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THE MAINE SENATE
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**Joint Standing Committee on Transportation on
LD 1714, An Act to Create a New Pathway to Licensure to Drive School Buses
April 22, 2025**

Senator Nangle, Representative Crafts, and esteemed members of the Joint Standing Committee on Transportation: 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 here to present LD 1714, "An Act to Create a New Pathway to Licensure to Drive School Buses."

If you were to reach out to just about any school district in Maine, I would bet the superintendent will tell you he or she is having a hard time finding school bus drivers. Our school districts are desperate for bus drivers. At the beginning of each school year, we see news about another district struggling to get the kids to and from school. Districts are trying to attract new drivers any way that they can: incentives, bonuses, radio ads, and free training have all been offered.

Unfortunately, no matter what is offered, some districts are left struggling. Additionally, when one district offers enough incentive, drivers may join one district but that leaves another one short. In a NewsCenter Maine article from September, reporter Pearl Small showed that RSU 21 (Arundel, Kennebunk, and Kennebunkport) only had 21 full-time drivers to start the school year despite the need for 33. These are the numbers after the district offered a 25% increase (\$25/hour).

RSU 4 (Litchfield, Sabattus, and Wales) has seen similar issues despite increasing the pay to \$25/hour. Last year, the district had days when it was short by nearly half of its bus runs. On top of that, one route was shut down for a full six months. This frustration and anxiety in RSU 4 caused a couple of parents to put their growing careers on hold and pursue obtaining commercial driver's licenses (CDL) so there would be more certainty.

One of my constituents who has dealt with this challenge as a school board member reached out to me to tell me that one of the significant problems is that, despite the rise in pay for bus drivers, CDL licensees can be paid significantly more by private businesses than they can by our school districts. Companies that need people who can drive moving trucks, delivery trucks, tractor-trailers, dump trucks, etc. are willing to offer far above what our school districts can provide. So, even if people get the CDL with the intention of helping the local community meet its needs, the incentive of higher wages often lures them away.

My constituent suggested that some of this problem could be solved if there was another pathway to becoming a school bus driver. Besides, there are many things taught in a CDL class that are not necessary for driving a school bus.

This new pathway would make it easier for interested community members to get our children to school. Instead of a 6-8 week training program, a course could be offered that is entirely based on school bus driving.

I do not want to lower the safety threshold. It is imperative that all drivers receive adequate training to perform the job safely. The lives of our children, and of other drivers on the road, are on the line. I think, if anything, safety is strengthened by this bill. In order to become a CDL instructor, one must have had at least 2 years' experience in the last 10 years as a CDL driver in the operation of a commercial motor vehicle. This bill would require at least 3 years of driving a school bus before one could become such an instructor.

I understand that Representative Gary Drinkwater has been working extensively with Sen. Susan Collins' Office to get a special license for school bus operators. From my understanding, legislation may not actually be required for this to happen. Either through this legislation or a federal process, let's help our students get to school by providing a simpler pathway for people to get a driver's license for school buses.

Thank you for your time today. I would be happy to answer any questions.