

Honorable Members of the Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs,

I write today in support of L.D. 1702 which would establish the Commission to Improve the Educational Experience of People Who Are Resettling in Maine.

In late August of 2019, my husband and I accompanied a 17-year-old asylum seeking girl who was living with us to register for high school at Cape Elizabeth High School. She did not speak English, so the school arranged for an interpreter to be with us as we discussed enrolling her in High School which would start in a week. She had no prior school records to provide upon registration, and related to us through her interpreter that she had not attended school regularly since approximately the 8th grade due to the instability of her home life, which involved frequent moves between the D.R.C. and Angola, where various family members cared for her prior to harrowing trip to the United States, where she ended up landing at the Expo in Portland, considered an unaccompanied minor.

Upon enrolling at CEHS, she received an extra level of attentive support, including ESL services and a group of committed teachers who were invested in her success and achievement. With their support and her hard work, she was able to graduate from High School in 3 years and go on to college where she has just completed her first year at USM.

We were fortunate that a group of extremely dedicated educators, school administrators, and community organizations provided a supportive safety net around this remarkable young woman, now and forever a member of our family. She is one of thousands of other equally remarkable young people now living and attending public schools in Maine.

The creation of a Commission to focus on the unique needs of students who are asylum seekers, refugees, and immigrants is much needed. Because this is not a new issue to Maine (as many of Maine cities were built by immigrants and thrive today because of them), I would hope that the Commission could consult with other communities who have had success in this work for many years and learn from prior examples of successful models. In addition, I am hopeful that this new Commission can connect to the students themselves, who I believe will provide the most meaningful and powerful reasons for why this is so important. These young people have been through experiences that many of us can never imagine going through. Despite the challenges of their dangerous travels which ultimately resulted in their arrival here in Maine, they remain hopeful and determined to learn, grow, thrive, and develop into fully contributing members of our communities.

It goes without saying that we need more young people coming to Maine. We have one of the oldest (if not THE oldest) populations in the U.S. Here is a population of young people that we need, who we should take meaningful action to support and help become successful, along with all Maine students. Their success is our success.

Lastly, I will add that the creation of this Commission will benefit ALL Maine students, as we pave the way to showing what it takes to care for and attend to those who have come from backgrounds and experiences that are different from our own. This is truly where educators can have the most impact, and where students will have the greatest learning. The creation of this Commission shows that the State of Maine is invested in and supportive of the education of all students who attend our public schools.

Thank you for putting this important legislation forward.

Sincerely,

Gina Tapp