

Senator Rafferty, Representative Murphy, and esteemed members of the Committee:

My name is Sara Abronze. I'm a resident of Sanford, Maine, and I work at the University of Southern Maine in Portland. I am speaking to you on my own behalf, neither for nor against LD2099, *An Act to Amend Certain Eligibility Requirements for Secondary Students Receiving State Subsidies for Postsecondary Courses*.

Today, I'd like to advocate for the continued and unrestricted support of Maine's Aspirations Program. As our state works toward the critical goal of ensuring that 60% of Mainers hold a postsecondary credential of value, the Early College program stands as our most effective and equitable "on-ramp" to higher education and workforce readiness.

The benefits of this program are not just theoretical; they are reflected in the success of over 10,000 Maine high school students who are currently bridging the gap between secondary education and their future careers. By allowing students to earn college tuition-free credits, the state is effectively removing the single largest barrier to higher education: cost. On average, participating students enter their first year of college with nearly a semester of coursework already completed, saving families thousands of dollars and significantly reducing the burden of student debt.

Furthermore, Early College is no longer just for traditional academic paths. Through partnerships with the University of Maine System and the Maine Community College System, students are gaining early exposure to high-demand fields such as Nursing, Cyber Security, and Precision Manufacturing. This acts as a direct pipeline to the Maine workforce, particularly when paired with the Free Community College Scholarship. National and state data show that students who participate in Early College are significantly more likely to persist into their second year of higher education, a factor vital for our rural and first-generation students.

However, I must state clearly that any proposal to cap early college participation would be entirely foolhardy. In a state facing a significant labor shortage and an aging population, we should be doing everything in our power to accelerate young people toward their careers, not installing speed bumps on the path to their degrees. Capping these credits is a "penny-wise and pound-foolish" approach that ultimately costs the state more in the long run by delaying entry into the workforce and decreasing the likelihood of degree completion.

We cannot afford to stifle the momentum of our most ambitious students. Investing in Early College is an economic development strategy that tells our Maine youth their aspirations are limited only by their drive, not by a state-imposed ceiling. I urge this committee to prioritize funding that protects the open-access nature of this program and rejects any movement toward further restrictions.

Thank you for your time and for your unwavering commitment to Maine's students. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.