

January 26, 2021

Testimony Neither For Nor Against LD 42/The Supplemental Budget

Senator Breen, Representative Pierce, and esteemed members of the Appropriations and Financial Affairs Committee,

My name is Grace Leavitt. I am a Spanish teacher on leave from Greely High School while serving as President of the Maine Education Association. The MEA has nearly 24,000 members—faculty and staff in our pre-K-12 public schools, our institutions of higher education, and many dedicated retired educators.

I am speaking on behalf of these members neither for nor against the Governor’s proposed supplemental budget.

I know all of you are aware of the challenges our educators have been facing since last March—facing and dealing with incredibly well! Our educators are on the front lines as across the state we are providing in-person learning whenever possible to do so safely. Unfortunately, there are a growing number of instances when it is not possible to do this—the number of cases in our state has gone from a few dozen to consistently in the hundreds. And there have been positive cases in our schools as well. In the responses to a survey we did just prior to the December break, 87% of our members reported there has been at least one positive case in their school. And that was a month ago—since then, we have seen those numbers climb. This is causing many faculty and staff to have to quarantine as they are identified as ‘close contacts’ of someone who has tested positive for the virus, or if they test positive themselves, and in some cases, the whole school or district is having to transition to remote instruction when there are not enough staff available to have in-person learning. In addition, some staff have had to be home when their young child has had to quarantine due to being a close contact, or when their young child attends another school and that school has had to move to remote instruction due to cases in their school or district. In just the past few weeks, I have heard from members who are quarantining for their third time. In some instances, our educators are able to do their work remotely—but in other instances, they cannot or may even not be allowed to do so. They are then using what sick leave they might still have, depleting this so there would be none if they themselves are then sick or have to quarantine yet again, and if they have no leave remaining, they are unable to be paid. This also creates a situation where someone might feel they have to report for work when they really should stay home, to keep all safe, but are otherwise faced with a loss of income they need.

Last March, when it was first becoming apparent that the crisis would be longer than anyone had initially thought, the Governor issued an Executive Order stating that all would be paid during the remainder of the school year, whether they could be in the buildings working, working remotely, or not able to do either, given the circumstances—a huge relief to many educators.

Then as the pandemic continued, even worsened, there was relief in the federal legislation—the Families First Coronavirus Relief Act (FFCRA)—which provided up to 10 days, or two weeks, of paid leave for individuals with COVID, COVID symptoms, or those who were forced to quarantine due to COVID exposure (as well as 2/3rd pay if

the leave was due to childcare concerns). However, these leave provisions for the public sector expired on December 31st. These provisions definitely helped keep our schools safer. They helped, especially our hourly school employees, to know they could continue to do what helps to keep all safe and stay home when they needed to.

There are some districts that are doing the right thing, even now that FFCRA leaves have expired, and they are making sure everyone is paid and employees are supported, helping to keep all safe. But this is inconsistent across the state—not all districts are doing this, which is becoming a growing concern, as, once again, the number of cases continues to be high and the number of times people are having to quarantine continues to increase.

I need to be sure you understand that MEA very much appreciates that the Governor's proposed supplemental budget does not cut funding to schools, especially given the challenges we are all facing. But we are concerned about increased contributions to the Rainy Day Fund when educators in our state are in a situation where their own leave time is dwindling or being depleted, and educators may see periods of no pay due to quarantines and this pandemic.

Our educators are dedicated to our students—they have been working so hard in the most difficult situations, and they continue to do so. They are experiencing enormous levels of stress, as are we all, I know. But the added stress and worry of losing income--and in many cases these educators are hourly wage earners who may be paid the least of all in our districts—add enormously to that stress. Ensuring that they are paid, as happened last spring, is one way to alleviate at least one of the causes of that stress. If not, we risk losing educators—and we have already seen a sharp increase in shortages in the education workforce.

The very least we could do is to make sure they are getting the leave they need to care for themselves, their families, and also their community. Indeed, if I were speaking for all workers, I would hope we could do this for everyone. As President of MEA, I urge you to help find a solution in the supplemental budget, however this might best be solved, to do this for our educators so that they can continue to provide what our students need and deserve. We are hoping to work with you on what that solution could be, whether it is another round of paid leave for all educators who have COVID, COVID symptoms or need to quarantine much like the FFCRA leave provisions passed by Congress and signed by the President last spring, or passing a provision similar to the Governor's Executive Order last March that required school districts to pay all employees as if the school year were not being interrupted. Whatever might help, we hope we can work with you all to develop a solution.

Thank you for your time, and I am glad to try to answer any questions.

Grace Leavitt
President, Maine Education Association

gleavitt@maineea.org

35 Community Drive Augusta, ME 04330-8005 207-622-5866 800-452-8709 207-632-2129 fax www.mainea.org