

State of Maine
STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION

Testimony of Fern Desjardins, Chair of the School Construction Committee, Maine State Board of Education

In Support of: L.D. 1312: An Act to Provide a Source of Revenue for School Construction and for the Land for Maine's Future Trust Fund

Before the Joint Standing Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs

Sponsored by: Senator Pierce

Date: November 14, 2025

Senator Rotundo, Representative Gattine, and Honorable Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs:

My name is Fern Desjardins, Member of the Maine State Board of Education and Chair of the School Construction Committee. I am here to speak in support of L.D. 1312: An Act to Provide a Source of Revenue for School Construction and for the Land for Maine's Future Trust Fund.

Yesterday, November 13, 2025, the State Board of Education unanimously approved the 2024-2025 Rating Cycle, Major Capital School Construction Programs, Final Priority List. There were 95 public school applications that were complete and deemed eligible to be scored by the Maine Department of Education's Facilities Team. The eligible projects were scored following an on-site visit by the evaluators. The rating system was based on a total of 200 points for the following priorities:

Buildings and Grounds – 90 points total

School Population – 45 points total

Program and Planning – 65 points total

Within each of the priorities, a number of criteria were rated. Those are all listed in Rule Chapter 61: State Board of Education Rules for Major Capital School Construction Projects. The prioritized list of school facilities recommended to the State Board was “based on a rating of the overall needs of evaluated school facilities as defined in ... Chapter 61.”

Having 95 out of 594 public school buildings indicating a need for renovations or replacement is significant. Add to that number the eight Part I applications that were received by the October 31, 2025 deadline for the next cycle of the Integrated, Consolidated 9-16 Educational Facility under the Major Capital School Construction Projects. Part II of the application process is due only on October 31, 2026. It requires committed partners from a minimum of two high schools or one regional high school, and at least one CTE center or region. Together, the two programs indicate that as many as 119 schools may not be providing the desired safe and healthy learning environments they seek for their students. Moreover, that does not include schools in systems that did not apply for either program because of limited staff to

dedicate time to the application process. That is especially true in small, rural school administrative units.

The number of schools to be approved for construction from the 2024-2025 Rating Cycle will be determined by state funding available and the \$150,000,000 maximum debt service limit. The two schools that received Design and Funding Approval this past year were approved at over \$650.00/sf. The total project cost for one school was over \$109,000,000 and the other over \$171,000,000, which is actually over the maximum debt service limit for 2025, but keep in mind that construction is paid with 20-year bonds.

Given the number of schools needing renovations or replacement and the current cost of construction, the current level of funding construction in Maine is inadequate. L.D. 1312 is timely in offering a way to increase the amount of money available for school construction. I cannot speak to the need for the Land for Maine's Future Trust Fund or the Irrevocable Trust Fund for Other Post-Employment Benefits that are also part of L.D. 1312, but the opportunity to transfer to the Major Capital School Construction Fund 50% of the investment proceeds in the stabilization fund that are over the 18% limitation must not be dismissed.

In the *MEPRI Report on Policy and Practices for Funding Maine Public School Construction and Renovation*, the researchers wrote, “What has long been a discouraging situation has grown into a critical problem, demanding some out-of-the-box thinking and hard choices at both the state and local levels to consider different strategies for funding facilities and collaboration across communities and districts.” No matter what comes out of the Governor’s Commission on School Construction or any other report, legislators need to find a way to increase the total amount of funding available for school construction. L.D. 1312 is one source that could be tapped, and the State Board of Education fully supports it. It would certainly make a dent in addressing some of the identified needs for construction aimed at making schools safer and healthier.

Thank you for this opportunity to comment, and I would be happy to answer any questions the Committee may have.