

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

My name is Lauren Stark (she/her). I live in Belfast and am a Policy Engagement Fellow for the Scholars Strategy Network. I am also an Assistant Professor of Education and Field Placement Director at the University of Maine at Augusta, and I am here to share my own perspective and expertise without representing my university affiliations.

I am here to testify in support of LD 1064: An Act to Increase the Minimum Teacher Salary.

Teachers in Maine earn the [lowest](#) educator wages in New England and, when adjusted for cost of living, the [fifth-lowest](#) teacher salary in the nation. They also make [24% less](#) than their college-educated peers in other professions, a “teacher pay penalty” that has worsened over time despite increases in teacher workload and inflation. That is a problem.

Educators play a fundamental role in our society. They create safe spaces for children and teens to learn and grow, nurturing the unique strengths that every student brings to the classroom. They support youth as they navigate the most difficult structural inequalities we face as a nation. And as the Covid-19 pandemic has made clear, teachers don’t just prepare the next generation of doctors, firefighters, and scientists. They make it possible for the current generation to do their jobs, too.

If we hope to recruit and retain skilled, compassionate educators for this crucial frontline work, we need to pay them accordingly.

Unfortunately, the current level of investment in teachers is not enough to keep them in the classroom. Teacher resignations have risen sharply in the past five years, fueled by the pandemic and longstanding structural challenges. Data from the Maine Public Employee Retirement System shows a record 1,311 teachers resigning from their positions in 2022, nearly two times as many as in 2017. As reported in the [Maine Monitor](#), teacher retirements have also risen in the past five years.

While the state of Maine does not keep track of teacher shortages, district and school leaders have [spoken out](#) about the challenges of filling open teaching positions, particularly in rural and high-poverty districts. In my role as a teacher educator and field placement director, I work closely with these leaders and my peers throughout the University of Maine System to develop [creative solutions](#) to bring more teachers into the profession. At the University of Maine at Augusta, where I teach, we have pioneered a teacher residency model that allows educational

technicians and emergency-certified teachers to complete their certification courses while working full-time in schools.

But university and district leaders alike know that recruitment isn't enough; teachers need to be appropriately compensated if they are to stay in the profession. While superintendents across the state would no doubt be thrilled to be able to offer a more competitive [living wage](#) salary to new and current teachers, this will not be fully possible until districts receive more investment from the state.

Without a significant increase in teacher pay, we can expect the teacher shortage to worsen in years to come. A recent [survey](#) by the National Education Association showed that 55% of educators are considering quitting or retiring earlier than expected. Participants [identified](#) raising teacher salaries and hiring more teachers as the two most important policies for retention, followed by providing mental health and behavioral support for students and hiring additional support staff.

Similarly, a recent [survey](#) by McKinsey & Company showed that nearly a third of K-12 educators are planning to leave their positions in the next year. Teachers in this survey identified “inadequate compensation” and “unsustainable work conditions” as their top two reasons for planning to leave their current roles.

These findings align with broader [educational](#) and [economic](#) policy research, which show that we can counter the exodus from teaching in two major ways: improving educators' working conditions and increasing educator pay. In recognition of this research, increasing teacher pay is central to the first pillar of the [#TeachMaine](#) plan.

Proposals have been floated here and across the country to increase recruitment by [lowering the bar](#) for teacher certification. These proposals aren't backed by research and, as the Portland Press Herald editorial team recently [argued](#), they could worsen educators' working conditions by exacerbating the ongoing devaluation of the teaching profession.

Instead of lowering the bar, we should follow the research and improve pay and working conditions for educators.

[LD 1064](#) would be a significant step toward these goals, and we should consider similar measures to improve the pay of other vital education workers, including educational technicians.

This bill would contribute to our collective efforts to overcome the “teacher pay penalty” and recruit, train, and retain excellent educators in the state of Maine.

Lauren Ware Stark is a Policy Engagement Fellow with the Scholars Strategy Network and an Assistant Professor of Education and Field Placement Director at the University of Maine at Augusta. The opinions and research outlined in this testimony do not necessarily represent the views of the University of Maine at Augusta, the University of Maine System, or any of the author’s other institutional affiliations.

Lauren Stark
Scholars Strategy Network
LD 1064

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