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Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs

RE: Support of LD 2131, An Act to Support Extended Learning Opportunities

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs, my name is Amara Ifeji, and I am the Director of Policy with the Maine Environmental Education Association. I am here today on behalf of MEEA to testify in support of LD 2131.

MEEA is a nonprofit statewide professional network representing over 2000 Maine educators, both classroom teachers and community-based educators at libraries, museums, and science and nature centers. For 40 years, we have worked to enhance and amplify the efforts of individuals and organizations to build environmental awareness, appreciation, understanding, and action in Maine.

At the core of MEEA's mission is the belief that extended and experiential learning is critical in improving Maine's environmental literacy and workforce. Such opportunities provide students with invaluable, real-world experiences to immerse themselves in education that speaks to their unique needs and interests.

Since 2018, MEEA has offered a six-month fellowship and a two-year residency program for young high school and college-aged professionals. We have engaged dozens of youth through these positions, who have completed our programs having honed their skills and passions in a way that is vital to Maine's workforce. As a former program participant in high school, who now works for the organization, I can say that my fellowship experience solidified my desire to stay in Maine and contribute to the state's environmental heritage as an educator.

Providing more early career exploration opportunities for high school students allows them to learn about Maine's workforce offerings and graduate feeling prepared to make decisions about their post-secondary plans. This bill represents an opportunity to support young Mainers as they explore their unique contributions to their home state. As such, MEEA urges the committee to support LD 2131. Thank you for the opportunity to comment, and I am available to answer questions.