



**MAINE MUNICIPAL
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Testimony of the Maine Municipal Association

In Opposition To

LD 1579 - *An Act to Abolish School Budget Referenda*
April 30, 2025

Senator Rafferty, Representative Murphy and members of the Education & Cultural Affairs Committee, my name is Rebecca Lambert, and I am providing testimony in opposition to LD 1579 on behalf of the Maine Municipal Association's (MMA) elected 70-member Legislative Policy Committee (LPC). MMA is a nonpartisan, nonprofit member service organization and aims to help provide policy solutions that work for all residents in Maine and the LPC guides the advocacy efforts and establishes positions on bills of municipal interest.

The referendum process at its core is a fundamental expression of democracy. It empowers voters to participate in decisions that have an impact on their local taxes and community services. For many citizens, the referendum is the only opportunity they have to weigh in on school spending and to ensure that their voices are heard in the decision-making process. Removing this safeguard squashes the public role in the financial governance of their schools, eroding trust and the cooperation they have cultivated in their communities.

When citizens are allowed to vote on school budgets, they become active participants in the process, which strengthens trust in the process and holds school boards accountable to the people they serve. Without this direct mechanism for approval, citizens are at risk of becoming disconnected from decisions that directly affect their wallets and their children's education. It is not only a right but a necessity for citizens to have the power to approve or reject budgets that could significantly impact their property taxes.

Additionally, the voters of the school district already have the power to cease the referendum validation process. Title 20-A §1486 provides that "Every 3 years, the voters in a regional school unit shall consider continued use of the budget validation referendum process. The warrant at the budget validation referendum in the 3rd year following adoption or continuation of the referendum process must include an article by which the voters of the school administrative unit may indicate whether they wish to continue the process for another 3 years. The warrant for the referendum to validate the fiscal year 2010-11 budget is deemed the 3rd-year warrant. A vote to continue retains the process for 3 additional years. A vote to discontinue the process ends its use beginning with the following budget year and prohibits its reconsideration for at least 3 years."

It's also worth noting that school budgets are often the largest expenditure in a municipal budget, and the referendum serves as an essential tool to avoid unnecessary increases in the local tax burden. Thank you for your time and considering the municipal perspective.



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JANET T. MILLS
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COMMISSIONER

April 30, 2025

Senator Rafferty, Senate Chair
Representative Murphy, House Chair
Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs

Senator Rafferty, Representative Murphy, and Distinguished Members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee:

LD 1705, An Act Regarding Adult Education Funding and Oversight (EMERGENCY), would establish the Career Advancement and Navigation Program within the Maine Department of Education (DOE), in collaboration with the Maine Community College System (MCCS). Furthermore, LD 1705 would establish annual reporting requirements for the DOE to the Legislature regarding adult education programming and funding, establish significant oversight duties for the DOE over adult education funding, and to convene a stakeholder group on a biennial basis to provide input on statewide goals for adult education, funding priorities, and programmatic improvements.

Currently the DOE Adult Education Team plays a central role in overseeing, funding, and guiding adult education programs across the state. It is responsible for determining and allocating funding levels, setting statewide goals, and ensuring program oversight and accountability. Each year by February 1, the DOE notifies school administrative units (SAUs) of the estimated subsidy funding they can expect for adult education programming in the upcoming fiscal year. These estimates are then included in the DOE's annual budget request to the Maine Legislature. Subsidy funding is provided through reimbursement for eligible local expenses, specifically 75% for instruction, 70% for administration, and 50% for supplies—as long as these costs are supported by local funds and tied directly to academic programming.

In addition to managing funding, the DOE Adult Education Team also sets goals and priorities for adult education that align with the Workforce, Innovation, and Opportunity Act (WIOA) and pertain to workforce development, high school equivalency attainment, English language learning, and lifelong education. Adult education priorities are also informed by communication with the field- through regular meetings with directors, case management, and advisory committees. The Department supports statewide initiatives to improve literacy, career readiness, and professional development for adult educators. The Adult Education Team

evaluates program effectiveness and ensures alignment with state educational goals, offering recommendations or adjustments as needed. Through these efforts, the Maine DOE ensures that adult education remains accessible, effective, and aligned with the state's broader educational and economic objectives.

The DOE also manages data systems and requires adult education units to submit detailed, timely reports as part of their subsidy funding eligibility process. Non-compliance with information requests may result in the withholding of subsidy payments. The DOE oversees the EF-X-132 subsidy form process, which must be completed annually by September 15, using data from the prior academic year.

While Section 5 of LD 1705, which ensures 100% state funding of adult education obligations, aims to strengthen Maine's adult education system, it also brings several potential impacts particularly for the DOE and the broader education and budgetary landscape.

The College and Career Success Coordinator positions are a Maine Jobs and Recovery Plan funded project that have had great success in serving new and perspective community college students making the transition to post-secondary education. Over 3,000 participants have benefited from this extra support offered on campus. These funds are expiring in 2026. These positions play an important role in the workforce and educational landscape of Maine, one that won't truly be felt until the positions are eliminated. The requirement to employ a College and Career Success Coordinator at each community college campus would mean the DOE must recruit, hire, and manage multiple new staff members statewide and coordinate closely with the Maine Community College System to align goals and services, and oversee program implementation and on-site support services, expanding beyond its traditional oversight role into direct service delivery. This represents a significant expansion of operational scope and resource commitment and deserves its own funding allocation.

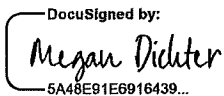
Additionally, guaranteeing 100% of the funding obligation could strain the General Fund, especially during economic downturns. Knowing that the State is covering all obligated costs might also discourage local districts from investing additional funds into adult education. The increased state role and strict reimbursement criteria could standardize programs in a way that limits local flexibility. Communities may find it harder to adapt programs to local needs if funding is tightly controlled or if the DOE's administrative processes are rigid or slow to adapt. Implementing a full-scale funding change and the infrastructure to support it could be logistically difficult, especially if timelines are aggressive.

While the appropriation is mandated by statute, it still depends on the Legislature's budget approval process. Political or economic changes could lead to underfunding or repeal, creating uncertainty and undermining program planning at the local level.

While the intent of LD 1705 is to stabilize and strengthen adult education in Maine, its full funding approach could place significant operational, financial, and political pressure on the DOE, create potential disincentives for local investment, and lead to administrative or funding risks if not carefully implemented and supported over time. Balancing these risks with strategic planning and sufficient DOE capacity will be critical to success.

The Department will be available to provide additional information on LD 1705 and respond to any questions during the upcoming work session.

Sincerely,

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Megan Dichter
State Adult Education Director