

## Testimony for LD 2170

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan, and members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee. I am Katie Joseph, the Assistant Superintendent for RSU 1, and I am here to testify in support of L.D. 2170, An Act to Prioritize School Construction Projects for Schools Affected by Disasters.

On the eve of graduation in 2022, an arsonist set fire to our Dike Newell Elementary School, a preK-2 school facility housing approximately 250 students. This fire displaced our students into an abandoned school building that the DOE had previously determined no longer supported our educational needs. As part of our new high school project, the RSU sold our old high school facilities to the City of Bath, a portion of which we are now leasing from the City of Bath to temporarily house our elementary students due to the Dike Newell fire. This is less than ideal, as the facility is not designed for an elementary school. There are significant issues with the heating system, inadequate space for physical education, and the playground is close to a busy main street. To exacerbate the issues, the City is demolishing sections of the former high school adjacent to the technical school. This has impacted our technology infrastructure, parking, and poses other safety and security concerns.

The comment has been made that the temporary facility we are in now is not as old as some other school facilities across the State. While we understand this fact, we want to emphasize that we are fortunate that the City of Bath was willing to lease the property, and they had yet to begin any renovations on this property. Our only other option was to rent approximately 15-20 portables. Would our situation have been looked upon differently if this was the case?

We have worked with our insurance company to obtain funds due to the fire. We had to use a portion of these proceeds to make the old high school, which was dormant for a couple of years, habitable for elementary-age students. The district spent an inordinate amount of time preparing an abandoned school building, ordering new supplies and equipment, and performing various other tasks to ensure the building was code-compliant.

We asked the State Board to consider two options:

One was to be considered an “emergency project” under Chapter 61: State Board of Education Rules For Major Capital School Construction Projects. Our school requires the replacement of all or a significant portion of the facility that is declared uninhabitable by an authorized individual or an authorized local, state, or federal agency as a result of an unanticipated and sudden natural or human-made disaster. Chapter 61 states that Emergency Projects will be dealt with on a case-by-case basis as deemed appropriate by the State Board. There is past precedent for funded emergency projects. However, it was determined that we did not qualify as an Emergency Project.

The other option we proposed was moving the Dike Newell School to the current approved project list as an Emergency Project. This request was also denied. We respect the process

used to develop the school construction list; however, we strongly feel exceptions should be made when there is a sudden natural or human-made disaster. These emergency situations do not happen often (25 years between the last one and the two recent fires). A school facility that is declared uninhabitable as a result of an unanticipated natural or human-made disaster should be approved before a regular school construction project, especially if the priority is the health and safety of students.

Thank you for your time and your consideration of this important bill.