

## Maine Education Association

Grace Leavitt President | Jesse Hargrove Vice President | Beth French Treasurer  
Rebecca Cole NEA Director | Rachelle Bristol Executive Director

### Testimony

#### In Opposition

**LD 1741: An Act to Promote Educational Opportunity Through the Educational Choice Tax Credit Program, Eliminating Certain Restrictions on Charter Schools and Virtual Public Charter Schools, Allowing More Entities to Authorize Charter Schools and Clarifying Educational Policy on Immunization Requirements**

**LD 1798: An Act to Support School Choice by Establishing Empowerment Scholarship Accounts**

**LD 1838: An Act to Create the Empowerment Scholarship Account Program**

**LD 1841: An Act to Establish the Hope and Inclusion Scholarship Program**

**LD 1860: An Act to Create the Educational Opportunity Account Program**

**John Kosinski, Government Relations Director, Maine Education Association**

**Before the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee**

**May 8, 2023**

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan and other esteemed members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee,

My name is John Kosinski (he/him), and I am proud to serve as the Director of Government Relations for the Maine Education Association (MEA). The MEA represents 24,000 educators in the state of Maine, including teachers and other professionals in nearly every public school in the state and faculty and other professional staff in the University of Maine and Community College Systems.

I am here today to testify on behalf of the MEA in **opposition** to LD 1741, *An Act to Promote Educational Opportunity Through the Educational Choice Tax Credit Program, Eliminating Certain Restrictions on Charter Schools and Virtual Public Charter Schools, Allowing More Entities to Authorize Charter Schools and Clarifying Educational Policy on Immunization Requirements*, in **opposition** to LD 1798, *An Act to Support School Choice by Establishing Empowerment Scholarship Accounts*, in **opposition** to LD 1838, *An Act to Create the Empowerment Scholarship Account Program*, in **opposition** to LD 1841, *An Act to Establish the Hope and Inclusion Scholarship Program*, and in **opposition** to LD 1860, *An Act to Create the Educational Opportunity Account Program*.

I will start with some specific proposals contained in LD 1741. LD 1741 appears to be an omnibus bill of bad ideas and we hope this Committee will vote “ought not to pass.”

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The bill proposes to lift the cap on charter schools put in place 4 years ago, after a thorough debate by this Committee and the full Legislature. The cap of ten charter schools matches the cap that was put in place when charter schools were first authorized in 2011 under Governor LePage. Members of the Charter Commission have warned about the daunting workload of overseeing ten, now nine charter schools and holding them accountable. Adding more will just add to their workload and make it harder for the Commission and its limited resources and staff to dedicate the attention some charters obviously need. And we have now seen what happens when a charter does not improve. The Commission only recently made the difficult decision to close a charter school and we see the disruption this has caused. We hope the Committee and the Legislature will maintain the cap of ten charters and allow this experiment to go forward with great caution and with great care.

At the same time the Legislature voted to cap the number of charters, they also capped the number of students able to enroll in one of the two for-profit virtual charters at 1,000 students. At the time, the cap was set to not interfere with their current enrollments and provide them room to grow a bit. We remain concerned about the two for-profit virtual charters in Maine. We are fully aware each of the virtual charters in Maine have an in-state, non-profit Board. But both are part of national, for-profit virtual chains. Maine Connections Academy is operated by the national, for-profit virtual charter company called Connections Academy with revenue in 2022 of \$140 million, and is owned by Pearson, Inc, a mega education corporation. The other Maine virtual charter also has a local nonprofit but is managed by K12 Inc, now owned by Stride Inc, with revenues over \$1 billion annually. We have consistently raised concerns about the for-profit arrangement of these two charter schools and question whether state resources should be going to support for-profit management companies. We also encourage this Committee to consider the amount of state aid and the per pupil rate for students at these schools before considering any increase in the current enrollment cap.

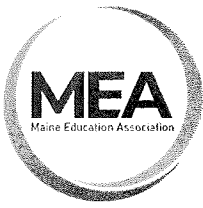
All these bills today contain some form of voucher program. Although they may have titles like “empowerment scholarship” or “hope and inclusion” or “educational opportunity account” the impact is all the same for public schools. Less resources. All these programs in one way or another attempt to divert resources from a public education system, that as you have heard already many times this session, is under resourced and overstretched. Our students are bringing new challenges that require new approaches and supports. You have heard districts are struggling to recruit and retain teachers, ed techs and other professional school staff, and salaries and wages are not keeping up with jobs and professions. Yet all of these bills propose to allow students to take their state and local funding to attend private schools or other educational arrangements, with no regard for the elasticity of school funding, as I described to this Committee in my testimony in support of LD 809, *An Act to Allow Regional School Units with School Choice to Opt Out of School Choice*.

Since at least two of these bills attempt to imitate a program from Arizona, I wanted to be sure to raise specific concerns about these proposals.

The “empowerment savings accounts” or “esas” in Arizona are vouchers and allow students to take their funding from the state (and the state also pays the local share) to attend any school of their choice. The

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original ESA voucher program was created in 2011 and was designed for students with disabilities but has been expanded several times since. One major expansion was overturned by voters in a people's veto with 65% rejecting the expansion of vouchers. It is important to note, even before the enactment of their voucher program, Arizona ranked 49<sup>th</sup> in the country in per pupil spending and was the stage for a series of teacher strikes due to inadequate funding and low wages.

Arizona Center for Economic Progress has followed the program and has this to say:

"ESA vouchers provide 90% of the base support level and additional assistance that would have gone to the student's district or charter school had the student remained enrolled. But that does not mean that ESA vouchers are less costly than educating students in public schools. The average ESA voucher is \$15,189, more than double the average state support for students attending public schools (\$6,612). This is due to two reasons:

- Most students who use ESAs require more funding: The majority of students receiving ESA vouchers are special needs students who receive more funding than most other students. One-fifth of students receiving ESA vouchers as of September 2021 received \$30,000 or more, reflective of the increased funding required by schools to educate and support these students.
- ESAs cost the state more if a student comes from a wealthier area: ESA vouchers are paid entirely with state general fund dollars. In most districts, student funding is a mixture of local property taxes and state funds. In wealthier districts, where student funding is paid entirely from local property taxes, ESA vouchers shift the entire cost for educating those students to the state general fund."<sup>1</sup>

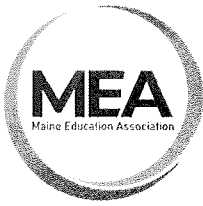
In the past, we have warned that vouchers could create more inequities for students and in fact the experience in Arizona thus far has proven this point. For example, again the Arizona Center for Economic Progress warns us "it is likely many vouchers are subsidizing private school attendance for households that could already afford to send their children to private schools."<sup>2</sup>

There are many reasons these voucher proposals are dangerous beyond siphoning funding from schools and the inequities such programs create but rather than articulate more of these concerns, I will leave you with several resources to help better understand the impacts and pitfalls of school voucher programs:

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<sup>1</sup> Please see, [School Voucher Costs Have Risen Much Faster Than K-12 Funding Increases](#), Arizona Center for Economic Progress, March 21, 2022 found here: [School Voucher Costs Have Risen Much Faster Than K-12 Funding Increases - The Arizona Center for Economic Progress \(azeconcenter.org\)](#)

<sup>2</sup> Please see, [School Vouchers: A Game-Changer for Whom?](#), Arizona Center for Economic Progress, April 6, 2022 found here: [School Vouchers: A Game-Changer for Whom? - The Arizona Center for Economic Progress \(azeconcenter.org\)](#)



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Economic Policy Institute, State and local experience proves school vouchers are a failed policy that must be opposed, April 20, 2023, found here: [State and local experience proves school vouchers are a failed policy that must be opposed](#): As voucher expansion bills gain momentum, look to public school advocates for guidance | Economic Policy Institute ([epi.org](#))

Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, State Policymakers Should Reject K-12 School Voucher Plans, March 21, 2023, found here: [State Policymakers Should Reject K-12 School Voucher Plans](#) | Center on Budget and Policy Priorities ([cbpp.org](#))

Brookings Institute, More findings about school vouchers and test scores, and they are still negative, July 13, 2017, found here: [More findings about school vouchers and test scores, and they are still negative](#) ([brookings.edu](#))

In Arizona and other states, there is now several decades of research on the impact of voucher programs on students, schools, families, and communities. Overwhelmingly the research points in the same direction. Voucher programs may help more affluent families provide a private school education using public dollars. But for every other stakeholder and constituency, the overall result of voucher programs has meant more inequity, more resource challenges for public schools, and more questions regarding the provision of special education services to students, among other negative outcomes. We can and should learn from the experiences of the other states that have tried this approach. We believe a thorough review of the research will hopefully help this Committee vote “ought not to pass” on all these bills.

Thank you for your time, your attention, and your service to the people of Maine and I will do my best to answer any questions you may have.

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