

Maine Education Association

Jesse Hargrove **President** | Beth French **Vice President** | Jaye Rich **Treasurer**
Rebecca Cole **NEA Director** | Rachelle Bristol **Executive Director**

Testimony

In Support Of

LD 1579: An Act to Abolish School Budget Referenda

In Opposition To

LD 1586: An Act to Amend the Regional School Unit Budget Validation Referendum Law

Jan Kosinski, Government Relations Director, Maine Education Association

Before the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee

April 30th, 2025

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

My name is Jan Kosinski, and I am the Director of Government Relations for the Maine Education Association (MEA). The MEA represents nearly 24,000 educators, including teachers and other educators in nearly every public school in the state, as well as full-time faculty and other professional and support staff in both the University of Maine and Community College systems. Thousands of retired educators continue their connection and advocacy work through the MEA- Retired program.

I offer this testimony today on behalf of the MEA in **SUPPORT** of LD 1579, *An Act to Abolish School Budget Referenda* and in **OPPOSITION** to LD 1586, *An Act to Amend the Regional School Unit Budget Validation Referendum Law*.

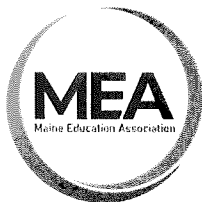
The MEA has been consistently frustrated about the current school budget process, and we applaud Representative Abdi for bringing forward LD 1579.

Typically, in municipal school districts, the city council must approve the school budget before it is sent to voters. The city council review of the school budget almost always results in school committees being told they need to cut their proposed budgets. This is especially frustrating because school board members are often chosen by the exact same voters who decide city council races. The structure seems awkward, at best, whereby one set of councilors, elected by the same people, can thwart the ability of school board members to advocate for the budgets their schools need, and their students deserve. And of course there is an inconsistency that municipal budgets do not require voter approval, only school budgets.

In regional school units, the school boards host budget meetings where members of the public can weigh in on budgets proposals and the voters in the RSU can propose changes. Even after this process, the budget is then put to the voters.

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Last May, the Lewiston school budget was voted down on May 14th – with a whopping 3.9% turnout among voters. We must ask, does this really reflect the views of the taxpayers and residents? The 2024 Lewiston school budget was approved in July of 2024, when 7.6% of the voters found it important enough to vote in the election. In June of 2024, Portland held a school budget referendum on the same day as contested primary races which tend to draw more voters to the polls. The budget passed but only 9.5% of the registered voters cared enough to vote. We question whether such small voter turnout is an accurate reflection of the views of the voters.

If nothing else, we encourage the Committee to consider a change that requires a certain percentage of voters to actually vote. If less than 15% of the voters choose to vote, we suggest the school budget should be considered adopted, regardless of the outcome of the vote.

What is more, we will remind the Committee that school board members are elected by voters. If they disagree with their decisions, they can be challenged and voted out. We encourage the Committee to empower school board members – not require their thoughtful budgeting to pass through city councils and the voters.

We oppose LD 1586 because it promises more confusion for voters. Including the total amount of the school budget in the ballot question fails to provide context to voters. Many will struggle with understanding the difference between a school budget of \$25 million and \$250 million. These figures lack context – many of us cannot picture what \$25 million looks like, let alone what that figure represents for schools and their budgets. We worry including this figure in the budget validation question could be misleading or confusing to voters.

In addition, such a question may undermine educational needs. The dollar figure lacks context that one can draw from the various budget meetings school boards conduct while working on their budget. A single dollar figure will not explain the rising cost of special education, a new, innovative program a school board is trying to implement, or any other nuance.

For these reasons, and others, we oppose LD 1586, *An Act to Amend the Regional School Unit Budget Validation Referendum Law* and we support LD 1579.

Thank you for your time and attention and I am happy to answer any questions you may have.