



**April, 2023**

**Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry**

**Testimony in *Support* of LD 1682 An Act to Create the Maine Experiential Education Program**

**Senator Ingwersen, Representative Pluecker, and Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry**

My name is Lily Chaleff. For 7.5 years I worked as a community partner to Portland Public Schools both through FoodCorps and Cultivating Community to offer garden & food based programs. I am here today to support passage of LD 1682 - An Act to Create the Maine Experiential Education Program. I would like to thank Representative Shaw for introducing this legislation. I'm sure you will hear how many benefits there are to students' learning, behavior, and overall health and happiness to have experiential learning. However, today I would like to add to the committee's knowledge on this topic by making a case for why the investment in teaching positions specifically is so impactful.

In my years working directly with Portland Public Schools (PPS), I have been the educator as well as supported many others through training them and creating positions - I know the curriculum, classroom management needs, and prep that it takes to do effective outdoor and garden-based learning. I ran the PPS School Garden Network for 5 years. There is some form of garden infrastructure at all 17 Portland schools! However, the biggest challenge is getting those maintained and used for consistent educational instruction with students.

I've advocated locally for years to embed garden & food education into the curriculum. I have supported many models including:

- Building “sequenced garden curriculum bins” tied to NGSS standards by grade level for easy grab and go instruction for classroom teachers
- Supporting garden coordinators who receive a small stipend for their time to oversee garden is maintenance and support teachers to use it
- Convened volunteer garden teams and worked with PTO's



From this experience, I can confidently say the “gold standard” is having a paid teaching position that is compensated for their time and expertise. The role can act as a “specials” teacher who ensures consistent and predictable outdoor learning time to the weekly schedule.

The other models bring value and can work in conjunction with a teaching position, but as stand alone models students only access experiential garden-based learning a few times sporadically through the year, and it almost never falls equitably between classrooms.

As an example, in Portland, there was a financial investment in Outdoor Learning infrastructure at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic. Tents, tables, teaching materials, and more were provided to teachers and students. There was a clear directive supporting time learning outside. Still, this form of education did not persist for long with classroom teachers. It is asking teachers to incorporate yet another aspect to their classrooms and days that are already stressed. Experiential learning is a skill set & paradigm shift. I see the creation of this program as a way to invest in students' wellbeing & learning, while valuing the teachers' health & wellbeing by not asking them to do more.

In Portland, we did however have success instating Garden & Living Schoolyard teachers in five elementary schools for two years! This model was shared through state school garden networks, and there were similar positions created in a few other districts in the state. It created a meaningful and consistent outdoor learning experience for students in these schools. There are a few learnings I would like to share from this that show how impactful and needed this legislation is to keep supporting these successes:

1. Those positions were mostly created through ESSERF funds. As schools now face a funding cliff and need to make cuts to many programs and positions, even ones that existed before the pandemic, this legislation will support the momentum while schools rebuild from the financial shocks of the pandemic, and rebuild ground to fully incorporate the financials in the local budget.



2. As positions around the state were created - many at previous FoodCorps sites which is an amazing accomplishment - the positions were faced with not having a structure within any state agency to support their unique challenges and content areas. I strongly support the aspect of this legislation that appoints a staff member in the state to be a point person for Experiential learning positions. Myself, other community partners, and educators found ourselves filling in gaps around curriculum and technical support through grassroots, state-wide work to support the success of these positions. I think it would be an incredible compliment to FoodCorps, who provides so much training and support to school districts with FoodCorps members, to have a state partner to support schools beyond graduation.

We have an existing pipeline for creating positions, and this would be an essential piece of the puzzle to invest in the work already underway. There is a bounty of information and resources within our state of how to do effective experiential, and specifically garden and food based programming. We hope the state can invest in that road with us. Investing in an experiential education program is investing in the resilience, health, and wellbeing of our students, and the future stewards of Maine's natural resources.

I hope you will vote in favor of LD 1682. I am happy to answer any questions you may have, and I will do my best to provide any additional information you may require. I am happy to be of service when you discuss this bill in the work session.

Thank you,

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