



Richard A. Bennett
Senator, District 18

THE MAINE SENATE
132nd Legislature

3 State House Station
Augusta, Maine 04333

**Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry on
LD 895, An Act to Support Immersive Outdoor Education by Establishing
the Outdoor School for All Maine Students Program**

March 13, 2025

Good morning, Senator Talbot Ross, Representative Pluecker, and honorable members of the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry: I am Senator Rick Bennett of Oxford, and I have the honor of serving 14 communities in Western Maine in the State Senate. I am proud to sponsor LD 895, "An Act to Support Immersive Outdoor Education by Establishing the Outdoor School for All Maine Students Program."

The intent of this bill is to provide opportunities for Maine students in grades 4 through 8 to have outdoor experiences. The curriculum would cover conservation, sustainability, STEM topics as well as the critical skills such as leadership, teamwork, and problem-solving. We all share the goal of providing these opportunities to our schoolchildren. The bill tasks the University of Maine Cooperative Service to administer grants to school districts that will implement the program.

Students in Maine are incredibly fortunate to be surrounded by such vast natural landscapes. However, many do not get the chance to really take advantage of our environment. Today there are several school districts that do offer outdoor education, but sadly, not enough. The current network of outdoor schools only serves 25% of Maine's middle school students. For the future of our state, it is essential to instill a love and appreciation of the Maine outdoors.

Kids from districts across the state avail these opportunities occasionally now from some superb organizations but only episodically. These organizations include the University of Maine Cooperative Extension: 4H, The Ecology School, The Schoodic Institute at Acadia National Park, Chewonki, Kieve Wavus Education, Cobscook Institute, Hurricane Island: Center for Science and Leadership, and Maine Local Living School.

I took a tour last session of the Schoodic Institute's offerings and was thoroughly impressed. I also am familiar with the Bryant Pond 4H camp and was equally wowed.

I'm sure many of you remember this bill from last session, LD 1817. There were 114 sponsors from all over the state, including many of you on this committee. The bill was unanimously reported out of this committee as "ought to pass as amended." It then went to the Senate and House and was passed under the hammer. Unfortunately, the bill spent nearly a year on the Special Appropriations Table and then died when the House didn't act on the Senate's and Committee's amendments.

I'm sure that some of the advocates behind me will speak about the incredible benefits and advantages that outdoor school students gain.

Thank you for your time and consideration today. I want to strongly urge the committee to vote "ought to pass" on LD 895. I would be happy to take any questions.