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March 9, 2026

Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs

Maine State Legislature
Augusta, Maine 04333

RE: Letter of Support for LD 2226 — An Act to Improve Maine's Essential Programs and Services School Funding Formula

Dear Chair and Members of the Committee:

I am the Superintendent of the Sanford School Department, and I am here to tell you plainly: the children in the Sanford community who are economically disadvantaged cannot wait any longer for the state funding they deserve. I began my career as a school counselor believing that public education is the great equalizer. I have spent my entire professional life in schools that serve kids who need more, not less — and I have spent the better part of the last several years doing everything I can with what the current formula gives us. Meanwhile, children in wealthier zip codes across this state continue to receive significantly more in combined state and local funding simply because of where they were born. That is not a funding system. That is a waiting list — and the children of Sanford have been on it long enough. LD 2226 does not solve everything. I want to be clear about that. But it inches us toward something that feels more fair in a formula that has needed fixing for a very long time.

Sanford is one of the largest cities in York County and one of the highest-poverty school districts in southern Maine. We serve almost 3,200 students. Of those students, 58.9 percent qualify as economically disadvantaged. That is not a rounding error. That is nearly six out of every ten children walking into our schools every morning carrying the weight of food insecurity, housing instability, and the full range of challenges that being economically disadvantaged brings. Our families work hard. The Sanford community works hard. The Sanford School Department works hard and runs lean because we have to. But hard work and efficiency does not change what the formula delivers, and the formula has not been delivering what our students need and deserve.

Let me put some numbers on the table, because I think the committee deserves to see them clearly. Sanford spends \$15,066 per pupil — running \$3,567 below the state average. Compare that to low-poverty districts in southern Maine with economic disadvantage rates of less than 10 percent — one-seventh of Sanford's rate — that are spending more than \$23,000 and \$24,000 per pupil. That is a gap of more than \$8,000 to \$9,000 per child, and every one of those districts has substantially less poverty than Sanford. The pattern is consistent across the data. A child in Sanford does not cost less to educate than a child in a low-poverty community. The research is clear that they cost more — because the needs are greater, the barriers are higher, and the support required is more intensive. The current formula does not reflect that reality. The formula is badly outdated. LD 2226 begins to correct that. That is the flaw it addresses.

I want to be specific about what “nothing left” looks like in a school district, because I do not think that phrase fully lands until you see it up close. We are not talking about only cutting enrichment or trimming electives at the margins. Each year, we face significant funding gaps and have to eliminate teaching and support positions. We nearly cut our alternative learning program — a program that serves about 40 students who struggle with anxiety, depression, and the kind of challenges that make a traditional classroom setting nearly impossible for them. We are not a district that has elaborate or extra programming to sacrifice. What we have is core. What we are fighting to hold onto are the teachers and support staff that keep the doors open and keep kids connected. Every cut we make from here means a real person loses their position and a real student loses a relationship, a support, or a pathway that we cannot afford to lose without falling further behind. As a Superintendent, I am not managing a budget. I am managing what is left of a margin that has already been spent.

I want to be direct on where I stand on the full scope of this bill. On the income-adjusted ability-to-pay model, I believe the right answer is more aggressive than the 90/10 calculation in LD 2226. The structural imbalance between what high-poverty districts can generate locally and what wealthy districts can is significant, and the current proposal only partially corrects it. I understand why the bill is calibrated as it is — larger swings create larger fiscal impacts across the state, and the Legislature must manage those realities. But I want this committee to understand that for districts like Sanford, the 90/10 model is a beginning, not a solution. Pass this bill, and let’s commit to continuing the work. On the special education provisions: we are not advocating for those changes at this time. Special education funding requires a broader conversation, and we do not want that complexity to obstruct the reforms our students need now.

I want to be direct about something this committee needs to understand: even after LD 2226 passes, the readjustment will still leave Sanford way behind the wealthiest districts in this state, with thousands more dollars behind each of their students. And here is the part that has to land clearly: our community cannot close that gap on its own. We cannot tax our way to the per-pupil spending levels of low-poverty districts. The property wealth is not there. The commercial base is not there. Our families cannot absorb what the state formula fails to provide. When the state formula underdelivers for a district like Sanford, there is no local backstop. There is just less — less staffing, less programming, less support, less of everything a child in an economically disadvantaged district needs more of, not less.

I also want to be clear about what LD 2226 does not solve. Even after this bill passes, communities across Maine — including Sanford — will still be paying far above what EPS provides in order to deliver a quality education. That places a crushing burden on local taxpayers, particularly in high-poverty communities that have the least capacity to make up the difference. EPS must ultimately reflect the true and full cost of an adequate education for every Maine child. That work does not end with this bill. It begins here. LD 2226 inches us forward. It does not get us where we need to be. But every year this formula goes unreformed is another year the gap compounds, another year the children in the Sanford community are told by the numbers that they matter less than a kid in a wealthy district. That has to stop. I urge this committee to advance LD 2226 without delay, and I urge this Legislature to commit to the further work that must follow.

Respectfully submitted,

Matt Nelson - Superintendent of Schools