

State of Maine  
STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION

Testimony of Fern Desjardins, Chair of the State Board of Education

In Support of: L.D. 323: An Act to Fund Staff Support for the State Board of Education.

Before the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs

Sponsored by: Representative Brennan

Date: March 18, 2025

Senator Rafferty, Representative Kelly Murphy, and Honorable Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs:

My name is Fern Desjardins, Chair of the Maine State Board of Education. I welcome this opportunity to submit testimony on behalf of the State Board in support of L.D. 323: An Act to Fund Staff Support for the State Board of Education. As a retired educator, I've served on the State Board for almost seven years and been honored to serve as chair since July 1, 2021.

It would have been challenging for me to serve on the State Board, especially as chair of the Board, while I was employed in any of the positions I held during my PK-12 career in education. Board members have only one staff member, an office specialist, to assist them in their work. The workload of members is much heavier than that of other boards I've served on. Allow me to review the Board's composition and some of their responsibilities.

The State Board has 11 members, 9 voting members and two non-voting students. Voting members are elected for a 5-year term and can serve two terms. In 2026, 4 members' terms will expire; in 2027, 2 members' terms; and in 2028, 3 members' terms will expire. Some may be appointed to serve a second term; others won't be reappointed or will term out. Having 4 out of 9 members get off the Board in any given year is certainly not good for the Board.

Since I began serving as chair of the State Board, I've worked with three secretary/office specialists in a period of 3 years, 8 months. In fact, the Board is currently assisting the MDOE in filling the vacancy of the office specialist that recently resigned. When 2026 rolls around, the Board will have a new chair with 6 months experience in that role, an office specialist with 8 months experience, and 4 members' terms up for reappointment.

Two of the eight characteristics of an online AI overview of effective organizations are *Effective Leadership* and *Operational Excellence*. The State Board is led by its chair - a position that is voted on annually. Since July 1, 1999:

- 4 chairs served for 1 year;
- 2 chairs served for 2 years;
- 2 chairs served for 3 years; and
- 3 chairs will have served for 4 years by June 30, 2025.

With the leadership changing every 1-4 years, how can the Board keep its vision in the forefront to achieve ambitious goals, anticipate challenges, make informed decisions, and

empower board members by providing resources and fostering a sense of ownership and responsibility? The resources provided to Board members are the services of the MDOE and, to a limited extent, the National Association of State Boards of Education.

Efficiency, quality, and continuous improvement are key to *Operational Excellence*.

**Continuous improvement** is especially challenging for a volunteer board without consistent leadership. Some of our policies need to be updated. Rule Chapter 114 needs to be amended, but Rule Chapter 115 has consumed much of the work of the Certification and Higher Education Committee since 2017. Other rules of the Board that need to be reviewed are Chapter 119, Chapter 138, Chapter 149, Chapter 170, and Chapter 301. And it would be good for the Board to actually have the support needed to carry out certain duties in 20-A MRSA such as §405(3)(S) on developing “long-range education goals and standards for school performance and student performance to improve learning results ... and recommend to the commissioner and to the Legislature a plan for achieving those goals and standards.”

A few examples of questions to consider regarding the work of the State Board would include:

1. Is it reasonable to expect volunteers on a board to carry out the responsibilities in 20-A MRSA §401-A, powers and duties in §405, and adopt rules to carry out its responsibilities with only an office specialist on staff to assist?
2. Should a volunteer chair be responsible for new member orientation, website updates, ensuring public notice is given for all Board and committee meetings, minutes being recorded, training members for Educator Preparation Program reviews in accordance with Rule Chapter 114, and even following the requirements of the Bureau of Human Resources in evaluating the performance of the office specialist?
3. Is it reasonable to expect a volunteer Board member to prepare an 8-year report – the Government Evaluation Act Program Evaluation Report – for the State Board of Education?

Members of the State Board are volunteers. Some do not have the capacity to directly manage and oversee operating, support or administrative functions of the Board. The only assistance the Board receives is from an office specialist with limited to no financial training or leadership capacity. From my experience as chair for almost four years, the State Board would be in a better position if it had a full-time executive director and part-time administrative assistant to help carry out its responsibilities and duties. That is the staffing for the Delaware State Board of Education, and they speak positively of the 1.5 FTE staff positions.

An Executive Director would provide visionary leadership and management of the State Board’s programs and initiatives in collaboration with key educational stakeholder groups, and serve as the primary liaison Board representative to the MDOE, Governor’s office, legislature, LEA’s and professional groups. An Executive Director would provide continuity to the work of the State Board and build upon prior accomplishments while addressing identified needs.

The State Board supports L.D. 323 for what it could do toward enhancing the Board’s effectiveness in meeting more of its responsibilities and duties.

Thank you for this opportunity to comment, and I would be happy to answer questions the committee may have.