

Testimony in Support of LD 34

February 26, 2025

Chair Rafferty, Chair Murphy, and Distinguished Members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee:

My name is Jeremy Ray, and I serve as the Superintendent of Schools for Biddeford, Saco, and Dayton. I represent over 900 dedicated employees and more than 5,000 students across our communities. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today in support of LD 34, "An Act to Incrementally Increase Minimum Teacher Salaries Beginning with the 2026-2027 School Year."

Current Challenges in Teacher Recruitment and Retention

As a superintendent overseeing three diverse school systems, I witness firsthand the critical challenge we face in recruiting and retaining qualified teachers. In the past five years, our districts have experienced a significant decrease in applicant pools. For a recent elementary teaching position, we received only seven applications, where previously we would have received thirty or more.

According to recent data from WalletHub, Maine ranks 43rd in the nation for teachers, which aligns with what I experience as an administrator trying to build strong educational teams. This ranking reflects multiple factors, including compensation, work environment, and career opportunities that directly impact our ability to staff our schools effectively.

The starting salary for teachers in our districts is simply not competitive in today's market. In our communities, the average one-bedroom apartment now rents for approximately \$1,800-\$2,000 per month, which constitutes more than 50% of a starting teacher's take-home pay. This bill addresses this fundamental issue by establishing a clear pathway to raise the minimum teacher salary from \$45,000 in the 2026-2027 school year to \$52,500 by 2029-2030, with subsequent increases tied to the cost-of-living adjustment.

Housing Affordability Crisis

In our York and Cumberland County communities, the housing affordability crisis has dramatically worsened our ability to hire qualified teachers. We have lost promising candidates who accepted positions only to later decline when they could not find affordable housing within a reasonable commuting distance.

In Biddeford and Saco particularly, rapid development has transformed our housing markets, with median home prices increasing over 35% in just the past three years. Young teachers carrying the average \$30,000 in student loan debt find it nearly impossible to secure affordable housing on their starting salaries. Recently, two exceptional new hires were forced to commute over 45 minutes each way because they could not afford to live in our communities.

There is immense value in having teachers live in the same communities where they teach. When educators are embedded in the community, they develop deeper connections with families, better understand local contexts, and can more readily participate in after-school activities and community events. They shop in local businesses, volunteer at community organizations, and become invested in the long-term success of the area. Students benefit from seeing their teachers as integral community members, not just classroom figures who disappear at the end of the school day. This community integration is increasingly impossible when housing costs force teachers to live far from where they work.

The WalletHub study highlights that Maine ranks poorly in "opportunity and competition" metrics for teachers. This abstract ranking translates to concrete realities in my office, where I have watched qualified candidates choose neighboring states or private sector positions that offer more competitive compensation packages.

Economic and Educational Benefits

As someone responsible for both educational outcomes and fiscal management across three school systems, I urge you to consider the multifaceted benefits of this investment:

1. In my districts alone, we spent over \$125,000 last year on recruitment, substitute coverage for unfilled positions, and onboarding costs related to teacher turnover
2. Our best-performing schools are those with stable, experienced teaching staffs where educators can afford to live in the communities they serve
3. When we lose teachers mid-year due to financial pressures, student achievement measurably suffers, particularly among our most vulnerable populations
4. The incremental approach in this legislation allows districts like ours to plan appropriately while making meaningful progress toward competitive compensation

We've observed a direct correlation between community-embedded teachers and positive student outcomes. Teachers who live locally can more easily attend student events, offer extra help sessions, and build the trusting relationships that research shows are fundamental to learning.

They understand local contexts and can make curriculum relevant to students' lived experiences. When teachers are forced to live far from their schools due to housing costs, their ability to fully engage with the school community is limited by long commutes and disconnection from local issues.

In Biddeford, Saco, and Dayton, we pride ourselves on fiscal responsibility. I can attest that investing in competitive teacher salaries now will save significant resources in the long term while improving educational outcomes for our 5,000 students.

Broader Economic Context

I want to express my strong agreement with the article recently shared by the Maine House Republicans highlighting the WalletHub study on teacher conditions across states. As a superintendent who reviews this kind of data regularly, I can confirm that Maine's rankings—39th in "Academic & Work Environment" and 44th in "Opportunity & Competition" for teachers—align with what I see on the ground.

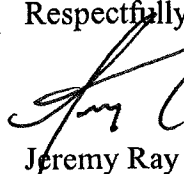
These aren't just abstract rankings. In practical terms, when I try to recruit a math teacher or speech pathologist, I'm competing not just with neighboring districts but with New Hampshire and Massachusetts, where starting salaries can be \$5,000-\$10,000 higher. I'm also competing with private sector employers who actively recruit our teachers with salary offers we simply cannot match under current conditions.

Conclusion

LD 34 represents a practical, forward-looking approach to addressing Maine's teacher shortage. It acknowledges the real economic pressures facing our educators while providing a clear pathway to fair compensation. The gradual implementation allows schools and communities to adapt while making meaningful progress toward valuing our educators as the professionals they are.

I respectfully urge the committee to vote "Ought to Pass" on LD 34. Our teachers deserve a living wage that recognizes their professional expertise and the critical role they play in shaping Maine's future. Our students deserve high-quality educators who can focus on teaching rather than worrying about making ends meet.

Respectfully submitted,



Jeremy Ray

Superintendent of Biddeford, Dayton, Saco Schools