebrated Free Community College Initiative, which is helping learners in every county gain essential workforce skills. Maine's public institutions remain the most affordable in New England, and continued investment is crucial to meet the needs of both students and employers.

The state has made significant progress in education attainment. In 2009, only 38.6% of adults held a degree or credential of value. With the formation of MaineSpark in 2016 and bipartisan legislative support, the state set a goal of reaching 60% by 2025. Lumina Foundation's latest 2023 data shows we are now at 56.6%, closing in on that target. Increased higher education funding will help us reach this goal while addressing workforce shortages across all industries.

In addition, Maine's appeal is growing. People outside of Maine are realizing what tremendous educational institutions and way of living are available in our state. The 2024 DECD report highlights that in 2021, the state saw its highest net migration since 1950 (21,200 people). The

proposed support for higher education will continue this progress to upskill adults to meet the needs of the workforce and attract new people to Maine, many of whom will join the workforce of employers across the state.

Although Educate Maine supports the proposed public higher education investments, our organization opposes the changes to the Maine State Grant Program to limit these funds to only learners attending Maine's **public** higher education institutions. The Maine State Grant Program is the best program we have to support students from low-income families to attend college. Thanks to the leadership of the Finance Authority of Maine and your support of this program over the years, thousands of learners have been able to enroll, persist, and graduate with degrees in order to join the Maine workforce. These learners are from every county in Maine and attend a variety of Maine institutions including the University of New England, Husson University, Thomas College, and Maine's public institutions. Limiting this program to students only attending public universities will cause significant disruption for learners already enrolled in private institutions and likely will decrease persistence and graduation rates. This disruption will not save the state any funding but instead negatively impact college students from every Maine county.

This change will directly impact the availability of students to join the Maine workforce and increase the workforce shortages. Our private institutions are a huge part of growing local talent and attracting new talent by educating our future nurses, teachers, police officers and other critical positions across the state.

Since 2017 Educate Maine has administered the Maine Career Catalyst program, engaging thousands of young people through summer internships across the state. This past summer alone, we worked with over 500 interns at more than 100 organizations and government agencies. Half of these participants are currently attending college in Maine and represent a mix of both public and private institutions. These are students actively involved in the workforce, engaging in activities instrumental to living and working in Maine following graduation and contributing to our economy. Continued investment in these institutions and the expanded Maine State Grant Program is critical to their success and persistence through their education, ensuring we have a thriving workforce to drive Maine's economy into the future.

We encourage you to support LD 210 in order to grow our local talent and attract new talent to Maine. Please do not make the proposed change to the Maine State Grant Program. This program is essential to thousands of families across Maine. Thank you for your time today.