

Katie Wuori
Eustis RSU, Stratton School
LD 1682

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 Katie Wuori, and I am the 6 -8 Grade English Language Arts and Social Studies Teacher for Eustis R.S.U., Stratton School. Over the past ten years, I have spent countless hours outside of my school commitments managing our fledgling garden program to embed sustainable healthy living choices into the school environment through experiential learning. I am writing to support the passage of LD 1682, An Act to Create the Maine Experiential Education Program. Finally, I want to thank Representative Shaw for introducing this legislation.

An Overview of Eustis RSU, Stratton School Farm to School Program

Mission Statement:

To provide an alternative food experience for students and faculty that encourages experiential learning, health, and well-being at Eustis R.S.U. To network locally sourced foods and augment the school community food program to tie curriculum to the most vital of everyday activities; eating.

Vision Statement:

To supplement the current school food program with fresh local sources and enrich the students with an awareness of where our food comes from. An Integrated Common Core Next Gen Curriculum with the U.S.D.A. guidelines allows students to become more invested in food production and understand local sourcing. This will not only influence the physical health of the next generation but improve their behavior in class with less sugar and artificial ingredients. If each student can leave the Eustis School system with the knowledge to grow a garden and make healthy food choices, it will be a skill they can use throughout their lives.

History:

In the spring of 2011, Dave Richards, a member of the Eustis School Board, approached the teachers, wondering if there was any interest in a school garden. He had already written a grant to obtain multiple garden tools, soil, and stones for raised beds. The fifth grade Social Studies class helped pull up the grass and dig the outline for the beds, volunteers placed the stones, poured the soil, and the Preschool/Kindergarten started planting. "Initially, I do not think it was very organized. . . The Kindergarten kids planted the entire garden one of those years, but there was not a cohesive plan, and it was not taken care of well. I remember one fall I took my students out, and we gathered cherry tomatoes and put them in the staff room to eat," recalled Tabitha Emery, at the time, Pre-K-K teacher, now Stratton School Principal.

In 2015 a more cohesive program unfolded. During the winter months, sixth/seventh grades plan out a "theme garden." A school-wide (preschool - eighth grade) seed planting day was implemented where every student gets their hands in the dirt and grows seedlings in all classrooms. Groups of students, volunteers, and staff take turns watering, weeding, and maintaining the garden over the summer months. The food grown has been incorporated into the daily lunch program, local food pantry, and fine dining restaurants. In the fall, there is a school-wide harvest and cooking day where every student takes Maine-produced ingredients and cooks part of a pot-luck meal for the community. The middle school sets up, serves, breaks down, and cleans the gym as part of the annual Pot-Luck Harvest Fest meal, which the community is invited to attend.

As 2020 came to fruition, so did the Farm to School Program in Stratton. We

fundraised and built nine vegetable beds out back of the school, a parent group got together and raised funds for a new 33 ft three-season growing dome from Growing Spaces in Colorado, and Food Corp came to our school to embed curriculum with a push into classrooms to support experiential learning with the standards teachers were already teaching but did not have time to prep or find materials for. We had our challenges through the pandemic, as everyone did, but our food program continued to thrive as we sent home pallet gardens for students and their families to grow together; staff planted and cared for the new beds in hopes students would be able to enjoy them when they got back to school.

Currently, we have posted a new position to replace Food Corp with a full-time Farm to School Garden and Nutrition Coordinator, year-round. Finding funding for this position was a struggle, but once the school board saw and listened to our student testimonial. We showed the number of hours and successes our Food Corp Service Member had accomplished over the past two years; it was hard to say an ultimate no. With some funds in our pocket, we turned to the surrounding school boards as many of our school population is from unorganized districts. We also were accepted into the Farm/Sea to School year-long cohort, which provides training, support, and engagement in sharing ideas and resources for schools across the spectrum (beginning to embedded).

All success stories are unique, and our contributing factors to our success are the school board, administrators, and staff supporting the teachers teaching to their student's strengths and supporting their weaknesses while keeping standards and the whole child at the heart of their teaching and learning practices.

I have many stories, but it is best heard from students on how they have benefitted from food education programming. Attached to my testimony is a three-minute video of our students and their candidate remarks on Farm to School at Eustis R.S.U.

There are many undisputed facts that exist for schools supporting healthy living choices and getting outside the classroom walls. My number one reason the state should support experiential, outdoor, and nutritional learning is that those towns cannot. I am in several different cohorts (New England Farm to School, Maine State Curriculum, S.I.N.G. (Schools Integrating Nutrition and Gardening Franklin County, Great Franklin Food Council, Food Corp Service Member Supervisor) and many teachers are investing extra time and money into resources and curriculum planning to support experiential learning and outdoor curriculum. I have listened to many frustrated teachers whose administrators are unwilling to support experiential learning for two reasons: They do not believe that teachers can teach the rigor needed to prepare students to test well through out-of-the-box teaching. Two - they have a budget to balance and want to keep the taxes down or the same.

Our students have experienced this learning over the past several years, particularly after the emergence of covid. Our kids and teachers need this tool to help with learning and development. Our board is eager to see experiential/garden-based learning continue. As a last note, while experiential learning does include outside engagement, it also encompasses programs such as coding, carpentry, and other necessary 21st-century skills. I urge you to vote to pass on LD 1682, An Act to Create the Maine Experiential Education Program. I am happy to answer any questions and provide additional information you may require. I am happy to be of service when you discuss this bill in the work session.

Thank you,

Katie Wuori
Middle School E.L.A./S.S. Teacher
kwuori@strattonschool.org
(207) 246-2283

Video Link:

<https://vimeo.com/820096887?share=copy> - Student Testimonial