

Regional School Unit 57

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RSU 57 prepares students for success in an ever-changing world.

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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 writing in strong support of LD 2226 on behalf of the students, families, and staff of Regional School Unit 57, which serves the communities of Alfred, Limerick, Lyman, Newfield, Shapleigh, and Waterboro in York County. I have served as Superintendent of RSU 57 for four years, and my career in Maine education spans nearly thirty-five years, beginning as a special education teacher. I have spent my professional life working closest to the students who require the most from their schools, and I have watched the EPS formula fail them in slow and compounding ways for as long as I have been in this work.

RSU 57 ranks 26th out of 30 school districts in York and Cumberland County in per-pupil spending — meaning we are well below the regional and state average and far more comparable to rural districts across the state than to the wealthy suburban districts that often dominate the conversation about Maine school funding. Our district serves 2,885 students, nearly half of whom — 46 percent — qualify as economically disadvantaged. Our current total per-pupil spending in RSU 57 is approximately 43% below that of a regional peer, where just 8.4 percent of students are economically disadvantaged. That is a gap of nearly \$7,700 per child, per year, in favor of the district with one-fifth the poverty rate that also receives a greater state subsidy per child than RSU 57. This is not an outlier according to the data you have received.

The communities in RSU 57 are working communities. Alfred, Lyman, Waterboro, Newfield, Shapleigh, and Limerick are not wealthy towns. They do not have large commercial tax bases or high-value oceanfront property. And yet, because of how the EPS formula calculates local ability to pay, the families in these towns are currently shouldering 59 percent of the total cost of their children's education which grows to 63% in the coming year. That local burden falls directly on property taxpayers — many of them the same working families whose children qualify for free and reduced-price meals at our schools. The formula asks them to pay like wealthy communities while denying their children the per-pupil support that wealthier communities receive. The income-adjusted ability-to-pay provision in LD 2226 addresses this imbalance directly.

Alfred

Limerick

Lyman

Newfield

Shapleigh

Waterboro

Consider what this per-pupil spending gap actually means inside a school building. In RSU 57, it means the difference between having a reading interventionist and not having one. It means a school counselor who can actually reach the students on their caseload rather than being stretched across buildings. It means a career and technical education pathway for a high school student who needs to see that a viable future does not require leaving the community they grew up in. It means a music program that has not been reduced. The wealthier districts that spend more per pupil than districts like RSU 57 can afford those things not because their administrators are more creative or their school boards more dedicated — but because the formula and their communities deliver them more resources per child.

I want to speak directly to two provisions in LD 2226 where our position requires some nuance. On the income-adjusted ability-to-pay model — the 90/10 calculation — I will say plainly that we believe the right answer is a more aggressive adjustment than what this bill proposes. The formula, as designed, still leaves high-poverty districts carrying a disproportionate local burden. We understand why the bill is calibrated as it is. A more dramatic shift in the ability-to-pay calculation creates significant funding swings for communities across the state, and the fiscal implications are real. We are not asking the Legislature to do the impossible in one step. What we are asking is that LD 2226 passes so that it creates the platform — the baseline correction — from which we can continue this work. The 90/10 model is a start. On the special education funding provisions in the bill: we are not advocating for those changes at this time. We recognize that the special education component requires more careful analysis and a broader conversation. We support the rest of this legislation fully to achieve reforms that are overdue.

I have participated in conversations about this formula for years alongside colleagues from across the state. The frustration is consistent and it is real. Districts like ours do the math every budget season and arrive at the same conclusion: the formula is not neutral. It does not distribute resources based on need. We have accepted that reality because we had no alternative. LD 2226 offers an alternative, and we are asking this committee to advance it.

Without LD 2226, the students in districts like RSU 57 will continue to wait. They will wait while the children in zip codes where wealth exists — where property values are high and poverty rates are low — continue to be funded by the state and by their local communities at levels that are significantly higher. That is not an abstraction. It is a daily reality in many school districts in Maine. It is in the programs we do not offer, the specialists we cannot hire, the supports that are not there when a child needs them. The students sitting in classrooms in many Maine towns are not waiting because they matter less. They are waiting because the formula has not caught up to what they deserve. I urge this committee to move LD 2226 forward and to keep the door open for the further work that must follow. Thank you for your time and your commitment to getting this right.

Respectfully submitted,



Stephen D. Marquis, PhD
Superintendent of Schools