

Testimony in Support of LD 1527, *An Act to Promote the Community School Program*

From Kara Hay, Penquis President & CEO

May 1, 2023

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan, and esteemed members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs: My name is Kara Hay and I'm submitting testimony in support of LD 1527 "An Act to Promote the Community School Program."

I am the president and CEO of Penquis, a large community action agency in central/northern Maine that serves between 3,500 and 5,000 Mainers every single day. We provide roughly fifty services aimed at ensuring Mainers have access to early childhood education, safe and affordable housing, transportation, family supports, and programs that build financial stability. For more than 56 years we have supported individual needs across the lifespan, from our youngest children to our oldest adults. What we know from our experience and from a wealth of research is that investing in children has tremendous returns, for their educational, health, social and economic outcomes and for society as a whole.

Children cannot learn if they are hungry, worried about where they are going to sleep, suffering from neglect, or struggling with behavioral health needs. Maine, in 2021, had 34,000 children living in poverty, 2,100 students experiencing housing insecurity, 4,263 children with substantiated child maltreatment, and 2,654 visits to the emergency room for suicidal thoughts or suicidal attempts by youth under age 19. More than 40% of Maine high school students do not feel that they matter in their community and more than 50,000 Maine youth have two or more Adverse Childhood Experiences. The number of children who are experiencing and at risk of negative outcomes is staggering, as is the cost to our communities.

The Community Schools model is based on a comprehensive, effective, and efficient strategy for helping *all* children to succeed. It works because it supports learning and addresses the social determinants of health using the power of partnerships to meet the specific needs of children and families at the local level. This is why Penquis hosted informational sessions about the Community School model in 2014 and supported the efforts of RSU #34 in becoming a community school in 2017.

Since that time, we have learned even more about the model's impact. One case study demonstrated that each \$1 invested in a Community School Coordinator returns approximately \$7.11 in net benefits. Schools across the nation have documented positive student results, including improved physical health, attendance, literacy and math proficiency, and graduation rates.

Here in Maine we have seen positive results in our students and families because of our community schools. Community schools have, for example, met children's basic needs so they can concentrate on learning, connected youth to job training opportunities, offered on-site access to mental health and substance abuse counseling, and created community hubs that enable students to feel connected and supported. In short, they are supporting healthy children, successful students, strong families, a skilled workforce, a productive citizenry, and prosperous economies.

I support LD 1527 because it will yield a tremendous return on investment and because our children, families, and communities need and deserve the future that it makes possible, one that starts with children who are healthy, supported, encouraged, and cared for.

Thank you for your time and commitment to Maine's children.