

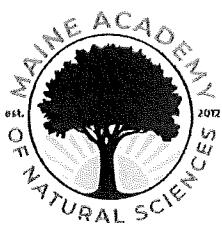
March 13, 2025

Good afternoon, Senator Ross, Representative Pluecker, and Members of the Committee on Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry

My name is Pat Henyan and I'm here to speak in support of Bill 505, An Act to Support Outdoor, Agricultural-Based and Hands-On Experiential Learning in Public Schools. I am currently the acting Head of School at the Maine Academy of Natural Sciences (also known as MeANS). We are a charter public high school in Hinckley Maine, and we specialize in hands-on, experiential learning in the areas of agriculture, forestry, and the environment. Like all of Maine's charter public schools, our school is tuition-free, public, and open to all students.

At MeANS, we see first hand the transformative effect that learning-by-doing in the natural world can have. Students, otherwise disengaged with a traditional curriculum, thrive when given the opportunity to work with their hands. Today, while I speak with you all, our freshman class is in the Hinckley Woods, tapping trees, running lines, and boiling down sap into Maple Syrup. This experience not only allows students to actively participate in one of Maine's oldest industries, but they also develop critical thinking skills, learn about the ecology and sustainability of Maine's forests, and develop community through the shared experience with their peers. On March 23rd, we'll celebrate the fruits of their labor by hosting the public for Maine Maple Sunday, where our students will practice public speaking, demonstrate their newly found knowledge, and be celebrated by teachers, parents, and guests alike.

In thinking of your own high school experiences, I would guess it's unlikely that anybody here thinks back and fondly reminisces about their favorite worksheet or text book. Instead, the vast majority of our most meaningful memories often come from moments that we experienced first hand with our peers. It's in those memories and moments that the foundational beliefs about the value of education develop. Like all of Maine's public schools, we are open to all kids, and as such we serve students with a wide-range of academic, behavioral, language, and/or special education needs. In fact, about 1 in 4 of our public school students receive special education



services, and close to 70% of our students come from low-income households. Thanks to our hands-on agricultural focused program, I am proud to share that our students are excelling academically. They are successfully graduating from high school, and they are enrolling in 2-year and 4-year colleges and/or going into the field equipped with the knowledge they need to achieve their career and life goals. I share these data with you to underscore the value that these hands-on experiences can have, especially when it comes to Maine's highest needs students.

As someone that has seen the impact that these experiences have on our students, and someone who deeply cares about the future of our state, I'm here to implore you to vote to make these opportunities available to all public school students across Maine. My own background is largely from a district public school. I taught across multiple subject areas in an urban Maine school for sixteen years before joining the team at MeANS. I know first hand the burden that adding experiential, agricultural based learning can have on our public school budgets. A burden that for many taxpayers would be untenable, which is why a bill like this, which would create resource-backed opportunities for our district public school peers to try-on this type of program, is so important to support.

Maine's public schools are filled with wonderful educators who would love the opportunity to explore and innovate within their curricula while accessing the state's greatest resources. Bill 505 would help provide them the means to do so. I urge the committee to pass Bill 505 and provide more Maine students with the transformative experiences that agricultural-based, hands-on public education can offer. Let's make sure that every public school student has the opportunity to learn, grow, and thrive in environments that connect them to their education, their peers, and their state.