

February 20, 2026

Senator Rotundo, Representative Gattine, and other members of the Appropriations and Financial Affairs Committee, and Senator Rafferty, Representative Murphy and other esteemed members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee,

My name is Beth French, and I work at East Belfast elementary school as a title one interventionist, and I live in Searsport Maine.

I am here today to testify in support of the Governor's proposed budget.

I grew up in Swanville, Maine graduating from Belfast Area High School, and the University of Maine Orono. I made the conscientious decision to return to my hometown to teach the students of my community, and I have made that commitment for over 23 years.

I am a national board-certified teacher, and I believe wholeheartedly in the promise of a public-school education for every child. However, the reality is if I was a new teacher at the beginning of my career, I'm not certain that I would be able to survive on \$40,000 a year. Many new teachers work more than one job to make ends meet which is causing stress, frustration, and burnout amongst our early career educators.

I wear many hats, and one of which is that of a local president in my professional association. I have worked diligently with my negotiations team to bargain a livable wage for our teaching staff. Sadly, we are not attracting enough new career educators to the profession because we are not providing them with professional wages that are sustainable here in Maine.

Just last year, I was fortunate to have a new teacher that was hired who had previously worked as an educational technician. She came to me, concerned that there was a discrepancy in her wages because when she moved from an educational technician to a new teacher on the beginning of the salary scale, after her deductions for health insurance and new deduction schedule, she did not notice a substantial difference in her teacher wages from that of her ed tech wages.

This is hugely problematic because her workload has increased substantially, and the responsibilities that she would be taking on in this new role would be daunting - requiring hours and hours outside of her teaching load to complete. In addition to that paperwork, she would also need to complete coursework for her certification, which would further prohibit her from being able to work a consistent second job.

When you're an educator giving your best to children, one job should be enough to pay the bills.

I also want to speak in support of maintaining 55% education funding. Our public schools are in dire need of resources in order to meet the complex needs of the students that are put in front of us each and every day.

I have seen firsthand in my role as a head teacher in my elementary school, that our students are coming in with more complex mental health needs each day. There are more instances of students in mental health stress and crisis, and these students often do not have a diagnosis or special educational identification which would qualify them for special education services.

We do not have enough school counselors, social workers, or nurses to handle the influx of social and emotional issues that <sup>our</sup> ~~are~~ students are bringing through the school doors each day.

Our staff are doing their best. I am doing my best as a headteacher and I know my administrator is doing their best as well, but without the support of these additional services, my focus is taken away from much-needed academic intervention that my students need, to address whatever crisis is happening in the moment.

This is not an uncommon story in our small rural public schools. We need more support for student mental health services, which would support our students, our staff, and our communities.

Thank you for your time today and for providing me with an opportunity to speak to you about my students. I love being a public-school educator and I want the very best that I can give my students each and every day.

Please support the governor's proposed budget which would provide much needed resources for our hard-working public-school staff and our students.

Thank you for your service to the people of the state of Maine.

Sincerely,

Beth French, NBCT