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LD 1817

Thank you so much for considering Legislative Document 1817; An Act to Support Outdoor Education by Establishing the Outdoor School for All Maine Students Program. Outdoor learning initiatives are thriving in Maine due to many great collaborations between schools, local organizations, and the state, but there is still much more work to be done to ensure all Maine students are experiencing the outdoors as a learning environment.

I work at Friends of Acadia, the non-profit partner to Acadia National Park, in youth and volunteer programming with the park. Our fastest growing suite of education programs is our outdoor learning initiatives, including outdoor classrooms grants for Maine schools and and educator training on how to teach students in the outdoors. When we began funding this program 6 years ago, one passionate teacher from a school would apply for a grant. Now, district administrators are applying with a team of teachers. The shift we are seeing is systemic, cultural change fueled by educators and parents strong desire to bring Maine students outside to learn and improve everyone's health and wellness, in addition to increasing stewardship of our shared lands and waters.

One major reason the park and FOA chose to focus on grants to school campuses was to increase equitable access to outdoor learning.

Historically, outdoor learning has been an exclusive experience for wealthy, white American students from the 1970's to the early 2000's. Most schools attending overnight programming at nature centers were from higher income communities. Even before the pandemic, funding for field trips was drastically being cut or eliminated entirely from school budgets. In addition, many schools in Maine are located too far to make a day-trip. In summary, the developments in the outdoor learning in the last 5 years will benefit Maine students, families and communities for generations to come.

Development 1.) the pandemic shining such a bright spotlight on outdoor learning and most educators/students/administrators realizing the value of outdoor learning as a flexible and valuable tool for all education communities, and

Development 2.) the opportunity to quickly move forward diversity, equity, inclusion, accessibility, and stewardship initiatives within our communities.

We have such a wonderful opportunity with outdoor learning to say to marginalized groups, whether they are low-income students from multi-generational Maine families or BIPOC students who may be newer to Maine, we have the opportunity to say you belong here, this space belongs to you, this school belongs to you, this community belongs to you, these trees and water belong to you. We want you here to learn about these spaces, to play and have fun in these spaces, and to ultimately take care of these spaces as you grow and raise your own families here one day. This opportunity is already being realized already at schools across the state, and this bill would increase equitable access to outdoor learning for all Maine students.