

**Testimony of Allie Smith, New Beginnings
In Support of LD 1318
An Act to Increase High School Graduation Rates for Students Experiencing Education
Disruption**

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs, thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of LD 1318, An Act to Increase High School Graduation Rates for Students Experiencing Education Disruption. My name is Allie Smith and I supervise the Educational Support Program for New Beginnings. We are an agency that has been serving homeless youth from across the state for the last 40 years.

For the youth we serve, the idea that education is the pathway to a better life is more than ethos; it's established fact. Youth who do not finish high school are 4½ times more likely to be homeless as adults. This makes lack of high school educational attainment the single biggest risk factor for young adult homelessness.

The youth I work with are nearly all committed to completing high school. As young people who are either without family supports or who have been leaned on by their families for support from a young age, they are the bearers of hard-won wisdom about the importance of employability and financial self-sufficiency. They recognize high school completion as a pathway to employment and stable housing. Despite their motivation, the barriers between these youth and high school completion are numerous and often feel insurmountable.

About half of homeless youth change schools at least once between the ages of 10 and 17. Nearly a quarter change schools more than once. Although the state of Maine has defined the minimum courses a student must complete to finish high school, district-level credit inconsistencies mean that students who change schools during high school often find that the classes they completed in one district do not count towards their diploma in another.

Last year I worked with a youth who had already successfully completed a high school Government class. The full class was worth ¾ of a credit. During enrollment at a new school, we discovered that the new school district required 1 full credit of Government for graduation. There was no mechanism to earn the ¼ credit this student needed. Their only option was to take another full-year, 1 credit class in Government, a subject they had already passed, putting them further behind their peers on the road to graduation.

This is just one example of the systemic barriers that highly mobile students face. Combined with the challenges they are already facing – lack of resources, lack of family support, unstable housing, trauma, and the daily struggle to meet their own basic needs – it is unsurprising that homeless and at-risk youth are 87% more likely than their peers to drop out of high school.

LD 1318 would reduce these barriers, allowing youth who have already met the state's requirements for high school graduation to receive the diploma they have earned. In doing so, it will drastically reduce these youths' risk of ongoing homelessness and give them a chance to achieve their goals of financial independence and sustainability. By creating a more accessible

pathway to the Maine Department of Education Diploma and allowing students who have met the graduation requirements at any high school they have attended to receive a diploma from that school, this modified law will create new pathways to high school completion for youth who have already overcome extraordinary barriers to meet the state's graduation requirements.

In closing, I would like to share a few words from a young person I have worked with. When I met this youth, they had already completed the state's graduation requirements. They were $\frac{1}{4}$ of a credit in an elective class short of reaching their district's graduation requirements. This missing quarter-credit meant they could not graduate. After weeks of exploring options, the Adult Education program in their district of origin agreed to allow this student to write an essay outlining the importance of their high school diploma for their last $\frac{1}{4}$ credit. Here is some of what they wrote:

“Why I need my diploma is quite simple. A diploma opens many doors for my own future. It allows me to get jobs that I otherwise have zero access to. A diploma can show my hiring manager, or anyone looking for hard, honest work, that I'm more than just muscle. I have a brain. [...] I'm currently homeless, living at a shelter, unable to get a job right now. On my last counting, I applied to more than 50 job sites. That's a lot. Not to mention printing resumes, going to interviews, etc. This diploma could get me a job. Something, anything to support myself in these harsh times. [...] I have always wondered why a diploma was so damn important to me. But then it wasn't about the diploma. It was about *why* I wanted it. Who I was doing this for. My Pa, Step-Ma, my boyfriend. They all encouraged me to do this. I do it for them. I do it for a better future.”

For this youth, and for the hundreds of others like them, I ask you to vote yes on LD 1318.

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