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**LD 375, "An Act to Require the University of Maine School of Law  
to Provide an Online Degree Program"**

**Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs**  
**March 3, 2025**

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

I am Trey Stewart; and I represent Senate District 2 that includes many communities in Aroostook and Penobscot counties. I apologize for not being able to join you in person today; but I thank you for the opportunity to present LD. 375, "An Act to Require the University of Maine School of Law to Provide an Online Degree Program," to you virtually.

It's a bit ironic that I'm presenting this testimony to you all via Zoom here today, although I think it underscores the point of this legislation well. If the COVID-19 pandemic taught us anything, it's how to adapt to a strange new environment.

Yet one school that is invaluable to our state's legal infrastructure, our judicial system and many Maine families who need legal services has not kept up with the times. The University of Maine Law School is one of the few institutions that has not adapted fully to the changed post-COVID environment. Here's some backstory on why this bill matters.

In 2018, I earned my MBA before I went to the University of Maine Law School. Yet where I did so was in the same exact building the graduate school is located out of. Back then, the Law School had no online course offerings. Upon inquiry of this dynamic, I was met with fierce opposition to even the idea of it – "That's absurd... This is law school... We can't possibly do that here." So, I attended all of my first-year courses – what we call the 1L foundational courses – in person. Then we all left for Spring Break in March of 2020 and we didn't return.

The Law School, as did many colleges across the country, adapted and moved to a distance learning model all within about a week – just like that, the pandemic proved it could be done. In fact, we were assured at that time that "our education will be minimally impacted," and that "we can still teach and provide a quality educational experience." I still agree with that sentiment. I don't think my law school degree is worth a penny less because it was mostly obtained online.

*132<sup>nd</sup> Legislature*  
*Senate of*  
*Maine*  
*Senate District 2*

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They say, "necessity is the mother of innovation," and I think that's true. Unfortunately, in this case, that innovation didn't stick with the Law School.

After taking the remaining portion of 1L year online from my home in Presque Isle and the entirety of my 2L year online as well, it was time to register for my 3L courses. I was shocked to learn that the entire list of course offerings was back to in-person without any online or hybrid options being offered. More frustrating is that I heard some of the same pushback to this as I heard pre-COVID. "That's absurd... This is law school... We can't possibly do that here."

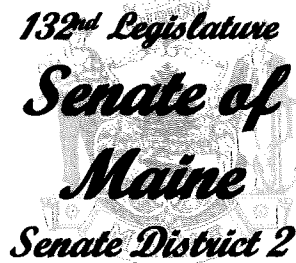
At one point during all of this, I asked Law School officials what it would take to offer an online program. I was told it would require an updated building capable of incorporating the latest technology, much of what we use here in the Maine Legislature. I was told that supporting the bond for the University system was key to this advancement and I voted for it. That new, immaculate, expensive building now sits overlooking Portland Harbor, paid for with tax dollars from my constituents – and yours – from across every corner of the state. Still, no progress and no online degree program offered by the school.

As you all know, we have a severe shortage of attorneys across the state, particularly within our criminal and family law practices. This disparity is even more pronounced in our rural areas, many of which don't have sufficient attorneys to handle child protective cases that are backlogged in every county in Maine. By offering an online degree program, it would serve the entire state – not just Cumberland County where there is a glut of attorneys.

I hear a lot of talk about the need to push more lawyers into rural Maine. I cannot disagree with this approach more. Rather than sending 25-year-olds with no life experience who are fresh out of law school to rural places, we should be working with motivated, driven individuals who are already living there. There are two key points here that need to be underscored for you.

First, if you're 35 and have some life experience like the loss of a close loved one, a divorce, a failed business or relatives with histories of addiction or crime, you have substantially more experience than the typical law school graduate. You will be a better attorney for your clients with more empathy and life experience that can provide compassion toward your client's situation and quality legal advice a typical law school graduate simply cannot give.

Second, there's virtually zero chance that you will be able to uproot yourself and your family for a three-plus year move to Portland to receive the only legal education offered in Maine. Or consider the 22-year-old who we want to keep in Fort Kent instead of forcing him or her to go to Portland. What chance do we truly have of attracting them back to Fort Kent to practice law?



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In fact, it is these very types of people who will be the answer to our so-called "access to justice" issue in rural Maine. We cannot do it without them; and the school is neglecting these people year after year – this must end. I do not want to hear that the school "serves every part of Maine" ever again until this issue is resolved.

I had hoped the school would demonstrate leadership on this issue at all levels. Regrettably, that has not happened; and it's now up to us in the Legislature to right this wrong.

On the pedagogical arguments, consider the following: The lack of an online Juris Doctor program also puts the Law School at a real disadvantage against other schools around the country that do. One example is the neighboring Franklin Pierce School of Law at the University of New Hampshire, which offers a hybrid program specializing in several areas of practice.

Indeed, that online program was one of the first American Bar Association-approved programs in the country before the pandemic even arrived. Since then, 19 other law schools including the Vermont Law and Graduate School have earned ABA approval to develop hybrid Juris Doctor program after the ABA adopted resolutions in the summer of 2020 to make it easier to do so. Clearly, online offerings do not hinder academic achievement elsewhere, nor would they be a hinderance here in Maine.

Our state's school is simply being left in the dust. Maybe that is why the Law School is struggling financially, while UNH's Franklin Pierce School of Law enrolled its largest class ever in 2023. Let me be clear about something else here – I actually think this would greatly help the school's finances. You could charge the same amount for the same degree – whether the student occupies physical space in the building or not – and allow more students to attend from across Maine. Everyone is aware that law school is an expensive investment, regardless of how you access the information imparted. I'm not advocating for cheapening the value of the degree at all, just improving the way in which information is shared.

As you can undoubtedly tell from my testimony, I am incredibly passionate about this issue because I believe in my heart there is an injustice occurring that can be easily addressed. Let's put this valuable resource that supports our legal system to best use for all Mainers who want the opportunity to practice law in our state. Let's do something that will actually address the rural disparity we have when attempting to access justice in Maine. Let's create an opportunity for both our state's legal system and our state's only law school to both thrive in a symbiotic manner.

We can do this. We must do this. Our constituents are counting on us to not continue to let them down.

Thank you.