



Maine Labor Climate Council Testimony in support of LD 612, “An Act to Create a Green Schools Coordinator in the Department of Education”

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs, my name is Francis Eanes, I live in Auburn, and I’m here today representing the Maine Labor Climate Council.

I’m here today to speak in favor of LD 612, “An Act to Create a Green Schools Coordinator in the Department of Education”, and to suggest some possible amendments to the bill.

The Maine Labor Climate Council is a coalition of 16 private and public sector unions a coalition of 20 labor unions here in the state of Maine working together to address the climate crisis while tackling broader inequality. To this end, we are happy to support Rep. Malon’s bill.

Recent federal legislation has opened an entirely new set of opportunities to make historic investments in our schools. The Inflation Reduction Act offers an enormous suite of tax credits to spur clean energy and energy efficiency investments, and for the first time makes these tax credits available to schools and other tax-exempt entities, in the form of a direct payment. For schools who commit to strong labor standards for the men and women who do this clean energy retrofit work, the IRA incentives gets five times bigger, up to a total of 40% of the project cost.

This is a historic moment to reinvest in the buildings where our students learn and so many of our community members work, and save districts real money. What is missing in Maine right now is the expertise to take advantage of this direct pay option through the IRA, as well as the other federal funds out there for building retrofit work, such as the IIJA and ARPA.

The Maine Department of Education has not had renewable energy in it’s purview before, but it is the Department that schools will look to for help in taking advantage of this new opportunity. A Green Schools Coordinator would be an important addition to the Department at this critical time.

While we applaud the Sponsor's initiative in putting forth this legislation, we would also like to suggest some amendments.

First, the Coordinator should be required to count organized labor as a stakeholder in this process. The organized workers who make our schools run — teachers, counselors, facility and custodial workers, and other support staff — know better than anyone the strengths and weaknesses of the buildings where they spend their days, and how investments to retrofit and upgrade them would improve their working conditions and our children's learning conditions.

Having the Coordinator consult with and broker relationships with representatives of our unionized building and construction trades can help to ensure not only that projects get done with some of the the best-trained craftspeople, but also put projects on the quickest path to qualifying for the maximum amount of federal IRA money on the table.

Second, the Coordinator should be required to focus on three areas: 1) improving the building envelope, 2) placing solar on school buildings, and 3) improving HVAC in our schools.

As the saying goes, the cheapest BTU is the one you don't produce. By improving the building envelopes of existing and new construction with better insulation and better controls on air infiltration we can save money, reduce energy usage, and improve the comfort level in our schools. There are tax credits and direct pay options available for this now, and we should address our aging public school building infrastructure using as much federal money as we can.