

## Testimony on the Governor's Proposed Budget--Neither For Nor Against

Senator Rotundo, Representative Gattine, and esteemed members of the Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs,

Senator Rafferty, Representative Murphy, and distinguished members of the Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs,

My name is Grace Leavitt. I live in Raymond. I am testifying Neither For Nor Against the Governor's proposed budget.

I appreciate very much the continuing support for public education and our students that Governor Mills has included in her budget proposal--55% of state funding for public schools, universal meals for students, tuition-free community college, and the proposed 4% increase in funding for the University of Maine System. I am truly grateful that these all are in her proposal.

I am recently retired, after more than 43 years of teaching and then six years serving as the leader of the Maine Education Association. Over 49 years--my entire working life--has been dedicated to public education. I grew up with a parent who was a dedicated public school teacher for decades. Public education is at the very core of my being, even now as a retiree.

We continue to have a serious nationwide shortage of educators which I fear will now only worsen, given the past few weeks of actions taken in D.C.

I could not be more concerned, apprehensive, fearful, terrified about the future of public education in our country and the future well-being of our students.

Yet I hope that at least in our state we can help not only to counter what is happening, but even make our system here ever stronger.

We know that the most important factor in student learning is having qualified teachers and staff. A key to attracting--and retaining--educators is pay--professional pay that reflects both the importance of the work and the value our society places on that work. Increasing the starting salary for certified educators to a minimum of \$50,000 will help greatly with both recruitment and retention of qualified educators.

Paying our aspiring educators while they are engaged in very important student teaching will help them to actually enter the profession rather than abandon it, and will help attract more to teacher preparation programs.

Despite all that is currently being done to address problem student behaviors, we know that even more is needed for the mental and behavioral health of some.

This morning you heard from many that our Universities of Maine are in need of more than the proposed 4% increase to continue to have a strong public university system.

And lastly, there is proposed legislation to increase the health benefit for retired educators which will help educators to join and stay in the profession and have the ability to retire with dignity..

I understand the constraints you face and the uncertainties we all face. But our students deserve our best efforts to help each of them have the opportunity to be successful. I urge you to do whatever you can that will help.

I am glad to try to answer any questions. Thank you for listening and for your time and work.

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