

TESTIMONY

In Opposition of

LD 1343: An Act To Create Education Choices by Creating Education Savings Accounts for Maine Students

And

LD 1426: An Act To Provide for the Equitable Funding of Education Chosen by Maine Families

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Before the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs

April 27th, 2021

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan and other esteemed members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee,

My name is John Kosinski, and I am here on behalf of the Maine Education Association (MEA) to testify in opposition to LD 1343, An Act To Create Education Choices by Creating Education Savings Accounts for Maine Students and in opposition to LD 1426, An Act To Provide for the Equitable Funding of Education Chosen by Maine Families.

While the title and text of LD 1343 refers to “education savings accounts,” the common and typical term used to describe such an initiative would be a “voucher” system. The MEA consistently opposes voucher programs because they threaten the stability of funding for public schools, divert precious state resources intended for public schools, and because they have a poor track record in other states that have experimented with such models. LD 1426 apparently goes one step further and provides a voucher to any parent in the state for nearly any educational purpose, including “tutoring” and private schools and “educational cooperatives.”

The Economics of Public Schools and the Siphoning of Money Away from Public Schools:

Simply put, if either of these bills were to become law, we fear there will be catastrophic implications for Maine's public schools. This bill would allow parents to establish education savings account thus moving the state subsidy away from public schools and instead to a whole host of schools and educational settings. We must understand that even a handful of students leaving a public school, and taking their state funding with them, could have huge implications for our public schools. For example, if a student leaves for a private school, that often does not mean

a school saves any money. The school will often need to have the same bus run, the same number of teachers, and maintain the same temperature in the building.

Here is another example. If a kindergarten cohort has 100 students, a school may employ 4 teachers and have 25 students in each class. If a school loses four students due to vouchers as proposed in this bill, their options would be to either have 4 teachers with 24 students or they can cut one teacher and instead have 3 teachers with 32 students in each class. We ask this Committee to please consider the economics of public schools when debating these bills. We fear the impact of losing funding, which comes from public tax dollars, to private schools or other educational services while our schools are already under tremendous financial strain.

Student Skimming:

Yet another issue with the voucher style program proposed by these bills is the undeniable "skimming of students" that will result.

Milwaukee, Wisconsin was among the first cities in the United States to adopt a voucher program and while the results from the research are clearly mixed, the research shows the impact has been a "skimming" of the most affluent students away from public schools. Joshua Cowan from the University of Kentucky has studied the voucher program there in detail and has found the private schools that receive the vouchers implicitly or explicitly select the better students." In addition, the private schools can counsel out or even expel students that public schools cannot."¹

Per the 279s produced by the Department of Education for next school year, schools in Portland are scheduled to receive an average of \$2,187 per student. Under LD 1343, 90% of this contribution could be applied to a voucher, meaning a parent could access approximately \$1,968. The Waynflete School of Portland has a tuition ranging from \$28,480 to \$35,465 for their K-12 school, thus meaning a parent would need to secure tens of thousands of dollars for their child to attend this very impressive private school.² Certainly this is out of reach for most families in Portland. Another reputable private school in Portland, the Breakwater School, charges tuition between \$23,615 to \$25,665 for their K-8 program.³

As has been demonstrated in other states that have enacted voucher programs, we fear LD 1343 will provide a subsidy to the parents of students that can already afford to pay private school tuition for their students, while further decreasing the state aid to the public schools.

It is important to note, while the MEA encourages the Committee to vote ought not to pass on LD 1343, the bill in its current form certainly raises deep concerns about equity for families. Families that live in minimum receiving districts can expect to receive 90% of almost zero, since minimum receiving districts receive very little state subsidy.

Voucher Programs in Other States:

In January of 2021, the National Council for Public Education produced a report demonstrating how voucher programs have failed in many other states and cities. A review of the research in Louisiana, Indiana and Ohio

¹ Please see "School Vouchers and Student Attainment: Evidence from a State-Mandated Study of Milwaukee's Parental Choice Program" by Joshua Cowen et al found here: <http://Onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/psi.12006/abstract>

² Tuition rates for the Waynflete School can be found here: [Tuition Rates - Waynflete](#)

³ Tuition rates for the Breakwater School can be found here: [Tuition — Breakwater School \(breakwaterlearning.org\)](#)

demonstrated worse academic outcomes for students using vouchers compared to their peers. Studies in Milwaukee, Cleveland and the District of Columbia demonstrate similar outcomes.⁴

Even the National Bureau of Economic Research in a review of the literature found "the empirical research on small scale programs does not suggest that awarding students a voucher is a systematically reliable way to improve educational outcomes."⁵

The bills before you also raise questions about the separation of church and state. Both LD 1343 and LD 1426 could allow vouchers to be used for private, religious schools. Such a drastic change in policy will unearth significant questions about the subsidizing of religious education. These schools may restrict access to certain students, and what's more, private religious schools have specific exemptions from certain civil rights laws, such as Title IX and the American with Disabilities Act. Vouchers for private, religious schools open serious questions and will have uneven impacts for families should Maine ever allow such provisions to be adopted.

At the same time the federal government recognizes the dire need to support public schools with funding, we argue now is not the time to cause confusion in school funding and threaten the stability of programs offered to students. Our schools around the state are doing everything they can to meet the needs of all students during this unprecedented time. Both bills would cause tremendous instability at a time when our state's educators are working harder than ever to bring stability to students and families.

Thank you for your time and your service to our great state and I am happy to try to answer any questions you may have.

⁴ Please see, Jonathan N. Mills & Patrick J. Wolf, Univ. of Ark., The Effects of the Louisiana Scholarship Program on Student Achievement After Four Years (Apr. 2019),
Megan Austin et. al., Russell Sage Foundation J. of the Social Sciences, Voucher Pathways and Student Achievement in Indiana's Choice Scholarship Program (2019),
David Figlio & Krzysztof Karbownik, Fordham Institute, Evaluation of Ohio's EdChoice Scholarship Program: Selection, Competition, and Performance Effects (July 2016),
Patrick J. Wolf, School Choice Demonstration Project, Univ. of Ark., The Comprehensive Longitudinal Evaluation of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program: Summary of Final Reports (Apr. 2010),
Jonathan Plucker et al., Ctr. for Evaluation & Educ. Policy, Univ. of Ind., Evaluation of the Cleveland Scholarship and Tutoring Program, Technical Report 1998-2004, 166 (Feb. 2006),
U.S. Dep't of Educ., Evaluation of the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program: Impacts Three Years After Students Applied (May 2019),
U.S. Dep't of Educ., Evaluation of the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program: Impacts Two Years After Students Applied (June 2018)
U.S. Dep't of Educ., Evaluation of the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program: Impacts After One Year (June 2017).

⁵ Please see "School Vouchers: A Review of the Economics Literature by Dennis Epple et al found here:
[http://WWW.nber.org\[papers/v/21523](http://WWW.nber.org[papers/v/21523)