

## TESTIMONY IN OPPOSITION TO

L.D. 220

### AN ACT TO ESTABLISH THE HOPE AND INCLUSION SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM IN ORDER TO PROVIDE FUNDING FOR STUDENTS ATTENDING CERTAIN PRIVATE SCHOOLS AND STUDENTS RECEIVING HOME INSTRUCTION

March 12, 2025

Senator Rafferty, Representative Noonan Murphy, and members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee, I am Steven Bailey, the executive director of the Maine School Management Association, testifying on behalf of the legislative committees of the Maine School Boards Association and the Maine School Superintendents Association in opposition to L.D. 220. Our associations represent more than 1,700 school board members across every region of Maine, as well as more than 200 superintendents and assistant superintendents.

Public education is a pillar of our democracy and society, serving every single student who enters, regardless of economic status, disability, religion, race, ethnicity, English fluency, sexual orientation, gender identity, immigration status, family status, or any other personal characteristic. More than that, public schools are the center of our communities. Public schools are libraries, meeting places, athletic fields, and pillars of our civic life.

If passed, L.D. 220 would take money away from our local public schools, remove accountability and transparency, and likely increase local property taxes across our state. We urge you to reject this bill and believe it would do irreparable harm and damage to public education.

#### **PRIVATE SCHOOLS DO NOT BENEFIT EVERY STUDENT**

Private school vouchers can take many forms, but they all are designed to fund private schools with public dollars. The proponents of this bill will say that this bill would offer parents more choice and opportunities, but we know from experience that it will largely go towards subsidizing families who have already chosen to leave public schools. In states that already have voucher programs, 70% of the students receiving vouchers are already attending private schools. This is not opening up new opportunities, but instead simply subsidizing private schools and the families who can already afford to attend.

More than that, directing public funding towards private schools often limits student opportunities, instead of expanding them. Public schools are open to every student, but private schools can pick and choose. Voucher programs allow private schools to accept taxpayer dollars but still reject students with vouchers for a variety of reasons, ranging from disability to ability to pay. We have many examples of private voucher schools not adequately serving students with disabilities, often failing to admit them or provide them the same quality and quantity of services available to students in public schools, including those mandated under each student's individualized education program (IEP). This hurts the children who need our support the most.

In Maine, tuition costs can reach \$30,000 or more for a private high school. In other states, private schools have actually increased their tuition after voucher programs were implemented, knowing that families had more state resources at their disposal. This, in effect, has created a system that is mostly subsidizing and benefiting private schools, and harming low-income students who cannot afford the cost of tuition and fees.

### **ACCOUNTABILITY CONCERNS**

Right now, state and local education funding is overseen by state agencies and locally elected school boards. These officials are committed to being good stewards of our public tax dollars. And as citizens, it's easy to find out exactly where that money is going. Ask for your local school budget, and you can see how every single dollar is spent – on teachers, instructional materials, transportation, special education, and more. Public schools are committed to financial transparency and have operated this way for centuries.

If L.D. 220 were to pass, that transparency would largely disappear. In many cases, these funds would go to private schools, which do not need to report on how they are spending funds or the qualifications of teachers they hire. We also question the ability of the Hope and Inclusion Scholarship Board, as described in L.D. 220, to “*review all expenditures from hope accounts*” to ensure they are in compliance with state regulations. Hundreds of thousands of families educate their children each year in Maine – is it possible for a 9-member board to provide enough oversight of every single expense?

We unfortunately have seen examples in other states of voucher funds spent on questionable expenses. In Arizona, vouchers have paid for kayaks, trampoline sessions, espresso machines, and more. Maine taxpayers deserve to have proper safeguards in place around their tax dollars.

### **THIS BILL WOULD HARM LOCAL SCHOOL BUDGETS**

Our associations also expect L.D. 220 would harm local school budgets and raise local taxes – particularly in Maine's smaller, more rural communities. This bill would divert funding away from local school districts. Yet those schools would still need to pay for major expenses: building maintenance, teachers, special education, and more. And because private schools can pick and choose their students, the students who remain in public schools will likely be the ones with the greatest needs. With less state funding, the burden will fall on local taxpayers. Our local schools will be faced with a decision to increase these taxes or to cut important student services in programming, hurting education for their students.

Across the country, we have seen cities and states face substantial budget deficits after passing voucher programs. We do not want to see the same situation play out here in Maine.

Other states – both Republican and Democratic – have repeatedly rejected these kinds of voucher programs. Nebraska repealed its own voucher program just last year. We urge your committee to follow their lead and reject this damaging proposal that would harm Maine public education.