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Testimony of Rep. Mana Abdi introducing
**LD 1748, An Act to Reform the School Budget Referendum Process by Limiting
the Circumstances in Which Referenda Occur**
Before the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs

Good afternoon Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan and honorable members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs. My name is Mana Abdi, and I represent House District 95, which includes a portion of Lewiston. I am here before you today to present **LD 1748, An Act to Reform the School Budget Referendum Process by Limiting the Circumstances in Which Referenda Occur** for your consideration.

This is undeniably a niche and wonky issue, but an important one that would strengthen Maine's democracy while saving taxpayer money.

Currently, Maine law requires that the budgets of school administrative districts, regional school units and community schools are subject to a budget validation referendum process unless the voters in the school unit vote to suspend the referendum requirement. The voters can suspend the requirement for periods of three years.

This bill replaces that process.

Under LD 1748, a budget validation referendum is only required if a written petition, signed by at least 20% of the number of voters voting in the last gubernatorial election in the municipalities in the school administrative unit, is filed with the unit's school board within 30 days of the approval of the budget at a budget meeting.

Rather than insisting that every school budget be subject to a referendum, Maine should adopt a system whereby school budget referenda are only triggered if petitions representing 20% of the electorate in the school district are filed within 30 days of final passage of the school budget.

The reason for this is simple: school budgets are, at present, the only budgets subject to voter approval by state law.

This unnecessary, additional step creates uncertainty in school budgeting, undermines the authority of elected school boards and wastes taxpayer money administering pointless elections few people bother to participate in. Democratic accountability over budgets best comes from the popular election of school board members, not through arcane budget votes few people are even aware of.

Take my hometown of Lewiston, for example:

- In 2022, 1.3% of voters turned out to vote in the school budget referendum
- In 2021, the number was 2%
- In 2019, it was 2.3%
- In 2018, it was 4.3 percent

These numbers, in Maine's second-largest city, conclusively demonstrate that school budget referenda often don't actually represent the will of any more than a tiny fraction of the people in the community. It is far better to allow the elected officials to determine school budgets, as is done for city budgets, county budgets and the state budget. After all, if voters don't like what their school board members are doing, they can elect members better suited to serve their community.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.