

To: Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs
From: Laura Hepner, Belmont, Student at Belfast Area High School
Date: April 25, 2025

RE: Testimony in support of L.D. 1543 "An Act to Establish the Maine Green Schools Network"

Senator Rafferty, Representative Murphy, and members of the Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs,

My name is Laura Hepner, and I am a youth lead for the Green Schools Bill campaign. I live in Belmont and am a public high school student. I had the privilege to go to a small place-based and community-centered elementary and middle school. At this school we read and wrote, studied math and learned all the things that we would in a normal public school, but we also spent time outside learning about the world around us. We played in streams and then we learned about how networks of streams from across the land flow together into one river in what is called a watershed. This education rooted me in this place, and gave me a context in which to think about issues and systems that are so much larger than myself.

As I got older, my love of this place led me to learn more. Through my explorations and the support of adults in my life I learned about climate change, biodiversity loss and about the systemic injustice that would determine much of the future of my generation. I also learned what is possible, grew up amid the beauty of a world – a place – that still holds life. And so I stand up for justice, for climate action, and for solutions. But there is a problem. Why isn't this story of raising our voices for what we love in the world the story of all young people in Maine? I think it comes down to this: youth are being denied the right to know and love the world we are inheriting.

It often seems to me that most of my peers are resigned to living in a world of climate chaos. It appears that many young people just aren't interested – or do not see a value – in climate action. I do not think this is natural. It is the manufactured result of a system that teaches kids in square white rooms of desks about calculus, and not in swamps, forests, urban green spaces, and coastlines about the place where they live. Believe me, I love calculus, but a sense of place must come first and is what makes me determined to live in the world of compassion, justice, beauty, equity, biodiversity, clean energy, and real solutions that I know are possible.

It is the responsibility of schools to make up for what many kids don't get at home. This includes connection to the outdoors. There is so much to learn and wonder about in nature. A relationship with the earth is transformational, and all students should have access to it. If education continues on its current path and students do not learn in nature and about the current state of our ecological and planetary future, they will be inheriting a world that doesn't make any sense.

Maine has a meaningful role in our collective climate futures, and a serious stake in the outcome. All students should learn about what will define so much of their futures. And those young people who are likely to be most impacted by social and climate upheaval are also those who have the least support in learning about it.

I believe that public education can be visionary, empowering, and place-based, and the Green Schools Network is a step in that direction. Learning about climate has to start with students going outside. If this learning does not start with a connection to place, students will have no context for what they learn, let alone for the changes and catastrophes they will stumble on in the world. It would remain abstract and confusing; unrelatable if not irrelevant.

The Green Schools Network will provide schools and teachers with material and support for implementing interdisciplinary and place-based projects that will help students explore and make sense of the communities and places in which they live. One focus of the Network as outlined in this bill would be connecting schools with organizations in the community to get students outside and engaging with real-world problems beyond the classroom. This would benefit more rural schools like many near me that do not have the resources and support to implement these programs on their own. It would also provide connectivity between schools, lightening the load on teachers who are trying to incorporate place-based education into their classroom on their own.

For these reasons, I respectfully encourage you to support L.D. 1543. Thank you for your time and consideration of my testimony.

Sincerely,

Laura Hepner