

**Testimony of Chris Bicknell, New Beginnings
In Support of LD 1916
An Act To Increase High School Graduation Rates for Students Experiencing
Homelessness or in Foster Care**

Senator Millett, Representative Kornfield, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs, thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony in support of LD 1916, An Act To Increase High School Graduation Rates for Students Experiencing Homelessness or in Foster Care in Maine. I am the Executive Director of New Beginnings; we are an agency that has served homeless youth from across the state in our programs for 40 years. Each year we improve the lives of over 700 youth and families in Maine with shelter, housing, counseling, and outreach services.

Many youth in our programs struggle with educational disruption throughout their childhood due to extreme housing instability and homelessness. As a result, they face multiple barriers to high school completion that other students do not. Two of the biggest barriers they face are a lack of credit portability from school district to school district and partial credit accumulation rather than completion when they are experiencing a housing crisis. Unfortunately, despite their personal dedication and hard work, homeless youth in our programs, and across the state, face many systemic barriers like these that prevent them from obtaining a high school diploma.

These are hard-working young people who have overcome so many obstacles to stay in school and get into a position where they have met all the state's requirements for graduation yet still don't graduate. They are surviving in severe poverty and struggling to meet their basic needs; they have histories of trauma; and they often have no financial or emotional support from their families. Despite all these challenges, many are focused on their education, and they are willing to put in the hard work necessary to be successful.

By changing the language in this existing law all Maine youth who experience educational disruptions because of homelessness, involvement in the child welfare system, juvenile justice involvement, tribal youth and children of migrant and immigrant families will have a pathway to graduation that does not exist for them now. Even if their school district of origin and their current school district cannot come to an agreement about credits earned and standards achieved there will exist a greatly streamlined process to obtain a Maine Department of Education Diploma. This small modification to existing law will open opportunities for post-secondary education, employment and lifelong achievement for Maine youth who through no fault of their own have been denied a high school diploma due to antiquated practices and red tape.

In the 2017-18 school year in Maine, 351 students were identified as unaccompanied homeless youth by the Maine Department of Education, this number does not even include those children and youth who experience homelessness as part of a family. This might seem like a small number, but helping those youth get a high school diploma could have a big economic benefit for them and our state. According to the US Census Bureau the average high school graduate earns \$10,386 more per year than someone who does not graduate. Over their working lifetime that is \$467,370. If only half of the 351 students currently identified as homeless in Maine schools earns a diploma that is an increase to our economy of \$82,023,435.

For all of these reasons, I ask you all to vote yes on LD 1916, to support our youth and our state.

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