

Floor Remarks
U.S. Senator Susan Collins
Educational Opportunity and Success Act and Success for Rural Students and Communities Act
March 22, 2021

Helping students achieve their education and career goals has long been a priority for me. I come to the floor today to introduce two bipartisan bills—both are aimed at helping students pursue higher education, complete their degrees, and have satisfying work lives.

Madam President, prior to my election to the Senate, I worked at Husson University in Bangor, Maine. Husson students, for the most part, are first-generation college students. They are the first in their families to take that step of pursuing higher education. I saw firsthand the importance of several federal initiatives: Pell grants, work study, and TRIO, programs that are specifically aimed at students whose families have little or no experience at all with higher education.

Madam President, the first bill that I'm introducing today is the *Educational Opportunity and Success Act*. It would reauthorize and strengthen the federal TRIO programs. I've been a longtime champion of TRIO. It helps students prepare for, succeed in, and graduate from college or other institutions of higher learning. I'd like to thank Senators Tester, Capito, and Baldwin for joining me as original co-sponsors.

Congress created the TRIO programs because it recognized that low-income, first-generation college students often face significant obstacles to accessing and completing higher education. Our bipartisan bill would reauthorize these programs, modestly increase grant sizes, and make it easier for administrators to reach students that would benefit from TRIO. The bill also updates the way that the programs are evaluated and streamlines the application process.

The bill would also increase the small stipend for Upward Bound students. Upward Bound is one of the TRIO programs. These stipends make their college visits more accessible. These visits are often the first time that these young people have experienced a college campus. It would create a new stipend for veterans participating in the Veterans Upward Bound program.

The *Educational Opportunity and Success Act* would also institute a common sense process for correcting TRIO applications that have minor errors. Now, let me give you a concrete example, Madam President. In 2017, the Department of Education initially rejected dozens of Upward Bound applications based on arbitrary, non-substantive formatting criteria such as line spacing or font size irregularities. The department lost sight of the goal of serving students and instead focused on whether the formatting criteria were followed correctly.

One of these applications was from the University of Maine at Presque Isle. It had used one and a half spacing instead of double spacing in text appearing in graphics in just two of the application's 65 pages. Imagine, Madam President, that the application was not considered on its

merits at all because of a spacing error that accompanies graphics on two pages of a 65 page application.

The department's bureaucratic decision would have denied 960 disadvantaged Maine high school students from the chance of fulfilling their academic potential. After many months of advocacy, I worked with the Department of Education, I kept pressing the department, and I worked with my Appropriations colleagues to reverse this ill-conceived policy. But it took federal legislation to move the department from its bureaucratic decision which affected potentially 960 students in Northern Maine. It affected students that were in other high schools as well across this country. I remember Montana was one of those that was affected. The University of Maine at Presque Isle ultimately received its TRIO grant to serve those students. The bill that we're introducing today would prevent the Department of Education from rejecting applications simply on the basis of formatting criteria.

This is a common sense reform that will prevent unnecessary bureaucratic obstacles in the future. We should be making sure that federal funds get out the door efficiently and focus on the students they are meant to serve.

Madam President, I've met so many Maine TRIO students and have loved learning about their dreams for the future. One of them is a priest who serves in Skowhegan, Maine. Neither of his parents went beyond the eighth grade. He, through the encouragement of the Upward Bound program, went to Dartmouth and then on to the seminary and is now a priest.

Let me tell you about another outstanding individual, Jason Judd. Jason grew up in Athens, Maine, a very small community. Jason said, "I knew that education was the only way I could escape poverty. Upward Bound taught me how to be successful in education and encouraged me to pursue my passions."

Jason is a first-generation college graduate. With the support of Upward Bound, he went to the University of Maine at Farmington and earned his bachelor's degree. He chose to go into school administration. He received his master's degree from the University of Southern Maine in educational leadership and earned his doctorate from Northeastern University in organizational leadership studies.

Now Madam President, Jason is the Executive Director of Educate Maine where he works to improve education in our state. TRIO put him on the path to success. And now Jason supports students just like himself across the State of Maine. A real success story that TRIO helped make possible. The TRIO programs have changed the lives of first-generation students across Maine and the country, opening the doors to the opportunities of higher education. I would ask all of my colleagues to support this important legislation to extend and improve the TRIO programs.

Madam President, the second bill I'm introducing today is the *Success for Rural Students and Communities Act*. This bill would help students living in rural areas achieve their higher education goals and connect them with economic opportunities in their communities. I want to thank Senators Hassan, Cornyn, and Smith for introducing this legislation with me.

According to census data, two out of three Maine schools are in rural communities and more than half of Maine's students attend these schools. Ninety percent of Maine's students graduate from high school. That's great! But only 62 percent enroll in some kind of higher education right away.

Unfortunately, an even lower percentage of Maine students go on to actually earn a degree or a credential. That often leaves them with student debts, but without the credential or degree that they need. Maine's experience is not unique. Rural students tend to graduate from high school at higher rates than their peers in urban districts and at about the same rate as their suburban peers. But fewer rural graduates enroll in college upon graduation than their urban and suburban counterparts. Our bill would authorize \$60 million for demonstration grants to create community partnerships that help rural students access college and career pathways.

Community stakeholders such as local school districts, colleges, universities, regional economic development entities, and community organizations would join together to help students and their families navigate higher education opportunities and address barriers that too often stand in the way to their achievement.

For example, partnerships could work together to expose students to college campuses, courses, programs, and internships. They could focus on enrollment and completion rates of rural, nontraditional students who may find that they need additional credentials or who once began but did not finish post-secondary education.

Today, Madam President, as you well know, many employers require something more than a high school diploma—perhaps a college degree, a skilled trade credential, or professional certificate. Our bill would encourage schools and local employers to work together to put students on pathways into the high-demand jobs available where they want to live. Several strategies could be developed and tested, including work-based learning opportunities like apprenticeships, internships, and a sequence of courses on the path to a certain skill or job.

In Northern Maine, the Aroostook Aspirations Initiative is using this model successfully to help put students on pathways to academic and career success. The Initiative collaborates with local businesses and with colleges and universities to offer seminars that guide students throughout their education. Students can team up with employers in the area through internships that give them the experience and the careers they wish to pursue.

Last year, I met with a student from Aroostook County named Katelyn Amero, who came to Washington to talk about her career goals.

Katelyn hopes to pursue a career in medicine. In 2019, Katelyn participated in the Emerging Rural Leaders program at the University of Chicago, which provides opportunities for rural high school students to enroll in college courses over the summer months. That program has helped put her on the path to becoming a physician. The *Success for Rural Students and Communities Act* would support dynamic programs such as the Emerging Rural Leaders program

and the Aroostook Aspirations Initiative. It would encourage other communities to innovate in similar ways.

Madam President, both bills I'm introducing today would provide critical supports to students across the country who are seeking to achieve their college and career dreams. I urge my colleagues to support both of these bills.

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