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Testimony
In Support of

LD 967 An Act to Reinvigorate Maine's Workforce and Ensure Student Job Readiness by Providing Funds for the Career Exploration Program

Senator Curry, Representative Gere and fellow members of the Joint Standing Committee on Housing and Economic Development, my name is John Eder and I represent HD 136, the town of Alfred and part of the towns of Lyman and Waterboro.

I am here to present **LD 967 LD 967 An Act to Reinvigorate Maine's Workforce and Ensure Student Job Readiness by Providing Funds for the Career Exploration Program**. During Commissioner Johnson's presentation to this committee, I quickly realized that the objectives of my bill concept align seamlessly with the goals the Maine Career Exploration program in the Department of Economic and Community Development. That program is a pilot program started with funding for MCE and since it's inception has connected 784 students and businesses with real life, paid experiences.

Business leaders and small business owners have consistently emphasized the urgent need to revitalize our workforce. The MCE program fosters invaluable relationships, creating a robust network that connects our youth with small businesses across Maine. This initiative effectively bridges the gap between education and real-world experiences, equipping students with the skills and confidence necessary to successfully enter the job market.

In its brief existence, the MCE program has successfully placed (784 students aged 16 to 22 into paid work experiences, established 1,115 new community business partnerships, and facilitated 3,911 engagements with business partners), including job shadows, guest speakers, and field trips. Notably, between 55% and 73% of these students come from disadvantaged backgrounds, particularly in rural communities. This program serves as a critical lifeline for youth who need to take pride in their contributions to society.

We now face a significant challenge: while we previously experienced a youth gap with students leaving the state for better opportunities, we now have a job-rich environment but are workforce-poor. Many young people in Maine are disengaged and often feel disillusioned about their future prospects. Common barriers to employment include transportation issues, lack of confidence, and limited community connections. The MCE program effectively addresses these challenges through MCE navigators who provide hands-on support and connect students with local employers, assisting them in developing essential skills. Research indicates that

students involved in work-based learning programs exhibit better academic outcomes and increased engagement in school activities (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020).

I am particularly concerned about our disengaged youth who are not entering the workforce, especially those from generational poverty. Data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) indicates that nearly one in three adolescents report symptoms of depression (CDC, 2021). These young Mainers often feel lost and disconnected, which can lead to reluctance in entering the workforce. Without the interventions provided by this program, they risk falling into cycles of dependency, which could incur significant costs for our state. The MCE program is crucial for providing pathways to meaningful employment and empowering these young individuals to build brighter futures.

Initially funded by the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) COVID relief funds, the MCE program's funding has now expired. Without decisive action to establish it in statute, we risk losing this essential resource. Moreover, without this legal framework, we will miss opportunities to pursue future federal funding that could sustain the program. I am committed to lobbying the White House and our congressional delegation to secure the necessary funding to ensure the ongoing success of this initiative.

By codifying this program into law, we send a strong message that Maine is dedicated to investing in our Maine youth right here and now and help secure their independent futures. This commitment will also enhance our chances of securing additional federal support while ensuring resources are allocated effectively. Let us not allow this valuable framework to disappear.

In conclusion, we must act now to preserve the Maine Career Exploration Program and ensure it continues to grow, benefiting our young people and communities. Hands-on learning like this cultivates lifelong skills essential for a successful future. Thank you for your consideration, and I welcome any questions you may have.

Sincerely,



John M. Eder
State Representative

References:

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