

Anna Sommo  
Maine Environmental Education Association  
LD 1817

Senator Ingwersen, Representative Pleuker, and the honorable members of the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry,

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony in support of LD 1817 and share my perspective as a former outdoor school educator. From 2004-2006 I worked at Multnomah County Education Service District's Outdoor School Program, based out of Portland, Oregon. I was hired as an educator to work at the residential program that took place at a summer camp campus for 8 weeks each fall and spring. Sixth graders from around the county would come out to the site for 5 nights and 6 days of Outdoor School and as they left each week I would hear from them how impactful the experience was.

Students would bond with each other and their teachers through field study- learning about plants, animals, soil and water- but also through the experience of being together for an extended period of time. Shared meals, evening campfires, doing chores, recreational time- all built connections between students, teachers and the natural world. It was such a special place where kids explored and created unique and yet shared life long memories. For a good portion of the students this was the first experience of this kind- being in a new place, away from home, learning outdoors.

Many of my coworkers and the teachers who attended had their own Outdoor School story from when they were in sixth grade and I know of many of my fellow staff members who decided to go into teaching- and specifically to teach sixth grade- because they knew that Outdoor School would be part of their yearly ritual. It was an experience that these classrooms of teachers and students would both build towards and build upon throughout that sixth grade year. I still keep in touch with many of them all these years later.

I also know of multiple generations who had all experienced Outdoor School- and how that shared memory was a common thread amongst nearly the entire community. The program has existed for more than 40 years now. It is such a special connection that people from such a wide range of backgrounds and experiences share. The experience for all of us was enhanced knowing that we were part of a tradition that stretched across both time and throughout the state. It would be amazing to have something like this in Maine. Therefore, I encourage you to support LD 1817 to ensure that Maine youth have equally empowering outdoor experiences.

Sincerely,

Anna Sommo  
Director of School and Community Partnerships  
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