

## **TESTIMONY IN OPPOSITION TO**

**L.D. 420**

### **AN ACT TO FUND THE CARLETON PROJECT TO PROVIDE ADDITIONAL ACCESS TO A NONTRADITIONAL SECONDARY SCHOOL**

Senator Rafferty, Representative Noonan Murphy, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs. My name is Mark Lipscombe. I live in Houlton and am a member of the RSU 29 school board. I am testifying today in my personal capacity and not on behalf of the school board or district. I previously served as a board member of the Carleton Project until I resigned over concerns about educational standards. I am also the legal guardian of one student who attended the Carleton Project, as well as the former legal guardian of another student who briefly attended the program. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today regarding LD420.

I respectfully oppose LD420, which would provide \$150,000 annually for five years to expand the Carleton Project's capacity by an additional 10 students. My opposition is based on firsthand knowledge of both the Carleton Project's operations and the alternative education options already available through our public school system.

#### **Historical Context**

Firstly, I want to acknowledge that the Carleton Project has a meaningful history in our community. By many accounts, it once served as a valuable alternative education program when it was co-located at the University of Maine at Presque Isle. During that period, it maintained stronger academic standards and more robust educational practices.

Unfortunately, while the organization continues to reference this legacy when seeking funding and community support, my direct observations indicate that the current reality falls significantly short of its historical reputation. Over time, the program has shifted away from rigorous alternative education toward an approach that prioritizes credential completion over meaningful educational attainment. The quality and substance of the educational experience have declined substantially from what was once offered.

I sincerely commend the sponsors of LD420 for their commitment to supporting alternative education pathways for Maine students. This is a worthy goal that deserves legislative attention. However, it is crucial that such support goes to programs that genuinely deliver quality education. Based on my direct experience with the Carleton Project, there appears to be a significant gap between the organization's historical reputation and its current practices. Any consideration of funding should be based on the organization as it exists today, not on its past accomplishments or reputation.

#### **Cost Effectiveness**

This bill proposes to allocate \$150,000 to serve approximately 10 additional students, which calculates to \$15,000 per student annually. This funding level is substantially higher than what our public schools receive per student from the state. As someone familiar with school finances, I find this particularly concerning given that like many schools across the state, the RSU 29 budget is strained to the breaking point. At a time when public schools are struggling to maintain essential services with limited resources,

allocating premium funding to a private program with questionable educational practices deserves serious scrutiny.

### **Duplication of Services**

RSU 29 and other districts in Aroostook County have already invested significantly in comprehensive alternative education programs that effectively serve students who don't thrive in traditional settings. Specifically, our region offers:

1. **Summit Academy** - Established in 2019 under the Southern Aroostook Area Regional Service Center (SAARSC), this program can accommodate up to 40 students from Houlton, Hodgdon, Southern Aroostook, and Katahdin schools. Students follow individualized academic pathways with two certified teachers and two certified educational technicians. They also have access to classes at public schools, Region Two CTE programs, counseling services, career counseling through ACAP, and community service opportunities.
2. **Transitions Learning Center (TLC)** - A newer program housed in the same building as Summit Academy, operated under the auspices of Houlton Hodgdon Adult & Community Education. TLC offers highly flexible scheduling, including late afternoon and evening options, with individualized pacing. All students must be engaged in one of three pathways: workforce preparation, college coursework, or Region Two CTE enrollment. The program has a direct partnership with Northern Maine Community College for concurrent enrollment options.

These public alternative programs maintain high standards with certified teachers, certified administration, proper oversight at both the local school board and state levels, and annual financial audits. The Carleton Project, as a private entity, effectively duplicates these services at a higher cost without the same level of accountability or certified staff.

### **Educational Quality**

During my time as both a board member of the Carleton Project and as a parent of students who attended the program, I observed concerning patterns regarding educational delivery:

1. Students frequently spent entire school days with minimal interaction with certified teachers. Instead, Educational Technician I's were routinely misused as primary classroom teachers without proper supervision or support. This practice directly contradicts Maine's regulations regarding the permitted responsibilities of Ed Tech I's, which explicitly limit them to:
  - Reviewing and reinforcing learning previously introduced by classroom teachers
  - Performing non-instructional, non-evaluative functions
  - Assisting in the preparation of instructional materials
  - Providing classroom management functions
2. Maine regulations further require that Ed Tech I's must "be assigned instructional duties that are directly supervised by the classroom teacher or appropriate content specialist in the classroom." At Carleton Project, Ed Tech I's were operating well beyond their permitted scope, often serving as the sole educational contact for students without the required direct supervision by certified teachers.
3. The curriculum implementation lacked the rigor and breadth that students need for meaningful post-secondary success.
4. There was limited oversight to ensure students were meeting established learning standards prior to receiving their diplomas.

I feel compelled to note that these concerns about educational standards ultimately led to my resignation from the Carleton Project board. I could not in good conscience continue to serve on a board that was not effectively addressing these fundamental educational issues.

### **Governance Issues**

Beyond the educational concerns, the Carleton Project also suffers from significant governance problems that directly impact educational quality:

1. The board is largely disinterested and dysfunctional, providing minimal oversight of the organization's operations.
2. The executive director routinely makes arbitrary changes to the school calendar, educational practices, and other important matters without meaningful board involvement or approval.
3. This lack of proper governance means there are few checks and balances to ensure educational decisions are made in the best interest of students rather than administrative or personal convenience.

### **Student Retention**

Further, I have repeatedly witnessed situations where students or parents who raised questions about educational standards or disagreed with administrative decisions found themselves marginalized within the program. Some students were discouraged from continuing or asked not to return after such interactions. This practice is particularly concerning when dealing with students who have already experienced challenges in traditional educational settings.

### **Privacy and Professional Conduct Concerns**

During my time associated with the Carleton Project, I personally witnessed concerning behaviors regarding student and family privacy. Employees routinely engaged in inappropriate discussions involving gossip and innuendo about students, their families, and even fellow staff members. These egregious privacy violations created an unprofessional environment and demonstrated a lack of appropriate boundaries and professional standards that should be expected in any educational setting, particularly one serving vulnerable students.

### **Public Education Investment**

Rather than allocating \$150,000 annually to a private program at a premium cost, I believe these funds would be better invested in our public education system. Public schools across Aroostook County have already developed effective alternative education programs that serve students with diverse learning needs. These programs operate with certified teachers, proper public oversight, and accountability measures that ensure students receive quality education.

The public education system has the infrastructure, expertise, and commitment to reach the greatest number of students in need of alternative educational options. By directing resources to public schools, we can strengthen existing programs, potentially expand their capacity, and ensure that more students have access to high-quality alternative education that genuinely prepares them for future success.

This approach would be both more cost-effective and more likely to result in meaningful educational outcomes for students who need additional support or different learning environments.

## **Declining District Participation**

It is particularly telling that virtually all the surrounding school districts that previously sent students to the Carleton Project now refuse to do so. These districts, staffed by professional educators committed to finding appropriate placements for struggling students, have made deliberate decisions to develop their own alternative education programs or find other options rather than continue working with this organization.

This mass exodus of public school districts speaks volumes. When educational professionals across multiple communities independently reach the same conclusion—that the Carleton Project is not meeting appropriate educational standards—the Legislature should take note.

When these potential sending schools have requested basic information about Carleton Project's curriculum or staffing levels—information that any legitimate educational program should readily provide and that is required of public schools—the organization has consistently refused to share these details. This deliberate lack of transparency appears designed to conceal the inadequate educational practices I witnessed firsthand.

Shortly before my resignation from the board, I personally attempted to address these very concerns. I encouraged the organization to view these district inquiries as an opportunity to strengthen their standards and "right the ship." My suggestions for greater transparency and improved educational practices were explicitly rebuffed by both the executive director and the founder of the school. This resistance to basic accountability and improvement efforts, even from within their own board, demonstrates a fundamental unwillingness to address the serious educational deficiencies at the core of their program.

The fact that Carleton Project now seeks substantial public funding while having a documented history of rejecting opportunities to improve their educational standards is deeply troubling and should give this committee serious pause.

## **Personal Experience**

As the legal guardian of two children who attended the Carleton Project, I've witnessed firsthand the consequences of their educational approach. The student whom I am the legal guardian of effectively lost an entire academic year while enrolled there. Despite being present at the school with near perfect attendance, she received no meaningful instruction or educational guidance. She was largely left to her own devices without appropriate teacher engagement, structured learning activities, or academic oversight.

This experience is particularly concerning given that alternative education students often require more, not less, educational support and structure. The absence of consistent interaction with certified teachers meant that rather than receiving a different but equivalent education, my child received substantially less education during her time at Carleton Project.

## **Conclusion**

I stand before you today not as someone opposed to alternative education—quite the contrary. My concern for students who need nontraditional pathways is precisely why I cannot support funding for the Carleton Project.

The testimony I have presented—drawn from my direct experience as a board member, parent, and educational advocate—reveals an organization that:

- Misuses untrained staff in place of certified teachers
- Resists transparency and accountability
- Rejects opportunities for improvement
- Fails to provide the educational experience vulnerable students so richly deserve

Our students deserve better. Our taxpayers deserve better. The \$150,000 annual allocation proposed in LD420 would reward an organization with significant deficiencies that undermine the very core of its educational mission, while our public schools struggle to fund proven, accountable alternative education programs.

I urge this committee to reject LD420 and instead consider how these resources might strengthen public education alternatives that maintain high standards, employ certified teachers, and demonstrate genuine commitment to student success. Our most vulnerable students deserve nothing less than our highest educational standards, not our lowest.

Thank you for your time, and I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

Respectfully submitted,

Mark Lipscombe