

TESTIMONY IN OPPOSITION TO

L.D. 543

AN ACT TO ENHANCE MAINE'S WILDLIFE CONSERVATION EFFORTS AND PRESERVE MAINE'S SPORTING HERITAGE BY REQUIRING HUNTER SAFETY EDUCATION IN SCHOOLS

February 27, 2025

Senator Rafferty, Representative Noonan Murphy and members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee. I am Robbie Feinberg, director of communications and government relations for Maine School Management Association, testifying on behalf of the legislative committees of the Maine School Boards Association and Maine School Superintendents Association in opposition to L.D. 543, *An Act to Enhance Maine's Wildlife Conservation Efforts and Preserve Maine's Sporting Heritage by Requiring Hunter Safety Education in Schools*. Our associations represent over 1,700 locally elected school board members, 260 school districts and their superintendents.

You frequently hear testimony from our two associations in opposition to requests that are considered curriculum mandates. Revisions or additions, in our view, should be occurring through the Learning Results review and revision process. This is the same in this instance. Viewing the words "requiring hunter safety education" is indeed a curriculum mandate. This would involve additional costs and additional scheduling adjustments, let alone the introduction of such a course is not being approached correctly. Not only that, it would add a graduation requirement, not currently seen in 20-A, subsection 4722. Beyond these graduation requirements as set in statute, local school boards are the governing bodies establishing requirements for graduation for their students.

While there are a few limited exceptions to the no guns on school grounds law, this proposed bill requires "hands-on practice of safe firearms handling", which as stated would require firearms to be brought in to schools for this training. This is only allowed within this exception:

"§6552. Firearms

2.B The prohibition on the possession of a firearm does not apply to the following persons, if the possession is authorized by a written policy by the school board;

1) A person who possesses an unloaded firearm for use in a supervised educational program approved and authorized by the school board and for which the school board has adopted appropriate safeguards to ensure student safety."

These state rules already allow school districts to provide firearm and hunter safety education – if they want to. That is important. Our current state statutes have worked well, and already allow districts to operate these kinds of programs if they feel they are beneficial for students and their community. But expanding this to a statewide mandate will require every district to adopt these special policies and safeguards, adding more work on school boards and educators, in areas where it may not be even desired.

The introduction of this bill also raises the question of “what problem is this trying to solve”?

In viewing the hearing on a similar bill during the 131st session of the Maine Legislature, it was observed that the sponsor had been concerned with the reduced number of licenses, and a desire to promote conservation and preservation while providing lifetime training. This may be a worthwhile goal, but we don't see a school mandate as the solution. The attributes of this training are already widely available to students and residents within area hunter safety education programs, offered both in person and online. And it is not a problem throughout the entire state.

Requiring this training for all students for graduation, no later than grade 9, is a curriculum mandate, would institute a change to graduation requirements, is unwieldy, requires special policy adoption by the local school board, and is available already within local hunter safety education offerings. For all these reasons, MSSA and MSBA are strongly opposed to this bill.