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Testimony of Rep. Kristen Cloutier presenting
LD 501, An Act to Fairly Fund School Administrative Units for Economically Disadvantaged Students
Before the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs

Senator Rafferty, Representative Murphy and distinguished members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee. My name is Kristen Cloutier, and I represent House District 94, which includes part of my hometown of Lewiston. I am pleased to present LD 501, An Act to Fairly Fund School Administrative Units for Economically Disadvantaged Students.

Schools and researchers have long known that economically disadvantaged students need more academic and social support than their peers in order to succeed. The evidence supporting this is overwhelming and consistent. We saw during the pandemic that economically disadvantaged students fell even further behind, and were hit hardest by educational and economic disruptions. In some districts, schools had to go door-to-door to get these students re-engaged and back on path to academic progress. These extraordinary measures highlight the urgent need for additional resources dedicated to supporting our most vulnerable students.

NAEP scores are a prime example of the disparities for these students. In 2024, Maine 4th graders who were not economically disadvantaged scored 5 points higher than the national average in reading. Economically disadvantaged students scored 18 points lower than the national average, and nearly 60 percent scored below the "basic" level. This achievement gap represents not just a statistical concern, but a fundamental threat to opportunity and equity in our state. Every child in Maine deserves the resources they need to reach their full potential.

Maine's school funding formula already provides an additional 15 percent weight in its pupil count for each student in a district that is considered economically disadvantaged. LD 501 would increase that weight to 25 percent. Making this change would acknowledge the significant effort required to educate and support these students, and put more funding and resources into the hands of local school districts to provide the services they need. This increased funding would enable schools to implement evidence-based interventions such as smaller class sizes, extended learning time, additional tutoring resources, and enhanced social-emotional support services.

This bill would also help to align Maine's funding formula with other states, many of which already have a greater student weight than ours.

The fiscal impact of this legislation should be viewed not as a cost, but as an investment in Maine's future workforce and economic prosperity. Research consistently shows that targeted educational investments in disadvantaged youth yield significant returns through increased lifetime earnings, reduced social service costs, and decreased involvement in the criminal justice system.

I want to emphasize that this is not just an urban issue or a rural issue - economically disadvantaged students live in every corner of our state. By increasing this weight, we acknowledge that all Maine schools face additional challenges when serving these students, regardless of their location or size.

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