



STATE OF MAINE  
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION  
23 STATE HOUSE STATION  
AUGUSTA, ME 04333-0023

JANET T. MILLS  
GOVERNOR

PENDER MAKIN  
COMMISSIONER

April 21, 2023

Senator Pierce, Senate Chair  
Representative Gere, House Chair  
Members of the Joint Select Committee on Housing

Senator Pierce, Representative Gere, and distinguished members of the Housing Committee:

L.D. 1609, An Act to Prevent Student Homelessness, proposes to fund preventative measures to protect Maine students against housing insecurity. This fund would be housed within the Department of Education and would be managed by the McKinney-Vento liaisons at the local school administrative unit (SAU) level. The Department of Education (DOE) applauds every effort to support Maine students.

Student homelessness is increasing in Maine. In 2023, 2,186 students were identified as experiencing housing insecurity. This marks a noticeable increase from the previous five years which had an average of 1,384 students identified for housing insecurity. Students who experience homelessness face numerous barriers to education, including high rates of chronic absence, mobility, academic challenges, and trauma.

The federal McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act requires every public school administrative unit to designate a liaison who is tasked with identifying and supporting students experiencing homelessness or who are in inadequate housing. These liaisons receive annual and ongoing professional development and are involved in regional cross-system collaboration with homeless providers, town offices, and other community-based organizations. Liaisons are familiar with the unique needs in their communities and with the families they serve. The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act provides approximately \$330,000 a year to identify and serve the students experiencing homelessness in the State of Maine. However, this federal funding must be used to help identify these students and provide educationally related supports, such as outreach, case management, and transportation. It cannot be used for rental assistance, utilities, and other housing-related needs. As a result, many SAUs face challenges in meeting the emergency needs of families when they must work within the processes of federal funds.

The funding proposed in LD 1609 would allow for McKinney-Vento liaisons to quickly access the resources to meet families' emergency needs and prevent the further traumas of homelessness. Oftentimes, the difference between a few hundred dollars - for things like a car repair, rent payment, or utility bill - can determine if a family will experience homelessness or not. This funding would ensure schools can access resources to support the basic needs of their students, so that these children can have what we wish for all our children - a peaceful childhood

to focus on their school experiences, and not worry about where to sleep that night, or if there will be heat, or if their parent will lose their job because the car broke down.

Currently, liaisons spend hours trying to navigate each crisis as it arises, and help families navigate a patchwork of different systems and agencies. Together with families, they are contacting social services agencies, homeless provider networks, and local philanthropic avenues to find some assistance to divert families from the deepening crises. If there were a simpler way for liaisons to access emergency financial support, it would save them the time and compassion fatigue, and potential burn out.

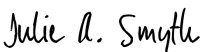
The preventative nature of this bill is essential. When one does lose housing, the intensity of case management drastically increases. For example, when students are temporarily staying out-of-district due to homelessness, the McKinney-Vento Act requires the districts arrange for and pay for transportation costs for the child to remain in their school of origin, if it is determined to be in the child's best interest. While this transportation is essential for school stability, it is costly and time consuming to arrange. Also, homelessness has a significant impact on a student's graduation. These preventative efforts will help improve attendance and achievement, and save staff time, effort, and significant costs.

Maine has recognized the capacity needs of liaisons, and the Maine DOE has dedicated American Rescue Plan Homeless Children and Youth (ARP-HCY) funding directly to SAUs. The Maine DOE has set up regional support for liaisons through McKinney-Vento Contacts through Community-Based Organizations, built regional communities of liaisons and service providers, and streamlined processes to simplify the liaison's workload. The ARP-HCY funding was more flexible than traditional McKinney-Vento funds and allowed for additional uses like temporary emergency housing and prepaid store cards. The ARP-HCY funding has been instrumental in increased identification and support to our most vulnerable students. But we all know this funding is coming to an end soon. LD 1609 is an opportunity for Maine to honor its commitment to ensuring all our children have what they need to be able to focus on school and get to graduation. The development of a new fund that would address the supports for rental assistance, utilities, and other housing-related needs could help our SAUs and struggling Maine families meet these emergency needs.

For these reasons, the Department of Education is in support of LD 1609, An Act to Prevent Student Homelessness. I am confident that we can provide support to Maine's liaisons to implement this new pilot, just as we have throughout the pandemic. I am happy to answer any questions the Committee may have, and I will be available for work sessions on this bill.

Sincerely,

DocuSigned by:



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Julie Smyth

Director of Office of School and Student Supports

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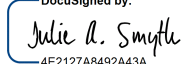
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