



DATE: April 27, 2021  
TO: Committee on Innovation, Development, Economic Advancement & Business  
FROM: Samantha Warren, UMS Director of Government & Community Relations  
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RE: **LD 1517, *An Act To Establish the Maine Workforce, Research, Development and Student Achievement Institute***

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Senator Curry, Representative Roberts and distinguished members of the Committee on Innovation, Development, Economic Advancement and Business (IDEA): My name is Samantha Warren. I am the Director of Government & Community Relations for Maine's public universities, speaking in strong support of LD 1517, *An Act To Establish the Maine Workforce, Research, Development and Student Achievement Institute*. As some of you will remember, an identical bill was unanimously supported by this Committee in the 129<sup>th</sup> Legislature.

For 25 years, through the Maine Education Policy Research Institute (MEPRI), the University of Maine System has directly provided policymakers with objective data, policy research, and evaluation to define and assess educational needs, services, and impacts.

MEPRI's annual work plan is developed to align with the anticipated needs of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs. A list of possible research projects is first brainstormed by a steering committee, chaired by a member of the Education Committee and comprised of representatives from relevant stakeholder groups. Members of the Education Committee then review, suggest other topics for consideration, and rank the proposals. On average, between four to seven targeted studies are undertaken each year and efforts are made to have those available in advance of the Committee's consideration of relevant bills.

MEPRI does not take positions on legislation. Instead, lead researchers present through substantive informational briefings to the Committee and reports available to the Legislature and the public. Researchers are intentional in how they frame their findings, being careful to focus the Committee's possible next steps without advocating for specific legislative solutions. As a result, MEPRI research and researchers have maintained the highest level of credibility, even though the subject of their studies are often at the center of some of Maine's most contentious public policy debates. As MEPRI co-founder David Silvernail said, "MEPRI doesn't have an agenda, other than providing good information and data."

The Legislature appropriates \$250,000 annually to support this applied research and the UMS matches that with an in-kind contribution of at least \$125,000. This funding supports MEPRI co-directors at both the University of Maine and the University of Southern Maine and the research time of faculty, part-time research associates and graduate assistants.

LD 1517 would create a model similar to MEPRI to serve this Committee, with a focus on research and evaluation about programs and policies related to business regulation; economic and workforce development; student debt; and other areas within the Committee's jurisdiction.

Earlier this session, you heard testimony from nearly two dozen medical students, doctors and healthcare employers in support of funding for the Doctors for Maine's Future scholarship. Their stories were compelling, as was national data about physician shortages. Some of you questioned at

the hearing and work session if there was data to demonstrate how effective this program has been and how to make it more so, including based on successes in other states. This is an example of how independent university research could uniquely inform your important work, helping you to understand how the policies passed by this Committee and the Legislature are being implemented, achieving their intended impacts (or not), and what needs to happen to make them more effective. Other sample research topics that may be worth exploring given current and likely future policy discussions could consider the Pine Tree Zone program, Opportunity Maine Tax Credit, Maine State Grant and college access and affordability more broadly, return on innovation investments, how to close Maine's workforce skills gap, wage and benefit policies, and business and worker attraction including teleworkers.

As is the case with MEPRI, the institute would not duplicate current data collection and analysis efforts, including those by State agencies. Instead, our researchers – who are trusted and regularly called upon to provide expertise and evaluation of relevant economic and workforce policy issues in the state and far beyond – would leverage existing capacity and data and their own quantitative and qualitative data gathering and analysis to deliver the insights you need to make good decisions for Maine. For example, last year MEPRI did a comprehensive study on educator recruitment and retention in Maine schools. They used data from the Maine Department of Education and conducted administrator and teacher surveys to put that data into context. Maine DOE data told them the demographic profile of the educator workforce including retention rates and years of experience, but through their surveys of those in the field, they learned why teachers were turning over, how many had seriously considered leaving the profession (55%) and what could convince them to stay. Similarly, MEPRI is considering an analysis of the applications submitted to Maine DOE for federal relief dollars, as how schools/districts propose to apply this aid can tell us about their unmet needs and guide future public policy and investment.

In closing, I would like to leave you with the perspective of your predecessors. Said former Education Committee Chair Sen. Brian Langley (R-Hancock) of the MEPRI model: "By the end of my tenure, MEPRI was a very valued and trusted source of information. It is critical and will be even more so in the future as people have more trouble figuring out if they trust sources of information." Meanwhile, explained his fellow long-time former Education Committee Co-Chair Rep. Tori Kornfield (D-Bangor), "MEPRI is essential to our work. Every bill has a public hearing and a work session, and in the public hearing we get a lot of anecdotal testimony, which is wonderful. But you can't base policy on it. We need facts and data, and that's what MEPRI gives us."

LD 1517 would instead give this Committee accessible and actionable analysis similar to that enjoyed by the Education Committee, while also being a resource to the many stakeholders the research would give voice to. We urge you to support this proposal and look forward to developing it to best serve your needs. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today and I am happy to answer your questions.