



March 13, 2023

Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry

FoodCorps Testimony in *Support* of LD 550 An Act to Support Outdoor, Agricultural-based and Hands-on Experiential Learning in Public Schools

Senator Ross, Representative Pluecker, and Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry,

My name is Ryan Parker, and I am the Maine Impact and Partnerships Lead for FoodCorps which is a national nonprofit organization which partners with schools all around the country to provide students with experiential learning opportunities tied to food, cooking, and gardening. For the past 14 years, we have worked with Maine communities from Portland to the Katahdin Region, Indian Township to Eustis, to provide hands-on lessons that help students learn better, and get excited about eating fruits and vegetables and support school nutrition staff in getting nourishing meals on school trays. I am a lifelong Mainer and I live in Newport with my family where, until recently, I served on the RSU 19 School Board, and now coach young athletes at all levels. I am here today on behalf of FoodCorps to ask you to support passage of LD 550, An Act to Support Outdoor, Agricultural-based and Hands-on Experiential Learning in Public Schools.

Thank you to Senator Guerin and her cosponsors for introducing this important opportunity for the schools and children throughout Maine, and for supporting experiential learning.

Many people intuitively understand that humans of all ages learn best by doing. We do not learn to ride a bike by reading books about it, or hunt by doing worksheets, or drive by watching videos. All of those things are certainly useful learning tools, but most people, and certainly the vast majority of children, must use their bodies along with their minds to actually learn. Many educators and advocates have long been calling for less stationary time at a desk and more outdoor, tactile, and movement based learning opportunities. Most people, including most teachers, intuitively understand the reality that experiential learning is most beneficial to students. But, there has long been a reluctance to engage in teaching experientially due to many barriers, most of which come down to capacity. Because of what our public education system was originally designed to do, and because of the way it has subsequently developed over the past century, teachers



are not taught in our colleges to engage in experiential learning. Those teachers that do teach this way will be the first to tell you managing an outdoor classroom and even hands-on activities inside is much different than managing indoor, sit-down, traditional classrooms. It is harder, which is saying something because teaching is already very challenging, takes more prep-time, and often involves clean-up after lessons. It involves considerations around how children are dressed, what type of footwear they have on a given day, and having materials that can withstand weather and physical movement. For years many organizations and individuals have worked to chip away at these hesitations with resources, professional development, and full programs designed to help those early adopters who both recognize the value of experiential education, and want to take advantage of it. It was long, hard, slow work to expand the educational paradigm.

But the covid pandemic, for all its disruption and tragedy, carried with it the silver lining that many Maine schools were forced to quickly create new systems to educate our children in outdoor spaces where airflow is far superior to that in even our most modern school buildings. Federal Covid relief funding made much of this possible because it included hundreds of thousands of dollars schools *had* to use exclusively to create outdoor learning spaces. Most schools chose to invest in school gardens, school orchards, hoop and greenhouses, and pavilions. This makes sense given that over 80% of experiential learning that happens in Maine is tied to school gardening. Importantly, many schools hired specific people to help students and teachers take advantage of this new infrastructure; helping teachers connect the outdoor growing and learning spaces to existing standards and curriculum for all subjects from Fine Arts, to Language Arts, from Math and Science to Social Studies.

While a select and small handful of schools have long been engaged in this type of education, the pandemic introduced it to many more. LD 550 fills a critical need to help schools begin to take advantage of the realities most have seen with experiential learning during the pandemic. This need has always been there but is now urgent. Covid relief money has disappeared from all school districts across the country. This has become known as the "Covid cliff." School districts throughout Maine working through this, some better than others. Experiential and outdoor learning programs that began during the pandemic are among the most universally valued. But schools need help to continue outdoor experiential learning programs.

The reasons for this are simple. Over recent decades, science has finally begun to prove what many have long known, and what dozens of schools around Maine have just begun



to experience. Specifically, children do better, by every measure, when they can learn by doing, particularly if it is a natural setting (outside). Children make deeper learning connections when they can learn experientially. Children's behavior improves when they can get outside, meaning fewer office referrals and disciplinary actions, which means our principals can spend more of their time developing curricula and evaluating teachers. Mental health improves when children (and adults) are outside. These and other facts are well documented in dozens of studies, only a partiality of which are highlighted in the list accompanying this testimony.

In addition to the timeliness of this legislation, LD 550 is well-crafted because it does not force anything on schools. Maine is a local control state and, as a school board member myself, I have strong opinions about local control. This bill provides support for experiential learning, but only to those districts who choose to use it. In other words, this is not an educational mandate. Under this language, districts are free to choose to partner with the Department, or not. And if they do, they are free to stick to their own curriculum, connecting it to outdoor and experiential learning as they see best fits their communities. There is nothing in this legislation that dictates what must be taught. And, garden and other experiential education provides nearly infinite flexibility to meet schools where they want to go.

Perhaps the most interesting, and useful part of this legislation is the fact that it strikes an often difficult to achieve level of support. Some programs provide one time support which may allow for an exciting project to be created, but not sustained. Indeed, Covid relief funds were a good example. They were required by law to be spent on outdoor infrastructure like greenhouses. But there was no money to deal with the maintenance, use, and connecting this infrastructure to curricula. Other types of support become a crutch to achieve that sustainability. This legislation is based on the old proverb that it is better to teach someone to fish than give them fish. LD 550 provides for a gradual build up of programming which will then be sustained by the district itself. It will also, therefore, provide an opportunity for all schools that are interested in this type of program to take advantage of it relatively quickly as the state support can shift from one community to another in succession around Maine.

FoodCorps' has long focused on this type of work. Our goal in Maine is always to help schools build outdoor learning spaces, learn to use them, and expand their use by teachers and students so they can realize all the benefits outlined above. We build these



partnerships with the exit strategy in mind at the outset. We help districts to become self-sufficient, meaning they will continue to expand and use their experiential learning programs long after FoodCorps moves on to help other communities. As such, we work to build support in districts for the creation of positions like those outlined in this legislation. When FoodCorps partners with a school district, we usually plan to be there for two to six years, depending on many factors including size of district, level of existing infrastructure, culture of use, and more. With our limited resources, we are only currently in 7 communities throughout Maine. Since FoodCorps' inception just over a decade ago, we have served in several communities. There are approximately 192 school districts in the state. At the current rate, it would take FoodCorps nearly 800 years to reach every school, and every kid most of whom would thrive if they could grow up with experiential education as the norm.

Maine is a leader in the realm of Farm to School programming, which means schools would have a lot of support if they were to participate in this program. Indeed, no other state brings a focus on the Sea to their programming. FoodCorps is a proud member of the robust and long-lived Farm and Sea to School Network, composed of organizations and individuals who support experiential learning based on gardens, food, fisheries, and agriculture, two of Maine's most important industries. FoodCorps joins our partners in this network and beyond in recognizing the incredible value of experience to the development of young minds which grow into thoughtful, contributing citizens. I urge you to vote ought to pass on LD 550. I am happy to answer any questions you may have, and I will do my best to provide any additional information you may require. I am happy to be of service when you discuss this bill in the work session.

Thank you,

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Suggested works:

"*Natural spaces and materials stimulate children's limitless imaginations*" Robin C. Moore and Herb H. Wong, *Natural Learning: Creating Environments for Rediscovering Nature's Way of Teaching* (Berkeley, CA: MIG Communications, 1997)

"*School Grounds as Sites for Learning: Making the Most of Environmental Opportunities*," Karen Malone and Paul J. Tranter, *Environmental Education Research* 9, no.3 (2003)

"*Outdoor Kindergartens Are Better at Stimulating Children's Creativity than Indoor Schools*," *Copenhagen Post*, October 10, 2006

"*Is Contact with Nature Important for Healthy Child Development? State of the evidence*," in *Children and their Environments: Learning, Using, and Designing Spaces*, ed. Christopher Spencer and Mark Blades, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006)

"*2006 Shape of the nation Report: Status of Physical Education in the USA*," American Heart Association and the National Association for Sport and Physical Education, <http://www.aahperd.org/naspe/shapeofthenation/>.

"*Trends in Blood Pressure among Children and Adolescents*," Paul Muntner, Jiang He, Jeffrey A. Cutler, Rachel P. Wildman, and Paul K. Whelton, *JAMA* 291, no. 17 (May 2004).

"*Green is Good for You*," Rebecca Clay, *American Psychological Association*, April 2001, Vol 32, No. 4

"*Think Beyond Drug Therapy for Treating ADHD*," Victoria Stagg Elliott, *AMA News*, April 19, 2004

"*2007 Report: Child and Youth Well-being Index (CWI), 1975-2005, With Projections for 2006*," Kenneth C. Land, (Durham, NC: Foundation for Child Development, Duke University, 2007).

"*Suutarila Journal: Educators Flocking to Finland, Land of Literate Children*," Lezette Alvarez, *New York Times*, April 9, 2004

"*Closing the Achievement Gap: Using the Environment as an Integrating Context for Learning*," Gerald A. Lieberman and Linda L. Hoody, (San Diego: State Education and Environment Roundtable [SEER], 1998).

"*Place-Based Education: Connecting Classrooms and Communities*," David Sobel, (Great Barrington, MA: The Orion Society and the Myrin Institute, 2004).

"*Effects of Outdoor Education Programs for Children in California*," (Palo Alto, CA: American Institutes for Research, 2005).