

Dear Senator Rafferty and Members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee,

My name is Melissa Luetje and I am here today in strong support of LD 1543, the Maine Green Schools Network Initiative. First, I want to sincerely thank you for your service to the people of this great state of Maine and for your ongoing commitment to our students, schools, and communities.

For the past 22 years, I have taught science at both the high school and college levels. I was a member of the Maine Department of Education's Climate Education Task Force that helped create the framework for this bill. I currently serve as President-Elect of the Maine Science Teachers Association. In both my professional roles and daily work in the classroom, I've witnessed students' growing anxiety about the future of our planet—and their incredible passion and motivation to be part of the solution. To be honest, climate change leaves students feeling angry, hopeless and mostly defeated. This bill is a wonderful opportunity for students to be a crucial voice and leaders in an arena where they often feel left out, unheard, and not valued.

The Green Schools Network is a voluntary initiative that provides a flexible and inclusive framework for schools that want to engage in climate action, environmental stewardship, and sustainability education. Built around four foundational pillars—**community engagement, facilities and operations, school governance, and curriculum and instruction**—this initiative is intentionally **student-centered**, providing young people with the opportunity to lead, innovate, and make a tangible impact on their schools and communities.

What makes this initiative so powerful is that it is not one-size-fits-all. There are **multiple pathways and entry points** for schools of all types—rural, urban, large, small, well-resourced, or under-funded. Schools can engage at their own pace and choose from a variety of creative, meaningful actions—whether it's launching a composting program, redesigning school gardens, reducing energy consumption, or integrating sustainability into classroom projects.

LD 1543 also offers schools a chance to **work collectively and collaboratively**—to share successes, learn from one another, and build a network of mutual support. This creates an incredible opportunity for professional learning communities to grow across districts and regions, ultimately benefiting educators and students alike.

Participation in the Green Schools Network is not only a way to positively impact the environment—it also transforms the **climate and culture of schools**. When students see their efforts being taken seriously and reflected in school policies and practices, they feel empowered, valued, and engaged. It fosters a sense of purpose and ownership in their education. This bill also offers a chance for students to build their own coalition across the state, sharing their successes and challenges.

This initiative also encourages **educators, administrators, and staff to live and lead by example**—to model the kind of environmental stewardship we hope to instill in our students. Participating in this

Network can become a **source of pride for schools**, building community identity around sustainability and shared values.

Furthermore, LD 1543 supports **Maine's green workforce development** by preparing students with the knowledge and skills they need to pursue careers in clean energy, conservation, sustainable agriculture, green building, and other fields critical to our economic and climate-resilient future. It opens doors to future job opportunities while encouraging students to become thoughtful, informed citizens.

It's important to recognize that **climate change affects all of Maine**—not just our coastlines, but our ski areas, agricultural lands, inland waterways, and all tourism sectors. It impacts our economy, our traditions, our fisheries and our way of life. As an educator, it is more important than ever to equip this generation with the tools to meet these challenges head-on, and LD 1543 helps us do just that.

Schools serve as the heart of a community. The Green Schools Network is more than just a program—it is a catalyst for community, innovation, and resilience. It empowers students, supports educators, strengthens communities, and builds a better future for Maine, and Maine's youth.

Thank you again for your time, your service, and your thoughtful consideration of this important legislation.

Respectfully yours,

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2022 York County Teacher of the Year