

May 9, 2023

Dear Senator Ingwersen, Representative Plueker, and members of the distinguished Committee on Agriculture, Conservation & Forestry – My name is Molly Cooper, from Phippsburg, ME, and former Education Programs Manager at Wolfe’s Neck Center in Freeport, ME. Today, I am submitting testimony in support of LD 1817.

For me, the importance of this bill is too great not to pass, and I have firsthand experience to back this statement. I began my work with Wolfe’s Neck Center for Agriculture & the Environment just two weeks prior to the Covid-19 pandemic shutting down our world. Having just been hired to manage the farm summer camp programs, my heart sank in fear that these children would not have the chance to experience summer camp in the coming months, and for who knows how long. I simply couldn’t accept this notion, and instead found a way to push forward by offering a hybrid/condensed version of the program to a much smaller pool of campers. We found success and grateful parents that season, and it got me thinking about the upcoming school year starting fall of 2020 – what were these kids going to do? Return to at-home learning, and continue losing precious time with peers?

After seeing us offer a safe space through the summer, I decided to get creative and formed ‘Farm Discovery School’ for all children in grades K-8. We approached our local school district (RSU5) to see if they would like to collaborate on this approach, however they were unable to jump on board at that moment. So, we opened the program to any family throughout Maine who was willing to make the drive to Freeport for half-day outdoor education learning experiences. We saw families from as far north as Damariscotta, and as far south as New Hampshire! After 3 weeks of the program running, RSU5 contacted us, and asked if we would be willing to extend the program past our current end date of October 30<sup>th</sup>, to host all K-8 students in the district. We signed an agreement with them and supported our local teachers by taking half the students every other day until December 15<sup>th</sup>. This allowed the district to consider themselves as fully in session with all students in attendance, utilizing our 600+ acres for outdoor hands-on learnings. After a short winter break, due to the lack of safe indoor space at our property and the colder temps in play, we again partnered with RSU5 to offer the program starting in mid-March and running through the end of the school year. The program focused on the following topics: animal husbandry, plant-based food production, woods and water ecology, research and science, and outdoor living skills. This program partnership with our school district was made possible by funding from the CARES Act.

After the 2020-21 school year ended and the funding went away, we saw a significant decrease in the school’s ability to continue our partnership simply because their typical budgets could not support such a large crew of students attending our programs. In the fall of 2021 & spring of 2022, we were able to sign a contract with the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade class at Mast Landing in Freeport, where we hosted the full grade one day a week for 5 consecutive weeks in early fall and late spring, offering our farm-based outdoor educational lessons. Having the layout as such allowed the teachers to integrate the farm learnings into their classroom learnings, providing hands-on examples at Wolfe’s Neck Center. The teachers saw huge success with this model, and the students retained much of what was learned in the season prior. Although this program was a success and did provide an amazing opportunity to get students outdoors and engaging in hands-on learning, the future of the program is at a standstill due to the financial barrier with the schools budgets. Through the fall of 2022 and winter of 2023, I personally spent hours reaching

out to, and visiting several other school districts in hopes of expanding our reach, however I kept hitting the same roadblock – ‘it sounds like a great program, however we simply can’t afford it.’ During the height of the pandemic, there was much financial support behind programs such as ours, however since things have calmed down and have somewhat returned to pre-pandemic ways, that funding has also moved on. Although there are still some funding opportunities out there, none of them are long-term and would be able to sustain the continuation of a program such as this.

I am a born & raised Mainer, who attended Tanglewood 4-H Camp starting at age 9. I went to summer camp every year until I was old enough to work there and continued to do so until after graduating college. In school, I remember participating in weeklong programs at the Ecology School in 6<sup>th</sup> grade, and Kieve in 8<sup>th</sup> grade. These programs were tremendously impactful on my life, as it was these opportunities that led me to earn my degree in Outdoor Education & Leadership from Sterling College in northern VT. I remember finishing my first semester at Sterling and calling home to say that I had learned more about life & how to live in this one semester than I had ever learned in my 12 years of traditional school education. The hands-on approach was so incredibly important and provided me with so many useful skills, I was disappointed to think such learnings are not more incorporated into our K-12 schooling.

My education and experiences have led me to return to ME to become the next generation of outdoor educational program managers. Maine is one of the most beautiful states in America, purely because of its outdoor access and opportunities, and it baffles me to think that some of the kids growing up here nowadays don’t have the chance to truly get outside and experience all that Maine has to offer. To me, that is simply unacceptable. I want to see our state become the leader in Outdoor Education by passing this bill and getting ALL Maine students outdoors.

I sincerely appreciate you taking the time to seriously consider the importance behind this bill and the positive impact it would have on our youth in Maine.

Thank you for your time,

Molly P. Cooper – Phippsburg, Maine

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