



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

2 STATE HOUSE STATION
AUGUSTA, MAINE 04333-0002
(207) 287-1400
TTY: MAINE RELAY 711

Mana Abdi

176 Blake Street, Apt 2
Lewiston, ME 04240
Mana.Abdi@legislature.maine.gov

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Testimony of Representative Mana Abdi presenting
LD 1579, An Act to Abolish School Budget Referenda
Before the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs

Good afternoon, Senator Rafferty, Representative Murphy, and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs. My name is Mana Abdi, and I represent House District 95, which includes a portion of Lewiston. I'm here to present **LD 1579, An Act to Abolish School Budget Referenda**.

This bill proposes eliminating the requirement for voters to validate regional school unit budgets through referenda. Instead, budget approval would occur at a regional school unit budget meeting – streamlining the process, reducing administrative burdens, and reinforcing representative democracy.

We've seen firsthand how burdensome the current system can be – especially in municipal districts like Lewiston, where a school budget must pass through the school committee, city council, and then voters. That final step often delays the process, adds cost, and most concerningly, rests on extremely low voter turnout.

In Lewiston, Maine's second-largest city, the numbers speak for themselves:

- In 2022, turnout was just **1.3%**, with 369 ballots cast out of more than 28,000 registered voters.
- In 2021, turnout was **2%**.
- In 2019, **2.3%**.
- In 2018, **4.3%**.

Even in more recent years, like 2024, turnout hovered around **7–9%**, with votes split so closely that budgets had to go through *three* separate referenda before passage.

This drawn-out process has a real and damaging impact on schools. When budgets fail repeatedly at the ballot box, schools are left in limbo – unable to hire staff, order materials, or

plan programs for the coming year. Administrators, teachers, and support staff are forced to operate in a state of uncertainty, often right up until the school year begins. It undermines morale, disrupts planning, and ultimately harms students.

On top of that, the process is expensive.

Elections in cities like Augusta cost between **\$28,000 and \$40,000** per round. In Lewiston, holding three referenda – as we did in 2024 – means spending **well over \$100,000** just to pass a single school budget. That's public money going toward repeating a process that barely engages even 10% of the electorate.

The intention behind budget referenda was to ensure accountability – but in practice, they've become costly, low-turnout exercises that do not reflect the will of the broader public. Other levels of government – municipal, county, and state – entrust their budgets to elected representatives. School boards should be no different. If voters are unhappy with how their schools are funded, they have a direct remedy: elect new representatives.

In the interest of fiscal responsibility, democratic integrity, and functional governance, I urge the committee to support LD 1579.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I'm happy to answer any questions.