

Chairs and Members of the Committees,

My name is Natalie Owens, and I am here today on my own time, to urge you to use the state government surplus to return funds to the state employee salary plan. By doing so, the state will have the ability to more adequately invest in, and lift up our support staff at the Department of Education.

Right now, we are asking highly trained leaders to do clerical work—not because they lack commitment, but because we lack adequate support staffing. When support roles pay only \$18–\$19 per hour, we simply cannot attract or retain the level of skill the work demands. As a result, the work does not disappear; it shifts upward.

In my own experience, I have watched directors answer phones, process invoices, manage scheduling logistics, and handle routine administrative tasks. This is not a matter of pride or work ethic—our leaders are deeply committed. But it is a matter of efficiency. It is the difference between working harder and working smarter.

Our directors and upper managers at the Department of Education are at the peak of their professions. Many hold master's degrees and doctorates. They are innovative, strategic thinkers who are passionate about improving outcomes for students and communities. Yet too often, they spend large portions of their day on minutiae that trained support professionals should be handling.

When we underpay support staff, we do not save money—we misallocate talent. We diminish organizational effectiveness. We limit the impact of the very leaders we have worked so hard to recruit and develop.

If the State of Maine offers wages that allow support staff to support a family—wages that reflect the responsibility and complexity of the work—we will attract and retain capable professionals. That investment will pay dividends immediately. Directors and managers will be freed to lead, to innovate, and to focus on strategic priorities rather than administrative backlogs.

This is not simply a compensation issue. It is a workforce strategy issue. It is an efficiency issue. And ultimately, it is a leadership issue.

By lifting up our support staff, you strengthen the entire system. Please work to return the money to our salary plan with the budget surplus.

Thank you for your consideration.