

State of Maine
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Testimony of Bear Shea, Climate, Culture, and Resilience Coordinator, Office of School and Student Supports, Department of Education

In Support of: L.D. 98

An Act to Include School Counselors in the Educators for Maine Program

Before the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs

Sponsored by: Representative Michael Brennan

Date: February 26, 2025

Senator Rafferty, Representative Murphy, and Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs:

My name is Bear Shea, and I am here today representing the Department of Education speaking in support of L.D. #98, An Act to Include School Counselors in the Educators for Maine Program, which seeks to add school counselor as a postbaccalaureate certification that is eligible for financial assistance under the Educators for Maine Program administered by the Finance Authority of Maine (FAME).

This bill would expand educator positions for participating in postsecondary credentialing at a time when incentives for joining the field of education are an important recruitment strategy.

Educators for Maine is a competitive, merit-based, forgivable loan for Maine students pursuing careers in education, speech pathology, or childcare. These students plan to live and work in Maine after their graduation. During their coursework, students must maintain a 3.0 grade point average and must be pursuing their initial certification. As of today, teachers, speech language pathologists, and childcare providers are the only allowable certifications for this program.

In 2023, the Maine Department of Education received a five-year, \$9 million grant through the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act, to increase school-based mental health staff and services in Maine. Expanding Access in School Environments (EASE) Maine has provided grants to nine high-need school administrative units (SAUs) to support their efforts to recruit and retain mental health providers and expand services to students.

Funds from the EASE Maine grant, which is managed by the Department's Office of School and Student Supports, would be used to augment FAME funding in order to support the school mental health professional pipeline. The funding is estimated to support approximately two years of FAME awards. Currently, school counselors are not eligible to access any FAME programs. Other school based mental health professionals can access FAME programs through the medical professionals' programs, and teachers and speech pathologists can access FAME educator programs.

For these reasons, the Department of Education is in support of L.D. 98, An Act to Include School Counselors in the Educators for Maine Program. I am happy to answer any questions the Committee may have, and I will be available for work sessions on this bill.