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Testimony of Representative Michael Brennan introducing LD 773, “An Act to Assist Public School Students and Families Who are Homeless” April 2, 2021

Senator Hickman, Representative Sylvester, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Labor and Housing, I am Michael Brennan and I represent District 36 which is part of Portland. I am pleased to present L.D. 773, “An Act to Assist Public School Students and Families Who are Homeless” for your consideration.

This bill is intended to accomplish two objectives. First, the bill establishes a more formal pathway for coordination between Maine's public school system and Maine State Housing Authority (MSHA). This coordination is essential to assisting the estimated 2,500 to 3,000 students in the state who are currently homeless.

Federal legislation under the McKinney-Vento Act of 2015 requires all school districts in the state to designate a liaison to identify homeless students and ensure that they have access to transportation and educational programming. By having the liaison work directly with MSHA, I believe a portion of those students will in fact qualify for existing programs within MSHA.

The second part of the bill provides a combination of state general funds and federal funds to provide housing assistance for students/families when existing housing resources are not available. With these funds, MSHA would establish and administer a housing assistance program specifically for homeless students and their families. The bill directs MSHA to develop rules and regulations defining an application process and eligibility.

Why is this needed?

The following graph from a January, 2020 report from the Maine Department of Education to the Education Committee demonstrates the increase in homeless students in the state over the past several years. The increase has been even more pronounced among students with special needs and those who are English Learners.

	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18
Total Homeless	1986	1934	2192	2515	2449
% total enrolled	1.08%	1.06%	1.21%	1.39%	1.36%
Unaccompanied	411 (20.7%)	446 (23.1%)	467 (21.3%)	527 (21.0%)	424 (17.3%)
Pre-K to K	171 (8.6%)	211 (10.9%)	220 (10.2%)	214 (8.5%)	208 (8.5%)
Grades 1 to 6	837 (42.1%)	777 (40.2%)	924 (42.2%)	1077 (42.8%)	1077 (44.0%)
Grades 7 to 12	978 (49.2%)	946 (48.9%)	1048 (47.8%)	1224 (48.7%)	1164 (47.5%)

I am sure that each of you would agree that not having a permanent place to live significantly compromises a student's ability to learn and reach their academic potential in school.

This bill is a first step towards addressing a long-standing problem and will help ensure that all students in the state, regardless of economic circumstances, will have an equal opportunity to be successful in school.

I have prepared an amendment, which you all should have, that while it makes no changes to the function of the bill, fixes some problems with the original language.

Thank you for your time and consideration.