



The Joint Standing Committee on Innovation, Development,
Economic Advancement, and Business
Testimony from Katherine Johnston, Director of Research and Strategic Initiatives,
Educate Maine

In Support Of

L.D. 1517 “An Act To Establish the Maine Workforce, Research, Development,
and Student Achievement Institute”

Tuesday, April 27, 2021

Senator Curry, Representative Roberts, distinguished members of the IDEA Committee, my name is Katherine Johnston, Director of Research and Strategic Initiatives at Educate Maine, a business-led education advocacy organization. Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of L.D. 1517.

Educate Maine’s mission is to ensure that Maine people are prepared to succeed in education and career and that all Maine people reach their highest educational potential. As a member of the MaineSpark coalition, we measure this by attainment - the share of adult workers with a postsecondary credential of value in demand by Maine employers. Maine’s goal is to reach 60% by 2025.

An essential piece of the puzzle is good, trusted information on Maine’s workforce and training programs. The best policies and strategies for tackling these complex problems are informed by data. A small organization like ours relies on the work of several agencies for the best and most recent data on education and workforce outcomes, and, despite our best efforts, there still is no central source of information for much of the needed data and analysis that our state’s lawmakers need to make policy decisions. This bill directly addresses that problem.

This is a proven model that serves the legislative process well today. Our experience in the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee has shown that when state legislators have access to an unbiased public research asset, their policymaking is more targeted and effective. The Maine Education Policy Research Institute (MEPRI) serves that committee well and provides critical information to the policymaking process. MEPRI is responsive to that committee and studies issues that are relevant to the problems they are trying to solve.

MEPRI is not swayed by the politics of the day and their work is supported by the professional views of stakeholders in the field, such as educators and school leaders. Legislators still rely on other sources of research, both inside and outside of Maine, to inform their actions. In those

cases, MEPRI provides a Maine lens through which they can consider those findings to determine ultimately if the policy will work for Maine students and schools.

The same level of research and analysis would be a boon to the IDEA committee as well as state agencies, businesses, and nonprofits who are all working to increase educational attainment, career readiness, and adequate training for the jobs that are the most in-demand right here in our state. Such an institute would build on the insightful data provided by the Center for Workforce Research and Information by providing broader context, projections, and analysis related to workforce issues. Maine would have the robust information necessary to track progress toward achieving the statewide economic development strategy as well as the insights needed to inform complex public policy decisions related to our biggest asset: our people.

Locating this institute within our public university system is a wise decision. Our public university system is home to some of the best research happening in Maine. This is an underutilized source of excellent research in demographic changes and workforce and economic development. Establishment of an institute within the system will provide policymakers access to useful and relevant data that is unbiased and accessible to the public. It also reinforces their role as a leader in workforce and economic development and is in line with their responsibility to serve Maine people.

I urge you to vote in favor of L.D. 1517. Thank you for your consideration of this testimony and I am happy to answer any questions.