

the **Ecology
Learning
Center**

230 Main Street Unity, ME 04988
www.ecologylearningcenter.org
leza.packard@ecologylearningcenter.org
207-230-9275

To: Committee on Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry
From: Lēza Packard, Superintendent & Head of School
Re: Support to LD550
Date: March 13, 2025

Good afternoon Senator Ross, Representative Pluecker, and distinguished members of the Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry:

I am speaking in enthusiastic support of LD 550 An Act to Support Outdoor, Agricultural-based, and Hands-on Experiential Learning in Public Schools. As the founding Superintendent of a public charter high school, the Ecology Learning Center in Unity, I see first hand the benefits of students learning outdoors, engaging with growing, preparing, serving, and eating food as part of their school curriculum.

Our public school's mission is to deeply root students in Maine's ecological and cultural landscape and foster authentic real-world learning through mentorship and craft. We are a place-based school that emphasizes outdoor, hands-on experiential learning. However, even with this as our primary focus, funding is a struggle. Funding staff positions is a struggle. We aim to provide outdoor experiential education on a shoestring budget.

In just a few weeks, we will hold our 5th annual Maple Run, a schoolwide event in which students celebrate the fruits of their labor tapping maple trees and boiling sap over a fire they tend. Our chemistry class will research the chemical structure of sap at different sugar levels, and our college level environmental science class will study the health of maple trees over time. This year, we will hold the Maple Run at MOFGA's fairgrounds where our students will learn from guest experts from Maine Audubon. We will then serve the maple syrup students boil down at lunch, with other local ingredients, and with student chefs helping to prepare the meal.

Outdoor learning is not once a year at our public school. We strive to make learning happen outdoors every week, in every subject. LD 550 will provide our school and all other public schools in Maine with the sources to fund outdoor lessons, field trips, garden programs, and farm to cafeteria practices that serve the health and wellness of Maine's next generation.