



maine
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association

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Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry

***RE: LD 895 An Act to Support Immersive Outdoor Education by Establishing the
Outdoor School for All Maine Students Program***

Dear Sen. Talbot Ross, Rep. Pluecker and the members of the committee,

My name is Olivia Griset and I am the Executive Director of the Maine Environmental Education Association (MEEA). I am here **to testify in support of LD 895**. Thank you to Senator Bennett for bringing this bill forward, along with the many cosponsors and other supporters including members of this committee.

MEEA is a statewide professional nonprofit network representing over 2,000 Maine educators, including classroom teachers as well as community-based educators at overnight environmental education program providers and nature centers, land trusts and government agencies. For over forty years, we have supported Maine educators in providing high quality, locally relevant, hands-on outdoor experiences for Maine youth.

MEEA also serves as the state affiliate to the North American Association for Environmental Education, and through our work there, we know that Maine is a national leader in the outdoor and environmental education sector. We are unique for our rich history of outdoor recreation, natural resource-based economy, and we have existing infrastructure, with collaboration between our community based programs, which would enable the state to provide a high quality, locally relevant outdoor school program for every Maine child. If established, the Outdoor School Network will increase jobs in the outdoor learning sector statewide, while at the same time inspiring our youth- exposing them to potential careers in the outdoor recreation, natural sciences, agriculture, and STEM fields.

In 2022, MEEA collaborated with the Maine Department of Education as they revised the state Environmental Literacy Plan. This plan was supported by the leadership of all the state agencies whose work relates to the environment. Establishing the Outdoor School Network would directly advance the goals of the state Environmental Literacy Plan.

When I was a high school teacher in a town just 45 minutes from the ocean, I took a bus full of students to Reid State Park for a marine biology field trip. I'll never forget my surprise when so many of my 17 and 18 year old students, who had grown up in Maine, had never seen or experienced the ocean. A program like this will ensure our kids, whether or not their families have funds to travel, will get to see and experience what Maine has to offer.

Research shows the critical years around middle school are a key window for physical, social, and mental health development and the data shows that Maine youth are facing more mental health challenges than ever before. These middle school years are when kids start thinking about possible career pathways and their beliefs about the place they call home. When our youth get to have positive community-based learning experiences they gain a greater sense of place and connection to this state, making it more likely they will want to stay here to pursue careers, contribute to the Maine economy, raise their families, and participate in their local communities.

For all these reasons, I urge you to support LD 895, An Act to Support Immersive Outdoor Education by Establishing the Outdoor School for All Maine Students Program.