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TESTIMONY IN OPPOSITION TO

L.D. 420

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

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. 420. Our associations represent more than 1,700 school board members all across our state, as well as more than 200 superintendents and their districts.

While we appreciate the educational goals of the Carleton Project, we oppose this bill because it would subsidize the operations of a Maine private school, with little accountability or oversight of the quality of education it would produce.

Our associations believe that alternative programs like the Carleton Project provide important opportunities for students across our state. We know that the path to graduation looks different from student to student. Many students face mental health challenges, trauma or situations at home that cause significant education disruption, and it's important to offer alternative programming to help those students thrive.

Yet in this specific case, the state would be effectively singling out and subsidizing a particular private school program, potentially at the expense of public education.

Because the Carleton Project is a private school, it is exempt from important state and local oversight rules that are important for good governance. The Carleton Project's governing board is not elected. There is less financial oversight. Our associations believe that our public dollars should be accountable to taxpayers, and this would go against that principle. It also opens a dangerous precedent that could pave the way for more public subsidization of private education, which could take away enrollment and resources from local public schools. We worry that the subsidization of private education in this instance could turn into a slippery slope, and we do not believe the legislature should be going down this path.

If the legislature is looking to invest in providing more alternative pathways for Maine students, we would welcome it – but that funding should be directed to Maine public schools, which are already providing innovative alternative programming across the state. Just in the Houlton area, four districts came together about eight years ago to form Summit Academy, an alternative program providing students at risk of dropping out with individualized instruction, behavioral support and community-based, hands-on programming. In the Presque Isle region, SAD 1 has created a similar program.

These types of alternative high school programs are administered all over our state, and they are successful. They help students stay in school, get better grades, earn a diploma and provide for themselves and their families. And because these programs are administered by public school districts, they are accountable to local school boards, and students are more closely connected to their sending schools and continue to have broad options for math, English, music, art classes, and CTE programming. State money is already supporting these programs, and school officials firmly believe that more state investment in this kind of programming in our public schools will provide students with more pathways to graduation and put fewer students at risk of dropping out.

The Maine Alternative Education Association has estimated that these programs exist in more than three-quarters of our state's school districts. We believe that our current system provides a range of options for our children. And importantly, it keeps locally elected school boards in control of the education, allowing for community oversight and governance of public funds.

This bill would circumvent this system and would subsidize private education, potentially to the detriment of Maine's public schools. We urge your committee to reject L.D. 420.