

State of Maine
State Board of Education

Testimony of Dr. Thomas Keller, member of the Maine State Board of Education and Chair of the Certification and Higher Education Committee in Favor of LD 323 An Act to Fund Support for the State Board of Education.

March 16, 2025

Senator Rafferty, Representative Murphy, and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs. My name is Tom Keller and I am a member of the Maine State Board of Education and I am chair of its Certification and Higher Education Committee. I am testifying in Favor of LD 323 – An Act to Fund Staff Support for the State Board of Education.

Pursuant to Section 401 of Title 20-A, the State Board of Education is *“intended to act as a body with certain policy-making, administrative and advisory functions. In those capacities, the board has the primary responsibility for the following:*

- 1. Formulating policy. Formulating policy by which the commissioner shall administer certain regulatory tasks;*
- 2. Advising commissioner. Advising the commissioner in the administration of all the mandated responsibilities of that position; and*
- 3. Enforcing regulatory requirements. Enforcing regulatory requirements for school administrative units.*

The state board may advise the commissioner and the Legislature on matters concerning state laws relating to public preschool to grade 12 and postsecondary education.”

The responsibilities of the State Board are numerous and important. The Board, which is an autonomous body, is meant to have staff assistance from the Maine Department of Education in carrying out our functions. There are slots for nine voting members and two nonvoting student members, all appointed by the Governor following review by this committee and confirmation by the Senate. At present, we have a full-time Office Specialist as our only support.

Title 20-A identifies 20 specific duties of the Board which are generally reflected in our three major committees: the Career and Technical Education Committee, Certification and Higher Education Committee, and School Construction Committee. The Board also has a Student Voice Committee, Student Membership Committee, and Legislative Action Committee.

The Career and Technical Education Committee (CTE Committee) is the cognizant organization in Maine for the federal Carl D. Perkins funds, totaling over \$5M in FY25. We work closely with Maine Department of Education staff, primarily Dwight Littlefield, in allocating these funds to the 27 CTE centers.

The Certification and Higher Education Committee (C&HE Committee) oversees implementation of Chapter 114 Purpose, Standards and Procedures for the Review and Approval of Educational Personnel Preparation Programs, Chapter 115 The Credentialing of Education Personnel, Chapter 149 Procedures for Obtaining Authorization for Institutions of Higher Education to Confer Academic Degrees or to offer Degree Courses/Programs in the State of Maine, and Chapter 170 Evaluating Requests for Degree Authorization (Maine and Out-of-State Institutions). We works closely with Maine Department of Education staff, primarily Michael Perry, in all phases of educator certification, review of educational preparation programs, and degree granting authority.

The School Construction Committee oversees all aspects of new school construction, which these days are running around \$900/square foot and the total construction cost of a single school is millions of dollars. We

work closely with Maine Department of Education staff, primarily Scott Brown, on all phases of school construction.

To summarize, the State Board oversees millions of dollars in education spending, all teacher, administrator, and educational specialist certifications, and degrees offered by Maine's higher education institutions. All with 9 volunteers and a single administrative support person.

As comparison, the Maine Charter School Commission, which oversees 10 slots for public charter schools and some 2,700 students has 3 staff members including an executive director, a research analyst and a business manager and funds for hiring specialty consultants. The Maine State Board of Nursing has 8 staff members including an executive director and an assistant executive director. There are approximately the same number as nurses as there are teachers in Maine. The Maine State Board of Environmental Protection has at least a Board Executive Analyst and a Board Clerk.

Should this bill pass Ought to Pass out of committee, there is still the price tag to consider. In this fiscal climate, I recognize that \$100,000 per year for two years is a sizable amount. And, truly, this would likely fund a .5 FTE Executive Director. But we have worked to create a job description (FJA) for an executive director position already. In fact we have proposed this as part of our budget request the past two years and that request was not supported by the executive branch.

I would request that if the full amount cannot be appropriated, that at least half of that amount be appropriated and that we be allowed to use that for two purposes.

One purpose is to convene task forces on particular topics. We could convene educators to examine promising practices such as the paying of student teachers, further instruction for pre-service teachers in the science of reading, mathematics and science, and the training of mentor teachers. We could catalyze collaboration in the PK-20 system of education in Maine. Regular meetings of the SBE chair and vice chair (and future executive director), ECA Committee chairs, the commissioner of the MDOE, the Governor's education aid, the chancellor of the UMS and the president of the state community college system to coordinate and collaborate should occur and should include the public. We could gather and disseminate staff information from those in new buildings who have informed opinions on what works and what doesn't in new construction, which would be extremely beneficial to those districts building new schools.

A second purpose is to add funds to our Revenue budget line. We are told that without a certain amount of funds in this line, we are prohibited from accepting grant funds. The SBE wrote a proposal with full cooperation of the MDOE and was granted \$10,000. We had to refuse the grant since we did not have a line in our budget allowing receipt of grant funds and the MDOE refused to be the fiscal agent. We need authority to accept grant funds.

We urge that you support passage of LD 323 – An Act to Fund Staff Support for the State Board of Education and give us resources we need to fulfill our responsibilities and duties.

I am happy to address any questions you have.

Thank you.