

## **Testimony in Support of LD 501**

**February 26, 2025**

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

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today in support of LD 501, which proposes to increase the economic disadvantage weight in Maine's Essential Programs and Services funding formula.

My name is Jeremy Ray, and I serve as superintendent for three school districts in southern Maine: Biddeford, Saco, and Dayton. These three districts, while geographically close, represent significantly different socioeconomic profiles that highlight the critical importance of this legislation.

### **The Current Reality**

In the Biddeford School Department, approximately 64 percent of our 2,400 students qualify for free and reduced-price meals. Just a mile down the road, the Saco School Department has 34 percent of its 2,800 students qualifying for the same program, while in Dayton, 36 percent of our approximately 330 students qualify. This stark contrast within such close proximity demonstrates that demographics in schools and classrooms greatly differ, and how that impacts schools and classrooms is substantial.

As someone who hails from Downeast Maine in Washington County, I bring a unique perspective to this discussion. While I now serve in Southern Maine, I can attest that this bill would greatly impact rural Maine communities that face higher levels of poverty yet often struggle with high land valuations that mask their true financial need. Many rural districts throughout our state, particularly in regions like Washington County, are caught in a difficult position where property values may appear substantial on paper, but the economic reality for families is quite different. This disconnect in the current formula creates additional hurdles for these communities to adequately support their students.

### **Fiscal Responsibility and Educational Investment**

Maine's school funding formula currently allocates an additional 15 cents for every dollar per economically disadvantaged student. In practice, this translates to approximately \$1,200 more for each low-income student compared to their higher-income peers. During the COVID-19 pandemic, recognizing the increased challenges facing our most vulnerable populations, this weight was temporarily increased to 0.20, only to revert to 0.15 once the emergency order was lifted.

This approach creates challenges for two fundamental reasons:

1. The current 0.15 weight provides insufficient resources to address the comprehensive support needed by any economically disadvantaged student.
2. More critically, it fails to account for the concentration of poverty in certain districts and schools, creating vastly different classroom environments with drastically different needs.

## **Return on Investment for Maine's Future Workforce**

As I've witnessed firsthand, "A student in a community that has 5 percent free and reduced lunch is still getting the same weight of .15, but that's a different classroom from one that has 64 percent free and reduced lunch." While the latter classroom receives more money in total due to more students qualifying, the additional funds don't adequately address the compounding challenges that arise when serving high concentrations of students from low-income backgrounds.

The concentration of poverty creates unique conditions that require more comprehensive interventions. In our lower-poverty districts, we benefit from active parent advocacy where families "would go to the end of the earth so that X field trip was still in the budget." But in higher-poverty areas, "we have to be the stronger advocate for our own kids," as family resources and capacity for educational advocacy are often more limited.

## **Evidence-Based Decision Making**

Recent research conclusively confirms that strategically directing resources to high-need students produces measurable improvements in academic achievement and workforce readiness. A working paper from Brown University researchers found that increased school funding made the biggest impact on test scores in districts where additional funding built upon a history of low spending. These benefits were particularly visible among students of color and those from low-income backgrounds.

Beyond test scores, districts with increased funding for high-need students saw decreases in student suspensions and chronic absenteeism rates – critical metrics that directly impact educational outcomes and future workforce participation.

As highlighted in a recent Education Week article, "Money Matters. Now What?": How Districts Get More Funding for Poor Students" (October 14, 2024), researchers have moved beyond debating whether money matters for improving student outcomes and are now focused on how to most effectively direct those resources. The article emphasizes that "directing more resources, more precisely targeted to the students who most need them, can have a measurable effect on academic achievement for students of color and low-income students." You can read the full article at:

<https://www.edweek.org/leadership/money-matters-now-what-how-districts-get-more-funding-for-poor-students/2024/10>

## **Accountability and Local Control**

Maine's approach falls below national standards. Across the country, economically disadvantaged students are typically funded at approximately 25% higher rates than their peers – compared to our 15%. This places Maine's students and future workforce at a competitive disadvantage.

A particular concern that impacts many communities across our state is the disconnect between property valuations and the actual economic capacity of residents. Many of our coastal and lakefront communities have seen dramatic increases in property values that do not reflect the financial reality of year-round residents. These inflated valuations can make a community appear wealthy on paper while masking significant economic hardship among families with school-aged children.

The current funding formula, with its heavy reliance on property values, does not adequately account for this disparity between assessed value and ability to pay. This creates a double burden for many communities, where they appear too "wealthy" for adequate state support despite having significant populations of economically disadvantaged students. Adjusting the economic disadvantage weight would help address this imbalance and ensure resources flow to students who need them, regardless of their community's property valuation.

## **Common-Sense Recommendations**

I respectfully urge this committee to support LD 501 and permanently restore the economic disadvantage weight to at least 0.20, with consideration for further increases to align Maine with national standards.

This approach would:

1. Provide local districts the flexibility to address their specific community needs

2. Ensure more efficient use of taxpayer dollars by targeting resources where they'll have the greatest impact
3. Strengthen Maine's future workforce through improved educational outcomes
4. Reduce long-term costs associated with remediation, social services, and lost economic potential

Additionally, I encourage the committee to explore modifications that would account for the concentration of poverty in schools and districts. A sliding scale that provides incrementally higher weights for schools with higher percentages of economically disadvantaged students would better reflect the reality that "as a community we need to be thinking about how we program and how we support families and create opportunities. In some communities that's going to require more funding than others."

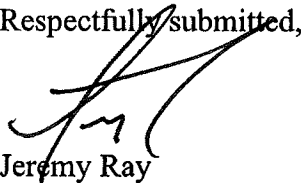
## **Conclusion**

It is time to better support students in need and recognize that schools with high concentrations of poverty look fundamentally different from those with only a small percentage of economically disadvantaged students. The dynamics of a classroom where most students face economic challenges creates a different learning environment requiring different approaches and resources. Teachers in these classrooms are not only educators but often serve as counselors, social workers, and advocates for basic needs.

Our funding formula must acknowledge this reality by directing resources more equitably and precisely to the students and schools that most need them. High-concentration poverty schools require more comprehensive support to create equitable educational opportunities for all Maine students.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

Respectfully submitted,



Jeremy Ray

Superintendent Biddeford, Saco, and Dayton School Departments