

Heather Merriman
Harpswell

Subject: LD1458: Increase Funding for the Maine School of Science and Mathematics

Dear Members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee,

The state's first public STEM magnet school has been part of Maine's educational landscape for nearly 30 years and has been ranked in the top 10 best high schools in America. Creating educational options affords every child the chance to find their best fit path for success. While applauded for STEM academics, MSSM's faculty offer a robust curriculum; Anthony Scott is Maine's 2023 distinguished English educator of the year. The faculty inspire future leaders to embrace their passion. Graduates have gone on to become scientists, engineers, doctors, artists, attorneys, and educators. Alumni have held seats in our government, currently of note, Senator Nicole Grohoski (SD7-Hancock), and have even served as our state economist, Catherine Reilly DeLutio, class of 1997. This school is an asset to the State of Maine.

I see two significant reasons why this funding is essential: 1) to provide equity of resources for operations and employment of MSSM staff and faculty, with the goal of keeping pace with the trajectory of all of Maine's public schools; and, 2) to create equity of financial access to all Maine families whose children find MSSM to be the best fit for their educational path.

1) Provide equitable funds to staff and operate the school.

MSSM has been flat funded from 2017-2023, while the DOE's General Purpose Aid (GPA) budget, from which MSSM's budget appropriations are made, has increased by 24% over that period. While this bill is asking for an allocation increase, this is not an expansion request, it is a catch-up request to create equity. While school districts can levy local tax increases to steadily increase their budget to maintain staffing levels, provide salary increases, and proper operations & maintenance of their facilities, MSSM has no such mechanism to increase their budget. MSSM has been making staffing cuts and delaying upgrades to balance their budget. I urge you to correct this inequity. In my opinion, MSSM should receive regular, consistent budget increases. I believe that my taxes are remitted in significant part to support the education of our future generation.

2) Create (financial) application/enrollment equity.

The families of all accepted students should be able to access MSSM. Many of the other residential STEM Magnet schools across the U.S. fully cover tuition like here in Maine, but they also cover room and board to a degree that removes a family's financial barrier to matriculation. I have heard too often that our "price tag" i.e., the nearly \$10,000 room and board fee is a deterrent to the parents of interested students (resulting in lower application rates). Public education can and should offer options, sufficient that we create a best-fit for every child. MSSM has proven it can be the best fit for kids from every corner of the state, and it does not feel equitable to put a financial barrier in front of families for a publicly-funded education.

Thank you to President Jackson and members of the legislature from the 1990's that had the vision to enact legislation to establish Maine's first public STEM magnet school, you created a path for me. This is my story:

I was a teenager at a large SAD. I could have graduated from there and likely gone on to a college or university, but looking back 25 years, I feel enrolling at MSSM is the choice that can be most attributed to where I am today. I found my passion for STEM as an engineer and as an advocate for access to STEM educational opportunities for children in Maine through my volunteering on local school boards, as well as on MSSM's Foundation board. MSSM put into motion a series of events in my life of benefit to the State of Maine: I went on to graduate from UMaine's College of Engineering, accept my first job here, raise a family here, and eventually run my own engineering practice here. If MSSM had not been an option, I would have likely opted for a different professional path (at a college out-of-state -- a desire to get-away), and consequently found a spouse "from away" to become the adult that returned to Maine only to visit family at the holidays. Instead, MSSM laid the groundwork for me to stay in Maine.

I am proud to be a graduate of the state's public STEM magnet school. I want to see this high school opportunity remain an excellent option for future generations. It deserves our collective support; LD1458 will ensure that MSSM can live the values of equity and access for every Maine student that finds MSSM to be their best educational fit.

In appreciation of your support,

Heather Merriman
Harpwell
MSSM Class of 1998
MSSM Foundation Vice Chair