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March 21<sup>st</sup>, 2023

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs:

Please let the text below serve as my written testimony in support of LD 1018, “An Act to Increase the Membership of the State Board of Education and Review the Board's Responsibilities, Functions and Staffing,” scheduled for public hearing on March 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2023. The opinion below is my own and does not represent that of any other organization:

Teacher leadership is an essential part of a healthy and productive education system, and the proposed added seat on the State Board of Education via LD 1018 reaffirms Maine’s commitment to being a national leader in this regard. In a time of unique challenge in public schools, it is critical that policy makers at all levels are as immediately familiar with student needs as possible in order to make appropriate policy and programming changes. Ensuring that a voice with classroom-level perspective is on the Board is an essential part of highlighting those needs, adapting to those needs, and responding to those needs circumspectly, equitably, and swiftly.

The establishment of a dedicated teacher seat on a State Board of Education is not new. According to their official state government websites, Arizona, Mississippi, Tennessee, and Wyoming all have similar provisions already enshrined in their state laws. What has already been accomplished in those other states is well within the grasp of ours. With LD 1018, Maine has an opportunity to join these innovative states and in leading the country by fostering more robust and informed dialogue between elected officials, public servants, and the public itself.

Establishing the dedicated teacher seat on the State Board of Education is a gesture of cooperation and collaboration that is timely and needed. Maine, like other states, is grappling with shortages of teachers and educational support professionals. As noted by Melissa Ellin of the *Maine Monitor* and on News Center Maine’s broadcast from February 6<sup>th</sup> of this year, the total teacher resignations and retirements in 2022 are the highest figures in seven years, creating a dearth of qualified professionals to fill critical positions. And while there are likely many reasons why teachers and other educational professionals choose to leave the field, not believing that their voices are being adequately heard and acknowledged in the halls of influence is certainly a factor. Improving representation of teacher voice is a factor which we have the ability to control and make better with the proposed legislation.

Those who have served the public during the COVID 19 pandemic and continued to do so under increased hostility and resentment in its aftermath have chosen to carry the mantle of public education against great odds. And as the Teach Maine Plan and various teacher residency programs at our public and private universities look to shore up the young and second-career teacher corps, we must do everything else in our power to support and validate the tremendous work that all currently practicing teachers and other educators invest in students and their communities every day.

In sum, LD 1018 fits with Maine’s greater ethos of community-mindedness, independence, representation, and inclusivity. I strongly recommend that the Committee vote in favor of it.

Sincerely,

Joseph Hennessey, MSED  
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2018 Piscataquis County Teacher of the Year  
2019 Maine Teacher of the Year  
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