

TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF

L.D. 501

AN ACT TO FAIRLY FUND SCHOOL ADMINISTRATIVE UNITS FOR ECONOMICALLY DISADVANTAGED STUDENTS

February 26, 2025

Senator Rafferty, Representative Noonan Murphy and members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee. I am Robbie Feinberg, the director of communications and government relations for Maine School Management Association, speaking on behalf of the legislative committees of the Maine School Boards Association and Maine School Superintendents Association in strong support of L.D. 501.

During the last school year, more than 64,000 Maine students were considered economically disadvantaged. That is 38 percent of all students across our state. These are the children and families who've been hit hardest by the effects of the pandemic and the rising cost-of-living in recent years. Many struggle to meet basic needs. And when faced with a financial emergency, they're forced to make impossible choices, like whether to make a car repair even if it means falling behind on rent and utilities.

Data has long shown that these struggles at home make it far more difficult for these children to make academic progress. In Maine, economically disadvantaged 4th graders score nearly 20 points worse than their peers in reading, and nearly 25 points worse in math. Chronic absenteeism rates are higher. Fewer graduate and go to college.

Our schools see this disparity every day – students walking in with baggage making it harder to learn. Teachers and ed techs and principals work hard to assist these students inside and outside the classroom. We have hired Title I specialists, social workers and mental health professionals. But there is limited funding to do this work.

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. L.D. 501 would increase that weight to 25 percent. Making this change would acknowledge the significant effort 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 bill would also help to align Maine's funding formula with other states, many of which already have a greater student weight than ours. At the bottom of our testimony, you'll find a link to a recent Learning Policy

Institute study¹ looking at how different state funding formulas support at-risk students. The report clearly shows that most states include a weighted count greater than Maine's. As just a few examples: Connecticut has a 30 percent weight; Tennessee provides at least 25 percent; South Carolina's is 50 percent and Vermont's is 103 percent. The report also cites five recent studies recommending that the weighted count for at-risk students should range anywhere from 30 to 81 percent. Clearly, Maine is not meeting that mark.

We also have precedent for such a change already. During the first years of the pandemic, Maine adjusted its funding formula to increase the economically disadvantaged weight from 15 to 20 percent. Superintendents and school boards have told us that this was a positive change that made it easier to support students through such a tumultuous time.

We are thankful that your committee has continued to invest in Maine's schools and children, and we feel the changes in L.D. 501 would ensure that more funding would go towards supporting the students and families who are most in need of support.

Thank you for your consideration, and I am happy to take any questions you might have.

¹ *Learning Policy Institute Study:*
https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/media/4555/download?inline&file=Funding_Student_Needs_REPORT.pdf