



**Testimony by William Norbert
Governmental Affairs and Communications Manager**

Neither For Nor Against L.D. 98

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

Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs

February 26, 2025

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

My name is Bill Norbert. I am the Governmental Affairs and Communications Manager at the Finance Authority of Maine (FAME). I am testifying Neither For Nor Against L.D. 98, *An Act to Include School Counselors in the Educators for Maine Program*.

This bill is a Department initiative and would add school counselor as a postbaccalaureate certification pursuit that is eligible for financial assistance--a loan and/or loan forgiveness--under the Educators for Maine Program, which is administered by FAME.

The Educators for Maine Program provides merit-based forgivable loans for Maine students pursuing initial certification as a teacher, including speech pathology or a career in child development. Students may be enrolling in or pursuing undergraduate or graduate education degrees, but they must demonstrate an interest in careers in education or childcare and that they are planning to work in Maine after graduation. Award amounts are based on available funding and are subject to change annually, but not less than \$3,000 for undergraduate students and not less than \$2,000 for graduate students. For academic year 23-24, awards were \$5,000/year for undergraduates and \$4,000/year for graduate studies. Loans may be forgiven if the recipient subsequently works as an educator or speech pathologist in an eligible elementary or secondary school or at a quality childcare program in the state of Maine. Loan recipients who are Jobs for Maine's Graduates Specialists may also be eligible for forgiveness in this program.

We have no objection to including school counselors in the Program. Please keep in mind, however, that without additional funding to accompany this added profession, school counselors will need to compete with other program applicants (graduating high school seniors, college undergraduates, and students pursuing post-baccalaureate certification) for limited spaces. We anticipate selecting twenty-five individuals in May for the program.

We have a couple of suggestions to improve the bill. First, we suggest adding a definition of “school counselor” in Section 12501-A (Definitions) of the governing program statute to be clear who we mean precisely. Our understanding from the Department is that they wish to use the definition currently set forth in statute at 20-A MRS §4008(1)(B), and we have no issue with that:

a person who is employed as a school counselor in a school setting and who:

(1) Is certified as a school counselor by the department; or

(2) Possesses a minimum of a master's degree in an approved program in guidance and counseling.

Second, we wish to point out an area in the bill needing clarification. In line 38 of the bill (Page 1), the draft proposes replacing the word “teaches” with “work” in statute. This is understandable since proponents wish to allow for school counselors to be covered by the program’s loan repayment terms, and they will “work” and not “teach.” From our viewpoint, however, considering the teachers who are included in the program already or may apply in the future, changing the term “teaches” to “works” might unintentionally open the program to former teachers who now work at a school but are serving there in an occupation other than teaching (e.g. ed techs or administrators). We therefore suggest using the following language instead in that sentence after the words “as long as the recipient” in lines 37-38:

“is employed in a certified instructional or student support role, specifically as a teacher, school counselor, or licensed speech pathologist, in a school in an underserved geographic area.”

Thank you for your time and consideration. I would be happy to answer any questions you might have.