



Testimony from Chewonki Foundation

Presented by Cullen McGough, Director of Communications In Support of LD 895, *An Act to Support Outdoor Education by Establishing the Outdoor School for All Maine Students Program* – March 13, 2025

Senator Bennett and distinguished members of the Committee on Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry:

My name is Cullen McGough, and I serve as the Director of Communications at Chewonki Foundation, an environmental education center located in Wiscasset, Maine. Today, I am honored to speak in strong support of LD 895, advocating for the preservation of our state's heritage and rich traditions introduced through environmental education.

I've had the good fortune to work at Chewonki for the past nine years. During that time, I've witnessed more than 10,000 middle school students from across the state attend our Outdoor Classroom program. Over the course of three days, each group immerses itself in hands-on marine ecology studies, team-building exercises, and learning the basics of outdoor living and camping. For some students, engaging in real-life field science unlocks new passions or career goals. For others, performing chores on our working farm and sitting down to a dinner they harvested themselves sparks a new appreciation for our food systems. And for others still, it may be the first and only time they experience the true joy of sitting around a campfire with friends under the stars, and discovering there is more to life than "swiping right" on a smartphone.

I have watched these moments unfold many times and can confidently assure this committee that nature-based programming at the middle school age significantly impacts students' interests, attitudes, and future career pathways. I also can confidently state that the curriculum, goals, and outcomes of the outdoor school programs represented by MOSFA providers strongly align with Maine's most vital economic growth sectors. They foster interest in bioscience, conservation, land management, energy production, and, of course, outdoor recreation and tourism. I can think of no greater gift for a child in Maine than introducing them to the wonders of the natural world and providing them with the tools they need to confidently explore and understand it.

Chewonki has also been fortunate to participate in the Maine Outdoor Brands Association, and I am hard-pressed to recall a year when finding and recruiting enough young people to fill job vacancies across the state was not a top concern. I am immensely proud that Chewonki has been the starting point for many students and young staff to establish meaningful careers in our outdoor economy. We take it as a point of pride that a few days in nature as a child can become a life-long passion and career.

And, I would like to say, this is not fair. Current funding formulas for public education simply do not allow schools that would most benefit from this type of experience to pay for it out of their normal operating budgets, especially schools in rural, low-income, or remote parts of the state. And yet, these very students are often the ones we are depending on to join our fisheries, farms,

and forests, and hope they develop an interest in the sustainable resource management so crucial to Maine's economy.

This issue also impacts towns beyond rural areas. For over 35 years, Chewonki was honored to serve RSU1, welcoming every middle school student from Bath, West Bath, Woolwich, Phippsburg, and Arrowsic. In 2024, RSU1 was forced to remove the outdoor school experience from its budget due to inflationary pressures. While we have attempted to bridge the gap with less expensive day programming, RSU1 and similar school districts simply do not have the resources to independently maintain this high-quality, high-impact programming. It is disheartening that the RSU1 community—a community leading our state in maritime construction and national defense—does not have the resources to provide students with their first immersive life-science experience, foundational to the academic pathways that made this country great.

I humbly recognize budget considerations are real, and expenditures must be prioritized in every town, school, and state budget. And, I urge this committee to reflect upon your own experiences living and working in Maine. Think back to your own first meaningful encounter with nature—a family camping trip, a backcountry hike with a friend, a job that took you off the grid, or even the quiet beauty of a sunset—and consider the lifelong benefits those experiences have brought you. Of all the things, what mattered most?

This committee has the power to unlock that door for every student in Maine. I appreciate your consideration and thank you for your time.