

Nicole Grohoski
Senator, District 7



P.O. Box 1732
Ellsworth, ME 04605

THE MAINE SENATE
132nd Legislature

Testimony of Senator Nicole Grohoski in support of
**LD 2008, An Act to Provide Funding to the Maine School of Science and
Mathematics and Clarify Sending School Administrative Unit Obligations**
Before the Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs
January 29, 2026

Good morning Senator Rafferty, Representative Murphy, and distinguished members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee. My name is Nicole Grohoski, and I am honored to represent the 22 coastal and island communities of Senate District 7. Thank you for the opportunity to introduce my bill, LD 2008, "An Act to Provide Funding to the Maine School of Science and Mathematics and Clarify Sending School Administrative Unit Obligations."

Firstly, I would like to thank members of this committee for your ongoing interest in the Maine School of Science and Mathematics (MSSM) and your previous support of the school. I am here today as a Maine School of Science and Mathematics (MSSM) graduate and also as a voice for many families in my district who have sent their students to this public high school and who are grateful for the difference it has made in their lives.

It is still the case that – other than a one-time FY24-25 appropriation of \$500,000 made by the Legislature three years ago – MSSM has been essentially flat-funded since 2017. This means its operating budget is decreasing every year due to inflation.

To address this untenable situation, LD 2008 appropriates \$400,000 per year for operational costs and \$250,000 per year for financial aid to in-state students, ongoing. Additionally, LD 2008 requests \$405,000 in one-time funding for infrastructural upgrades desperately needed in the dormitory:

Dorm Structure and Description	Expected Life	Current Age	Cost Estimate
Roof – soft spots expected to result in costly repairs if not replaced soon	20 years	At least 30 years	\$275,000
HVAC System - needs to be replaced; over \$10,000 has been spent to keep the system going past its lifespan	20 years	At least 30 years	\$115,000
Chimney - crumbling, needing repair	20 years	At least 30 years	\$15,000

Finally, LD 2008 includes language that Sen. Bernard introduced last year to require a sending school administrative unit (SAU) that does not operate or contract with a secondary school to pay the cost of attending MSSM for students it sends, including room and board (but not to exceed the state average secondary student cost multiplied by the unit's local contribution percentage, unless the unit votes to pay more). Regarding this section, the Attorney General's Office has flagged a concern with unequal treatment depending on where a student is from, so I'd like to amend the bill so that these tuitioning SAUs would pay the tuition for students they send to MSSM, the same way they do with all the other secondary schools that their students attend. This would increase MSSM's revenue by only a small amount, but every bit helps.

This legislation is so important because, without an increase in funding, the school teeters on the brink of viability. We need to invest more in Maine's most unique and outstanding public high school – not less.

Here is an excerpt of testimony I delivered in January of 2020 in my first term as a legislator in support of a general fund bond for a new dormitory for the school (LD 2060 in the 129th Legislature), and that I have since shared with your committee:

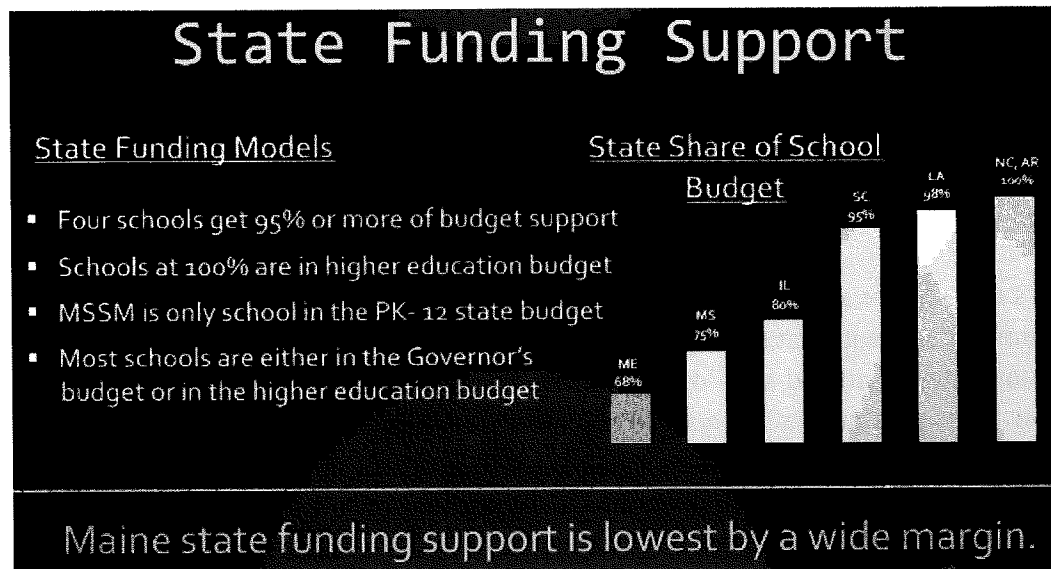
The Maine School of Science and Mathematics, or MSSM, is a shining star within Maine's public education system. You may recall that in 2019, MSSM was ranked the #2 Best High School in the nation by *U.S. News and World Report*. Behind this number is more than just smart kids and good test scores. This is an achievement earned by the whole state of Maine. Students at MSSM come from all corners of Maine where they were educated in their local school districts and supported by dedicated family and community members. When they arrive at MSSM, they are met by an enthusiastic and tireless group of teachers and staff who guide them as they continue on their educational journey. This opportunity is available to any Maine student, regardless of their family's income or location, because of the investment and commitment to MSSM that the Maine State Legislature has provided.

Fast forward to 2026: Ongoing funding declines have made it harder to keep excellent faculty and staff, and essential positions have been cut. Room and board is \$10,850, and, while financial aid is available, sticker shock keeps a lot of families from applying. I am saddened that the State has allowed the school to reach the level of hardship it now faces. However, I am also hopeful that this committee and the 132nd Legislature will build on the investment it made in the 131st Legislature and take further action to save the school.

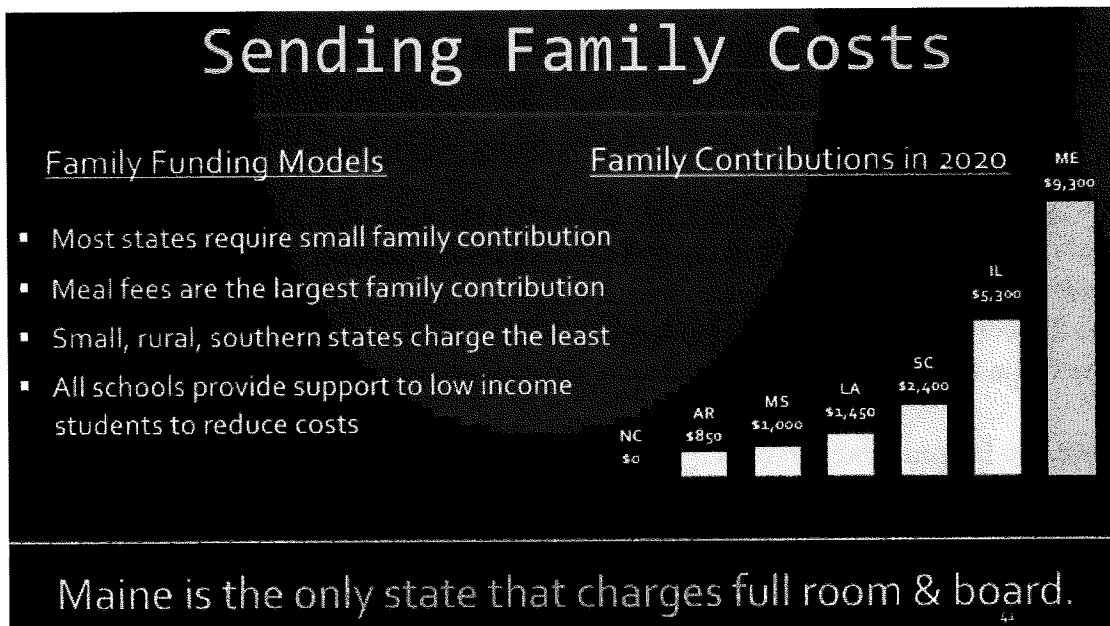
In 2020, this committee asked the school to see what it could do to help itself financially, which resulted in the establishment of an ad hoc "Business Planning Committee" of the MSSM Board.¹ At the end of 2020, this committee shared its findings with the Board and the Department of

¹ The Business Planning Committee Charter is available here: bit.ly/MSSM-business-plan-charter

Education.² The committee compared the MSSM funding structure to six states' science and math public residential magnet schools. Here are a few slides of particular interest:



In 2020, Maine ranked lowest for the state share of the school budget at 68%, with Mississippi the second lowest at 75% and North Carolina and Arkansas at 100% (Slide 40).



Maine also charged families significantly more for room and board, which is now up to \$10,850 (Slide 41). As you can see, most states charge nominal amounts, including \$0 in North Carolina.

The long and short of the Business Planning Committee effort is this – MSSM is an outlier when it comes to its school funding model. If we want it to stay in the same location and offer the excellent

² The Committee's presentation can be viewed here: bit.ly/MSSM-presentation

education it is known for – which by all accounts continues despite the dwindling funding – then the State needs to step up with resources.

I attended MSSM in my junior and senior years of high school, seeking a rigorous education in math and science, at a price my family could afford (room and board was less expensive back then). I found the curricular options and rigor to be beyond my imagination. I worked harder than I had ever needed to before and gained real knowledge and a new confidence in myself and what I could achieve.

There's more to life at MSSM than just academics. For me, this was the first time I was surrounded by a group of students that I really connected with. No one made fun of me for wanting to dig deeper into a tough topic; instead, they'd often join in. I competed in sports and played music in the band at the University of Maine at Presque Isle. As members of the Key Club, my friends and I were reading mentors to young students in nearby schools. I was an officer in the student senate and set up the school's first recycling program. I mention all of this to show the diversity of experiences one student can have at MSSM – well beyond just the excellent academic opportunities.

When I graduated from MSSM, I left with the skills to learn tough subjects and a solid academic base that made my transition to college seamless. I made lifelong friends, who are contributing to this state and country in incredible ways. I cannot say where we would be today without having attended MSSM, but I am certain that it was an opportunity that changed our lives significantly and positively.

I am grateful that the State had the vision to create such an institution of excellence. I know that it was life-changing for so many of my peers who came from small, rural schools that lacked large enough student bodies to support high-level courses available at MSSM. Now in its 31st year, the school needs our financial support to continue to help Maine students reach their full potential. Investing in these students and the school is an investment in our state's future.

Thank you for your time and consideration of my testimony. I would be happy to answer any questions.