

Testimony of Timothy Seeley, Head of School, George Stevens Academy
In Opposition to LD 1672, An Act to Require that Private Schools that Enroll 60 Percent or
More Publicly Funded Students Meet Certain Requirements
Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs
May 13, 2021

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan, and Members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee, my name is Timothy Seeley, and I am the Head of School of George Stevens Academy, a town academy in Blue Hill. We have been in existence in one form or another as the secondary school of Blue Hill going back to 1803, when we were known as Blue Hill Academy, and have been the high school of choice for all the towns of the Blue Hill Peninsula going back to the 1950s. George Stevens Academy is a member of the Maine Association of Independent Schools. I testify in opposition to LD 1672.

My testimony centers on four issues, two practical and two more philosophical. On the philosophical side, I am wondering, what is the motivation behind this bill? What is the problem it is hoping to solve? It proposes to fundamentally change the nature of town academies, the choice of over 5000 students in Maine. It proposes to turn us into public schools in all but our funding model. In our case, George Stevens Academy delivers a high-quality education, less expensively, than any public high school in Hancock County. What is broken that needs to be fixed?

The bill would force a change in the nature of the relationship between towns that chose town academies, and the schools they have chosen. Passage of this bill would mean that legislators in Augusta would mandate a new and different relationship between towns and town academies than the one those citizens have chosen, in many cases, for over one hundred years, going all the way back to the very beginnings of required education in this country, in the late 1800s. At that time, every town had the option of choosing a public school, and many did. But many Maine communities did not—they chose to establish a relationship with a local, already existing, academy. And our communities have reaffirmed that relationship every single year since, when they vote to approve tuition payments to their local academy. Each year our families reaffirm that choice as well, when they choose us rather than another school. I do not understand why the legislature would insert itself into that choice and relationship without being asked to do so by the communities who will be affected.

On a practical side, the proposed bill would mandate a 60-40 school accept any student from a sending administrative unit. Public schools are not required to do this. Why would 60-40 schools have this unique requirement? At George Stevens Academy, we do accept very nearly all students who want to come. We have a robust special education department, one very well regarded in the area, good vocational programs, and excellent success with students who struggle for any reason. But very occasionally (perhaps two times in the last six years), there is a student whose learning or behavior needs are beyond what we can provide. In those cases, as any public school would, we tell the family we do not have the resources to serve their child well, and, in those cases, the sending town education department finds the appropriate placement. This is exactly how it works with public schools, who are not required to accept students from sending units. In our area, Mount Desert Island High School will not accept students from Blue Hill,

because the tuition that comes with them is not high enough. This bill would require George Stevens Academy to accept all students, but does not provide for increasing funding in those cases where meeting the needs of a high-need student would require additional services.

Lastly, the bill requires a contract with every sending administrative unit. Again, I ask why—to what end? Our sending administrative units have not asked for this. In our case, it would require separate contracts with 10 – 14 units in any given school year. How would having contracts, where they are not wanted, improve education for those students? It will only add administrative costs.

Thank you for your time, for listening to my remarks, and for taking them into consideration.

Respectfully,

Timothy J. Seeley
Head of School
George Stevens Academy