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Testimony of Rep. Christina Mitchell in support of
**LD 471, Resolve, to Establish a Pilot Program to Expand Intensive English
Language Learner Programs**
Before the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee

Senator Rafferty, Representative Murphy and fellow members on the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee. I am Christina Mitchell, the House Representative for Cumberland, Long Island and Chebeague Island, but I come here before you to speak as an educator of English Language Learners (ELL) with over three decades of teaching experience in Maine Public Schools from middle school to university.

I first taught ELL to 6th and 7th graders as the Career Awareness Teacher. Even that young, the immigrant and refugee children in class were fully aware of the importance of future work, I didn't have to convince them of that; they observed and understood how critically important their future work lives would be from observing the struggles of their parents. They were, for middle schoolers, quite eager to learn how work works in America.

At Portland High School and then the University of Southern Maine, I taught ELL. First there were Vietnamese, including Amerasians; then came Cambodians, Serbs, Bosnians, Russians, Poles, El Salvadorans, Guatemalans, Rwandans, Burundians, Sudanese, Ugandans, Congolese, Eritreans, Ethiopians, Somalis, Haitians, Peruvians, Colombians, Iraqis and Ukrainians. The reason I take the time to list the many countries is to illustrate that the people coming here all needed some degree of English language to become employed, to support their families, and in turn, to become productive parts of the community.

LD 471 represents a critical investment in Maine's workforce and education system. This bill directly addresses the growing demand for English language instruction in Maine and ensures that working people have access to the high-quality education they need to succeed.

A key component of this legislation is its recognition that adults learning English often require more than just a few hours of instruction per week, which is what is typically offered through Adult Ed or employer sponsored on-site English programs.

Language acquisition for adults is not easy, and many individuals—especially those seeking employment—benefit from full-time, intensive programs. I have many examples of my former students who, after pursuing English beyond high school, became gainfully employed around Maine. There's the Serbian girl who became an emergency dispatcher in Falmouth; the Vietnamese young man who turned his drawing skills into a commercial artist career; the dental hygienists (last count 3); the medical aides; the nurses and doctors (too many to count); two women who were accountants in their home country and went on to become bookkeepers here; a long-distance Somali truck driver (there's a lot more English involved in that than you'd think); and a multitude of students who were teachers in their countries that needed more English to qualify for certification to teach here in the U.S. As you know, we have a critical shortage of teachers here that we need to address.

LD 471 provides the structure necessary to support these learners, ensuring they acquire not only English proficiency but also essential workplace skills such as interviewing techniques and professional communication.

The benefits of this initiative extend beyond the classroom and into the broader Maine community. Stronger educational opportunities lead to greater economic stability, which makes our communities more resilient. Maine has a significant population of internationally trained professionals who are eager to contribute but are often unable to fully utilize their skills due to language barriers. LD 471 helps to retain these skilled workers, allowing them to remain in Maine and contribute to our economy rather than seeking opportunities elsewhere.

I'm also a big fan of the robust reporting requirements in this bill. If the pilot program results in increased wages and tax revenue to the State as we expect it to, we can expand it. Also, by expanding university-based programs for TESOL (Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Language) training, we will develop a sustainable pipeline of highly qualified educators.

ELL students take care of us in Maine. I come across former students everywhere in Maine. There's the manager in the local grocery store, at the reception desk at my doctor's office, in the schools, working as certified teachers and ed techs, hospital x-ray technicians, military veterans, two I know enlisted to work as American translators for our troops, one in their native Afghanistan. Even Embry, the young woman who sang the national anthem in the House chamber last week, was in my ELL Intermediate Reading and Writing Class Spring semester at University of Southern Maine. She confirmed with me that she is still in school working toward a UM college degree as a nutritionist while working outside jobs. They all are fulfilling jobs here; we need these jobs done. We don't have enough workers. They have also become employed taxpayers, just like us.

The ELL students I have known all come with different levels of English. Living in a fishbowl of English swirling all around them, the youngest learn the new language the fastest. The older students and adults like I have taught in Adult Ed and at USM's ELL Department benefit from

the more intensive programs to strengthen whatever English they come with. Such programs are a win-win for Maine.

I strongly support LD 471. It is a forward-thinking initiative that will have lasting positive impacts on Maine's education system, workforce and communities. I urge this committee to support its passage.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I'm happy to try to answer any of your questions.