



The Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs
Testimony from Jason Judd, Executive Director, Educate Maine

In Support Of

L.D. 512: “An Act to Promote Student Enrollment and Degree Completion in the University of Maine System by Providing Tuition Waivers to Eligible Students”

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan, and distinguished members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee, I am Jason Judd, the Executive Director of Educate Maine, a business-led education advocacy organization. In addition, we are one of the founders of the MaineSpark Coalition, the state attainment coalition focused on increasing adult education attainment to 60% by 2025 to address the needs of our economy.

I am writing to you today to support L.D. 512. The investment in free community college for Maine students from the graduating classes of 2020 – 2023 has made a significant impact on students and families. Students who were not able to attend college or who did not believe they could afford college, are now enrolled in programs across Maine. The simplicity of the free college message has worked well for students and families across Maine. These community college students are working diligently to prepare to enter the workforce and be a part of the Maine economy.

This particular bill would expand the initiative to include tuition waivers to students planning on going to one of the University of Maine System campuses for a four-year degree. It would help both graduating high school students and learners who are very close to degree completion. This bill would also help Maine reach its state attainment goal of 60% of Maine adults with a credential of value or degree.

Great Schools Partnership recently released their 2022 Common Data Project report which includes essential indicators for high school and postsecondary education across New England. In Maine, the percent of students who attend postsecondary education in the fall directly after their high school graduation is 52.7% which is a 10% decline over the last five years. This rate is also 6% points below the New England average. The majority of jobs in Maine require education and training beyond high school, and we need to invest in postsecondary education to help more Maine learners participate in these pathways.

In 2022, Educate Maine, Maine State Chamber of Commerce, and Maine Development Foundation released the *Making Maine Work* report about the top needs of the business community. Three of the top six priorities of the Maine business community for the new administration are about workforce development including the need for entry level workers, the availability of skilled technical workers, and the availability of professional workers. Investing in Maine’s higher education institutions is one key strategy to expand the workforce and address the needs of our economy.

According to a report called “The College Payoff” from the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, bachelor’s degree holders earn 75% more in wages compared to students with only high school diplomas. Over a lifetime, these earnings are \$1.2M more for college graduates compared to students with only a high school diploma. It is clear there is a tremendous benefit for individuals and the Maine economy if additional learners are able to enroll, persist, and complete their degrees. We need to continue to scale innovative models like the ones proposed in this bill in order to make sure we have a future trained workforce in our state.

Although we completely support this particular bill, we want to encourage the committee members to support initiatives for all of Maine’s higher education institutions. The focus of the investments should be focused on Maine learners regardless of where they would like to attend postsecondary education. Each institution has unique programs, and it is important to recognize the vast variety of education pathways and institutions for Maine learners.

Thank you for your time. I am available if you have any questions.