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Kristen McAuley

Pronouns: she/her/hers

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Members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee, thank you for considering LD 2118 - An Act to Provide Funding to the Maine School of Science and Mathematics Using the School Funding Formula Criteria. My name is Kristen McAuley and I live in Topsham, Maine. I am testifying in support of LD 2118.

My daughter is a current freshman at MSSM, and my husband was a graduate of the class of 1997 - he started as a junior there in the first year it opened. Since it first opened, MSSM has changed much in how it operates (students are no longer on Loring Air Force base, fortunately) but what it has offered to students and families hasn't. Since inception, it has offered a rigorous, supportive academic environment to Maine students, students who otherwise are often not challenged in their home district school.

When I first met my husband in college, the two things that I recall most his experience was one, that he went to school along the Canadian border, and two, that it was the first time in his life he had found his people - peers, teachers, support staff. He was finally with a cohort that thought like him, academically, and teachers who encouraged and challenged him, rather than stifling him or shuffling him to the side. He has been committed to the field of science since, and for 15 years has been an Assistant Instructor and Lab Manager at Bates College in the Earth and Climate Science Department.

Fast forward over twenty years, and our daughter had what can only be described as a dumpster fire of a middle school experience. Even in the gifted and talented program, she was often left to her own devices when she completed her coursework. In math, she and another student would go out in the hallway for advanced work by themselves - basically being given handouts that explained concepts, but without support or instruction. I don't fault the teachers she had, who are amazing individuals, but who primarily needed to focus on the rest of the class. As a parent, I can't tell you how hard it is to see your child struggle as mine did, struggle because they want to be challenged, struggle because they are able to learn at a faster pace, and struggle because sometimes how they learn and think is different.

I admittedly was unsure if MSSM was right for my daughter. She entered at the age of 13, and it is hard to send your child four and a half hours away when they are barely a teenager. Since those first days, I have never once looked back. You have to understand how happy she is: she too found her people, and a place that challenged her and allowed her to actually learn - learn at her pace, in her way. The difference in my daughter is night and day. She is engaged, she talks about what she's learning, and the opportunities she is routinely given. My daughter is finally in a place that not just allows her to be herself, but actively supports her in being such.

I want to completely recognize that MSSM isn't the place for all students. But for those students who it is the place for - it is hard to articulate what it means for them, how impactful, important and validating. It is more than just the sum of its parts; these are students who deserve to thrive, and are finally given the opportunity to, academically. This takes sustained, financial investment. Please, I encourage you to provide the leadership and commitment that will continue to allow MSSM to be a place of academic excellence and support. Thank you for your time today.