

To: Joint Standing Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs

From: Morgan Dunton

Date: February 24, 2026

Subject: Testimony in Support of Funding to Close the State Employee Pay Gap and Resolve Bargaining Impasse (LD 2212)

Senator Rotundo, Representative Gattine, and distinguished members of the Appropriations and Financial Affairs Committee:

My name is Morgan Dunton, and I am a resident of Rockland. Until recently, I was employed by the Maine Department of Education, having served 21 years! I am here today to urge the Committee to prioritize using a portion of Maine's projected **\$248 million revenue surplus** to finally close the **14% state employee pay gap** and provide the necessary resources to resolve the current bargaining impasse with **MSEA-SEIU Local 1989**. While the cost of living has skyrocketed, while state employees have been pleading with this Governor, pleading with you and the last 4 legislatures to provide resources for fair, competitive wages, what did you do? You came around and voted to take away \$56 million dollars from their salary plan by raising the attrition rate? Again? Leaving the state with only enough money for a wage offer that doesn't even keep up with the cost of living? You can and must do better for our beloved state of Maine.

There are state workers who qualify for SNAP. For Mainecare. There are state workers who are relying on heating assistance. These folks, my former colleagues, have been dealing with understaffing for years upon years, triggered by uncompetitive wages, and so many have been working multiple jobs to make ends meet while serving the people of this state with utter exhaustion. Many give up and leave Maine altogether.

Once upon a time, the State of Maine was the most desired employer in the state of Maine. Salary, benefits, and working conditions were sufficient to both attract and retain committed employees. But that is just not the case anymore. The pay scale is woefully lacking; benefits are not keeping pace either; and working conditions are often far more desirable elsewhere. I can attest to that better than anyone.

Our state agencies need dedicated workers who stay in their agencies and positions long enough to develop expert knowledge of how the agency works and to build a relationship with stakeholders that engenders confidence in times of crisis or need. This was never more evident than in 2020.

As the English Language Arts Specialist for 16 years, I had name recognition across the state and trust fueled by confidence in my knowledge and professional skill. When schools

shuttered, I began meeting daily with teachers to assure them that we could rise to the challenge. I listened to their needs, planned professional learning activities to meet each of those needs, and inspired confidence in our collective ability to do what our students needed. My experience, skill, and commitment provided the calming presence most needed in that moment.

I am the exception and not the norm. For too many, state work is a steppingstone to a better situation. State employment is no longer competitive enough to inspire career commitment. nor one that allows workers in their 20's, 30's and 40's to afford a home and financially support their families. For our agencies to thrive, and our state programs to succeed, we need to make state employment more competitive and more desirable as a long-term career commitment. Please, close the pay gap. You have the funds to do that right now. You have the ability to make a difference and show our state workers that you appreciate the work they do and assure our Maine citizens that the programs they count on will be accessible, effective, and available. Use this surplus to set the record straight. All of Maine will be better for it.

Thank you.