



Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs
Testimony from Katherine Howell, Director of Workforce Partnerships, Educate Maine

In Support Of

L.D. # 2131 "An Act to Support Extended Learning Opportunities"

Wednesday, January 24, 2024

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan, distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs, my name is Katherine Howell, Director, Workforce Partnerships at Educate Maine, a business-led education advocacy organization. Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of L.D. #2131.

Extended Learning Opportunities (ELOs) lie at the heart of Educate Maine's mission to ensure that Maine people reach their highest educational potential and are prepared to succeed in their educational and career aspirations. As a member of the MaineSpark coalition, we support the goal to reach 60% of adult workers who hold a credential of value by 2025 in Maine. Extended Learning Opportunities, and the educational and career pathways they help illuminate for students, are a key stepping stone to reaching this goal.

In my role at Educate Maine, I have the opportunity to see the impact real-world, hands-on career experiences can have for students. For the last four years I've had the privilege of leading the Maine Career Catalyst program, working with high school and college students as they experience internships, pre-apprenticeships, and apprenticeships at hundreds of Maine's employers.

Career exploration at an early age is vital. A commitment to adding additional value to early experiences through recognized Extended Learning Opportunities before graduation from high school can and will contribute to the future academic and career success of young Mainers. In order to have a robust and thriving Maine economy, we must create pathways for students early on so they can explore new opportunities, visualize their futures, and learn what their interests are. The opportunity to learn more about themselves as professionals while exploring the variety of careers available in Maine at an early age will provide insights for students as they choose majors in higher education and make decisions on where to work.

The value of these future-shaping, experiential learning experiences cannot be understated. I continually meet students who have discovered something new about themselves, their strengths, and their passions from work-based experiences. Through Maine Career Catalyst programming, we work to help students gain work experiences and develop their personal and

professional skills. One such student intern wrote about the impact that her internship experience had on her growth:

“This internship was a necessary first step in establishing a professional presence and gave me the resources to successfully network and expand my career opportunities. Not only was I able to get hands-on experience in a field I have shown interest in, but I was able to create connections that will undoubtedly benefit me in the long run. Through this program, I not only acquired practical skills and knowledge but also gained insights into the inner workings of the industry that cannot be taught in a classroom setting.”

We need more of these types of experiences for high school students so that they can learn more about career pathways in Maine, develop their professional skills and network, and make informed decisions regarding their post-secondary plans.

Supporting and validating pathways for young people to explore opportunities that will shape their future is critical to their growth and the future of our state. This bill will support young people looking to build professional skills and explore the opportunities Maine has to offer. I encourage you to pass this bill in support of Maine’s workforce.

Sincerely,

Katherine Howell
Educate Maine