

Good afternoon Senator Rafferty, Representative Murphy and esteemed members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs. My name is Rebecca Millett, a resident of Cape Elizabeth, and former colleague of many of you here today. I currently have a very limited, part time contract with the Maine Community Schools Coalition, so I want to make clear that I am testifying as a private citizen and former legislator with knowledge of and commitment to community schools. I am testifying in support LD 1332 "An Act to Establish the Community Schools Success Fund to Ensure the Implementation and Success of Community Schools Programs".

10 years ago this May, the Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs unanimously supported my bill LD 956 "An to Create Community Schools" amended to initiate a pilot program. The bill was passed under the hammer in both chambers and was funded through the biennial budget. That was the culmination of over a year of work and two community school forums at York and Eastern Maine Community Colleges. Over 140 people attended the forums, and the attendees left asking for next steps to help move the idea forward here in Maine.

My words from then still hold true. "A student cannot focus in the classroom if she is hungry or tired. A student will fall behind and struggle to keep up if he chronically misses school. If there are no quiet spaces to study and do homework, the student may be limited in reaching her full potential. Many children face challenges in and outside the classroom. Community schools surround students with a community of support, empowering them to stay in school and achieve in life."

Briefly, the community school approach brings together public schools with local stakeholders such as nonprofit organizations, medical providers, businesses, and law enforcement to assess the community's challenges and resources and, based on that analysis, provide a broad range of programs and services for the students and their families.

Community schools have three distinct attributes:

- Programs and services that remove barriers and offer enhanced opportunities to boost academic achievement through in and out of school supports.
- Comprehensive support of the wellness and health of children and their families through medical support, counseling services, and youth development programs.
- Parental and community engagement including an active role in decision-making.

Every community school looks slightly different, as it is developed through mutually beneficial partnerships that are unique to that community. They are built on the community's strengths, and these community assets are strategically targeted. The result is teachers and principals are empowered to focus on helping our children learn and achieve high standards with partners at their side helping to address the children's other needs in an effective and efficient manner.

While it is encouraging to see this approach taking root in some communities in Maine, in many situations, schools' resources are stretched thin and there's little to no capacity to undertake the assessments, analyses, and partnership development necessary to create the foundation for building a community school where "educators, local community members, families and students work together to strengthen conditions for student learning and healthy development"¹.

¹ A Framework for Community Schools, Learning Policy Institute

LD 1332 seeks to ensure schools purposefully working toward the community school framework have access to technical assistance, professional development and training to support quality implementation and sustainability. Without such support, maintaining the focus and commitment of leadership, staff and partners can be challenging in the face of continuous stressors and crises. The power of a community schools strategy is impactful if implemented with clarity among stakeholders, collaborative leadership, asset-based thinking, data utilization, and stable funding.

With the support of this committee and passage of LD 1332, we have the opportunity to strengthen our commitment in helping communities come together, grow stronger and create an environment where more of our children can thrive, succeed academically, develop aspirations, pursue higher attainment and become productive members of our society.