



THE MAINE HERITAGE POLICY CENTER

## **Testimony regarding L.D.'s 1799, 1800, and 1801**

**Stephen Bowen**

**The Maine Heritage Policy Center**

**Senator Alfond, Representative Sutherland, men and women of the Committee,**

My name is Stephen Bowen and I direct the Center for Education Excellence at The Maine Heritage Policy Center, a public policy research organization based in Portland. I come before you today to testify in opposition to all three of these bills, not because I think what they seek to accomplish is necessarily wrong, but because in the context of the very real competition for a federal Race to the Top grant, the bills before you don't do nearly enough. Not even close.

Under the Race to the Top program, \$4.3 billion is being made available to states to help them fund promising education reforms. The catch is that this is a competitive grant program, and states across the nation have responded by passing comprehensive reform legislation that moves their states forward in a dramatic fashion.

I have with me, for instance, a copy of the Race to the Top legislation that was passed in the state of Michigan. In five separate bills totaling more than 50 pages, Michigan lawmakers expanded the number charter schools in the state, empowered the state to intervene in the lowest-performing schools, tightened certification requirements for school administrators, required annual evaluations of teachers and administrators using data on student growth, created alternative routes to teacher certification and raised the state's dropout age.

I also have with me the Race to the Top legislation passed by our neighbors in Massachusetts. This 41-page bill expands the number of charter schools in Massachusetts, and gives the state broad powers to intervene in chronically failing schools, including empowering district superintendents to unilaterally amend elements of the collective bargaining agreements in such schools in order to make the staffing changes needed to turn them around.

There are many more examples of states adopting comprehensive Race to the Top legislation, but rather than bore you with details on all of them, I would direct your attention to a short research piece by Democrats for Education Reform, which I have included with my testimony. It describes the legislative changes adopted in Michigan and Illinois as well as a half-dozen other states with which we will compete for a Race to the Top grant. All of their efforts are more extensive, more ambitious, and far more likely to have a transformational effect on students and schools than what you have before you today.

And what do you have before you today? You have three bills that, minus the emergency enactor language, would barely cover three pages and would, in my opinion, do almost nothing to improve Maine's competitiveness for a Race to the Top grant.

I would direct your attention to the Race to the Top points overview, which I have included with my testimony and which comes directly from the Race to the Top application.

138 of the 500 points available on the Race to the Top application are related to "Great Teachers and Leaders." That is more points than are available in any other section of the application. LD 1799 repeals language that forbids the use of data from the state assessment system in teacher evaluations, but makes no other substantive changes. What is Maine doing to create "alternate routes to teacher certification" as suggested in the Race to the Top application? Nothing. What are we doing to see to it that "highly effective teachers and principals" are given "opportunities for additional compensation"? Nothing. What are we doing to "ensure the equitable distribution of effective teachers"? Nothing. What are we doing to "improve the effectiveness of teacher and principal preparation programs"? Nothing.

47 of the 500 points available on the Race to the Top application are related to "Data systems to support instruction." LD 1800 adds 25 meaningless words to state statute, and that is it. The bill simply says that Maine's Learning Results "may" include standards that are developed in common with other states, which is something I'm pretty sure we could have done anyway. What are we doing to "implement a statewide longitudinal data system that includes all the America COMPETES Act elements," including connecting student performance to individual teachers in the data system? Nothing. What are we doing to "ensure that data from the longitudinal data system is accessible" to "key stakeholders" such as parents and community members? Nothing. What are we doing to ensure that this data is actually used to "improve instruction"? Nothing.

40 of the 500 points available on the Race to the Top application are related to "ensuring successful conditions for high-performing charter schools and other innovative schools." This committee knows very well that Maine is one of only 11 states without charter schools, but the so-called "innovative schools" that LD 1801 proposes to create barely meet the criteria for "autonomous innovative public schools" as defined by the Race to the Top application. In the application, such schools are defined as "open enrollment public schools that, in return for increased accountability for student achievement, have the flexibility and authority to define their instructional models and associated curriculum; select and replace staff; implement new structures and formats for the school day or year; and control their budgets." The schools LD 1801 would create are not autonomous (as they are run exclusively by existing school districts), have flexibility that is highly limited by existing state law (with which they must comply), and have no statutory authority over their own budgets. Again, we are competing against 39 other states that have charter schools. I find it hard to believe that legislation like this will move us any closer winning to a Race to the Top grant.

What may be most disappointing about these bills, though, is what is not there. What are we doing to "intervene in chronically underperforming schools"? What are we doing to provide "high quality professional development" to our teachers and school administrators? What are we

doing to place added emphasis on instruction in the STEM fields? What are we doing to develop a “systemic approach” to education reform generally? All of these are specifically mentioned in the Race to the Top application, yet these three bills make no mention of them. “Turning around the Lowest-Achieving Schools” is worth 50 points on the Race to the Top application, yet we are taking no statutory action whatsoever in that area.

I have to tell you that knowing what the other states have put forward for Race to the Top legislation, I was speechless when I saw these three bills. Maine could be in the running for as much as \$75 million from this grant program, we’ve known about it for a year, and yet these three bills are what we have in front of us with only weeks left in the legislative session and the grant application due in June.

Given all this, let me leave you with a couple of quick thoughts:

It will be tough for you develop, in a very short period of time, the kind of comprehensive and visionary legislation that these bills should have been, but I am going to encourage you to try.

This is has been a rough legislative session. This committee in particular has spent the bulk its time both this year and last doing crisis management and cleaning up other people’s messes. From district reorganization to the school funding formula to the budget shortfall, much of your time has been consumed trying to apply fixes to problems you had no hand in creating.

The Race to the Top grant, though, gives this committee the opportunity to makes its mark on Maine’s schools. You have the opportunity to rework our data and information systems. You have the opportunity to re-imagine how we attract, train, certify, support and compensate our teachers and school administrators. You have the opportunity to take aggressive actions to intervene in chronically underperforming schools, to give our school and community leaders the flexibility they need to make their schools better, and to provide students and families with more educational options, including charter schools.

The irony is not lost on me that I stand here representing the state’s leading free market organization encouraging you to boldly embrace President Obama’s education reform agenda. That is what I am doing, though, because we as a state are being presented with a unique opportunity to make our schools better.

Therefore, I strongly encourage this committee to aim high, to be bold, and to commit itself to significantly amending these bills in order to take full advantage of this opportunity to make Maine a leader in education reform and make Maine’s schools the best in the nation.

I thank you for your time, and I am happy to answer any questions.