

LD 1740 Testimony of Kristin Varum for Public Hearing, Monday, May 5, 2025, 10am

Good morning Senator Rafferty and Representative Murphy and esteemed members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee, my name is Kristin Varum, I'm a resident of Verona Island and I'm here to testify on LD 1740, An Act to Establish the Maine Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Mathematics Matching Grant Program.

I am a parent of alumni from the robotics Team 6329 from Bucksport, Maine. My son joined 6329 in 2017, their rookie year and my daughter joined 3 years later. The things these kids have learned through robotics – it's immeasurable. Robotics is more than just engineering, more than just coding, wiring and automation. They are learning real life skills – you can see it when you come home to 4 ninth grade girls who have gone for a bike ride after having taken apart, greased up, repaired and gotten rusty old flat-tire bikes working again instead of waiting for Dad to get home to help.

First Robotics Competition also has a huge social component. Every season, I meet new students who start out so shy, withdrawn, timid. I watch this program change them. By the end of the season these kids are engaged, scouting other teams and building strategy. Even speaking publicly about their experience with robotics – something you would never expect from many of them. My daughter, for example – when she joined the high school team as a freshman and attended the summer off-season event they put her in as human player (where you pass things to the robot) and the stress of being up there in front of people – she cried. Fast forward to senior year and her class placement meant giving a speech at graduation. She never could have handled that without the growth she experienced through the robotics program. And her speech – it centered on robotics.

My daughter is a mentor with the team now. She loves this program so much that she remains deeply involved, volunteering her time. She is a full-time student at Husson University, keeps a part-time job to pay the bills, and her full-time passion during robotics season is to help those kids do everything they can to succeed.

My daughter graduated in 2023 – that was the year Team 6329 from Bucksport, Maine went to the World Championship and made it to the semi-finals – placing 3rd. In. The. World. (This mom can't help but be amazed, I'm just truly in awe of these kids and what they have accomplished!) Now, the fact that Bucksport has done so well on such a small budget is pretty amazing. The teams that these small-town kids are up against – they come from all over the world. And they come with all sorts of different backings. Some of these teams are sponsored by NASA, Apple, Boeing, Coca Cola, Amazon...the list goes on. Speaking of NASA – some of these teams GO to NASA to *build* their robot. Our team's shop is the I.A. classroom – you know, where you took woodshop in high school? We should be helping Maine's students excel in areas of STEAM. This grant program is a great way to do that. Please support LD 1740.

*Kristin Varum, Vice President & CFO, Maine Farmland Trust
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