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*Testimony of Assistant House Majority Leader Rachel Talbot Ross presenting*

## **LD 1329, An Act To Establish the Career Advancement and Navigation Initiative in the Department of Education To Lower Barriers to Career Advancement**

*Before the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs*

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan and esteemed members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs, I am Rachel Talbot Ross. I represent House District 40 and serve as assistant House majority leader. Thank you for the opportunity to come before you to present **LD 1329, An Act To Establish the Career Advancement and Navigation Initiative in the Department of Education To Lower Barriers to Career Advancement.**

I want to start by acknowledging something that members of this committee know well: The greatest economic challenge our state faces is our workforce. As our aging population reaches retirement, our overall workforce is slowly shrinking, and the pace is projected to accelerate in the coming years. According to Maine Development Foundation's [Measures of Growth 2020](#), current estimates indicate our workforce will shrink by 65,000 workers by the year 2030.

It is an urgent problem, because no economy can grow and prosper without the hard work and talent of its people. Our workforce challenges are particularly dire in certain parts of the state, including our rural counties, which can be easy to overlook when we are discussing statewide numbers.

How do we act in the face of this looming crisis? A key component of the solution is to tap into the full potential of every Mainer. The [recent report](#) of the Governor's Economic Recovery Committee said it this way: To grow our economy, we must "unleash the potential of Maine's workforce by creating educational and training pathways for people of all experience levels[.]"

The report also highlights one of our best tools to accomplish that: Maine's adult education programs.

There are more than 70 adult education programs that form nine “hubs” throughout Maine. [According to Educate and Elevate](#), these programs served more than 6,000 individuals in fiscal year 2019 alone, including 715 who received high school credentials. That is especially powerful when we consider that, according to the Coalition on Adult Basic Education, a person with a high school diploma or equivalent credential earns an average of \$9,620 more per year than a person without such credentials.

Adult education programs change lives for the better, one Mainer, one family, one community at a time. [Research shows](#) that individuals who benefit from adult education programs see a cascade of benefits, from gains in personal income and educational achievement to increased civic participation and ability to help their own children succeed academically. For the broader community, these benefits translate into a stronger economy, decreased pressure on the social safety net and more vibrant, cohesive communities.

To phrase it more simply, the return on investment in adult education – both in economic and human terms – is well worth our attention as lawmakers.

Despite this, we are not fully leveraging the possible benefits of adult education programs in Maine. According to Maine Adult Education, in 2020, an estimated 65% of jobs in the U.S. required some level of post-secondary education. Meanwhile, based on data from 2018, more than 55,000 working-age Mainers did not have a high school credential. Another 310,000+ had a high school credential but no further education.

Our adult education programs are well positioned to help these Mainers achieve their full potential. They are already doing great work and want to build on it. But they need our support, starting with LD 1329.

Here is what LD 1329 does:

- The bill creates Career Advancement and Navigation Specialist positions at four of Maine’s adult education “hubs.” The particular hubs outlined in the bill serve half of Maine’s 16 counties. The bill also opens the door to expand these services to other areas to meet future demand.
- Through these targeted positions, it will provide individually tailored career navigation services for adults that face barriers to engaging in the workforce. This includes those who lack a high school credential, those who were formerly incarcerated, those whose work experience does not match our current job market, and many other Mainers.
- The bill aims to foster collaboration between our adult education programs, state agencies and the private sector in order to identify and meet workforce needs.
- Ultimately, LD 1329 will expand the capacity of our adult education programs to help them meet the growing demand for career navigation assistance and training, providing Mainers with pathways not only to a job but to a career.

For me, personally, it comes down to this: When it comes to providing a better quality of life for all Maine families – not just helping them survive but empowering them to truly thrive – all of us have a lot more in common than we have differences. Workers and families across the state and from every background share similar struggles. They also share the same hopes and dreams. We all want our hard work to pay off in the form of a brighter future for ourselves and for our loved ones. This bill provides us with important tools to interrupt generational poverty and therefore provide Mainers with a secure and prosperous future. We have an opportunity to act in a way that benefits Maine families and communities for generations to come.

LD 1329 is a data-driven approach to helping Mainers reach their full potential and realize that brighter future, whether they live in rural Oxford or Waldo County, in our capitol city, or in Lewiston/Auburn. When they succeed, our economy is stronger. Our communities are healthier. We all benefit.

I am also offering an amendment to the bill as drafted, which is attached to this testimony and simply includes minor clarifications and corrections. I would be happy to walk you through these proposed changes and to answer any others question you may have for me. Thank you for your time and attention to this bill.

1 **Be it enacted by the People of the State of Maine as follows:**

2 **Sec. 1. 20-A MRSA §8601-A, sub-§1-A** is enacted to read:

3 **1-A. Adult education hub.** "Adult education hub" or "hub" means a group of local  
4 adult education providers located within a geographic area specified by the commissioner.

5 **Sec. 2. 20-A MRSA §8601-A, sub-§2-B** is enacted to read:

6 **2-B. Career advancement and navigation specialist.** "Career advancement and  
7 navigation specialist" or "specialist" means a person employed funded by the department  
8 under the initiative to help participants access education and training and obtain  
9 employment.

~~Sec. 3. 20-A MRSA §8601-A, sub-§4-A~~ is enacted to read:

10 **4-A. Initiative.** "Initiative" means the Career Advancement and Navigation Initiative  
11 established in section 8614.

12 **Sec. 4. 20-A MRSA §8601-A, sub-§6-A** is enacted to read:

13 **6-A. Office.** "Office" means the office within the department that coordinates adult  
14 education programs and services.

15 **Sec. 5. 20-A MRSA §8601-A, sub-§7-A** is enacted to read:

16 **7-A. Participant.** "Participant" means an individual participating in or receiving  
17 services through the initiative.

18 **Sec. 6. 20-A MRSA §8614** is enacted to read:

19 **§8614. Career Advancement and Navigation Initiative**

20 The Career Advancement and Navigation Initiative is established in the department to  
21 provide educational and career guidance, support and services to help underemployed and  
22 unemployed individuals acquire education, skills, licensure or other preparation needed to  
23 participate to their fullest potential in the workforce.

24 **1. Administration.** The office shall administer the initiative through career  
25 advancement and navigation specialists employed by school administrative districts  
26 and funded by the department. The office shall collect and analyze aggregate data  
27 about participants, including, but not limited to, participant demographics,  
28 engagement in classes, trainings and other services accessed directly or by referral  
29 under the initiative and employment outcomes following participation.

30 **2. Career advancement and navigation specialist duties.** Career advancement and  
31 navigation specialists shall collaborate and partner with public and private sector entities  
32 to develop and implement the initiative and shall deliver and coordinate services for  
33 participants through adult education hubs in accordance with this subsection. Duties of  
34 career advancement and navigation specialists include, but are not limited, to:

35 **A.** Collaborating with the department, the office and other state agencies, including,  
36 but not limited to, the Department of Labor, the Department of Professional and  
37 Financial Regulation, the Department of Economic and Community Development and  
38 the Department of Health and Human Services, to develop a program or set of programs  
39 to serve the needs of participants and carry out the purposes of this section;

1 B. Creating partnerships with private employers and industry-specific trade  
2 associations in the State including, but not limited to, employers and associations in  
3 industries identified by the Department of Labor as paying high wages or having high  
4 workforce demand, and collaborating with these private sector partners to:

5 (1) Identify the employer and industry-specific workforce needs and corresponding  
6 skills, including job skills, academic skills and English language proficiency  
7 required by employers in the State; and

8 (2) Design appropriate training classes to address identified needs, which may  
9 include, but are not limited to, training in workplace culture, on-site training or  
10 other vocational training elements, and contextualized skills or industry-specific  
11 English language acquisition instruction;

12 C. Creating partnerships with state and local government agencies or other  
13 organizations that provide employment and workforce services and support to address  
14 participants' needs related to occupational licensure and credentialing;

15 D. Providing direct services and assistance to participants, including, but not limited  
16 to:

17 (1) Guidance and assistance accessing appropriate education and training to  
18 prepare for entry into gainful employment within 12 to 24 months of the beginning  
19 of the education or training. Such training may include intensive workforce  
20 preparation classes that cover habits of work, workplace culture and basic skills  
21 necessary to obtain, maintain and advance in employment;

22 (2) Assessment, career planning and case management services, including services  
23 to assess participants' education and training levels, qualifications, skill sets,  
24 credentials, work experience, work-readiness and English language proficiency;

25 (3) Assistance for participants who have limited English language proficiency or  
26 who are foreign-educated, foreign-trained or foreign-experienced workers to  
27 facilitate:

28 (a) Enrollment in English language acquisition instruction, including industry-  
29 specific English language and vocabulary classes to meet the needs both of  
30 initiative participants and of employers; and

31 (b) Obtaining English translations and equivalency evaluations of educational  
32 credentials, references and other evidence of skills, training and experience  
33 acquired abroad; and

34 E. Referring participants to legal aid services to address any legal issues that pose  
35 barriers to workforce participation and employment, when appropriate.

36 **3. Service areas.** The initiative, through the career advancement and navigation  
37 specialists, must serve participants and adult education programs in specific geographic  
38 service areas in accordance with this subsection.

39 A. During the first 2 years of the initiative, the career advancement and navigation  
40 specialists shall serve participants in adult education hubs associated with the following  
41 areas:

42 (1) Kennebec County;

