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THE MAINE SENATE
132nd Legislature

LD 550, "An Act to Support Outdoor, Agricultural-based and Hands-on
Experiential Learning in Public Schools."

Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry
March 13, 2025

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

My name is Senator Stacey Guerin and I am here today presenting LD 550, "An Act to Support Outdoor, Agricultural-based and Hands-on Experiential Learning in Public Schools."

This is an amended version of a bill that was considered and unanimously supported by this Committee in the 131st Legislature. Like the original, the purpose of this bill is to help local school districts and individual schools throughout Maine create positions that will allow for the expansion of experiential, hands-on education right in the schools and communities where kids are for at least 175 days every year.

As a former teacher myself, I can attest to the fact that kids learn better, have fewer behavior issues, and pay attention more easily when they can be active and, whenever possible, get outside to learn. I personally maintained a school nature walk at the elementary school where I taught. The children loved it and followed the seasonal changes with enthusiasm. But, I also know how hard teachers work and that the additional requirements to make outdoor and experiential learning happen are sometimes beyond their capacity or even interest. Many times I traded classes with other teachers to give their students an opportunity to be guided by me on the nature trail. This bill's provisions include not only the additional effort and focus needed to connect experiential learning spaces and infrastructure to the curriculum, but also the *maintenance* of that infrastructure. This is where LD 550 comes in.

I firmly believe local communities support the concept of experiential learning, as is evidenced by the fact that some districts across Maine have been able to create positions, whether they be certified teachers, ed techs, or coach positions, to create connections between outdoor and hands-on learning spaces and the curriculum our teachers deliver in math, science, social studies, English, art, music, and even phys ed. But right now, this is limited to a handful of districts that are either more financially well-off or are fortunate to exist in a place where there is non-profit support.

However, *all* children learn better by doing, and given the possibilities that exist in all parts of Maine relative to our natural resources and beautiful settings, these limitations should not hold back students anywhere in our great state.

This bill is fiscally neutral being that it is contingent on funding being captured, either from existing USDA Farm to School grant opportunities, private donations, or other sources. If that funding is obtained, the Department would create a grant program that would provide initial support for school districts that wish to participate, then slowly phase that financial support out over a couple years while the district ramps up support in its own budget.

Most other states with experiential education programs focus on multi-million dollar grant programs which allow children to visit residential schools for a short time. This is a good idea and I believe there are other proposals coming before the Legislature that are similar to those programs. However, this bill provides support for experiential learning right in schools where kids are, and it will be sustained by the districts themselves due to the unique support model this bill provides. I urge you to vote ought to pass on LD 1682.

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.