



**Testimony on Behalf of the University of Maine System**  
**Provided by Jamie Pratt, Chair and Associate Professor, University of Southern Maine**  
**Department of Educational and School Psychology**  
**In Support of LD 829, *An Act to Improve Behavioral Health Support for Students in Public Schools (As Amended)***  
**March 28, 2023**

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan, and Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Educational and Cultural Affairs:

On behalf of the University of Maine System and as members of the faculty of the University of Southern Maine's Department of Educational and School Psychology, we write in support of LD 829, as amended by the sponsor, Rep. Lydia Crafts. As graduate faculty in Maine's only school psychology and applied behavior analysis training programs, we fully support legislation like this to increase PK-12 students' access to comprehensive school-based mental and behavioral health services.

Maine's children need support.

Data from the National Survey of Children's Health in 2019-2020 showed that 29% of Maine children between the ages of 3 and 17 years had at least one emotional, behavioral, or developmental condition<sup>1</sup>. Given that children with mental and behavioral health conditions experience increased risk for academic underachievement, social difficulties, suspension, expulsion, and school dropout, there is a pressing need for policy and investment to improve children's access to quality care<sup>2</sup>. The provision of comprehensive mental and behavioral health services within the school setting mitigates multiple access barriers and therefore must be a priority<sup>3</sup>. In alignment with the positions of the National Association of School Psychologists and the Maine Department of Education (DOE), we believe that effective and equitable school-based mental and behavioral services must be (a) integrated within multitiered systems of support and (b) supported by sufficient numbers of qualified mental and behavioral health professionals<sup>4,5</sup>.

Qualified school-based mental health providers include state-credentialed school counselors, school psychologists, school social workers, and other mental health clinicians. We support the focus of LD 829 on ensuring appropriate ratios of clinical mental health providers and school psychologists. School psychologists are trained to support prevention-focused mental and behavioral health initiatives (e.g., social-emotional learning, positive behavioral interventions and supports, violence prevention, and trauma-informed school programs), assist with mental and behavioral health screening, conduct comprehensive psychological evaluations and functional behavior assessments, consult with teachers and families on mental health and behavior support strategies, and provide direct therapeutic services. Research suggests that a ratio of one school psychologist to every 500 students is needed for school psychologists to provide these critical mental and behavioral health services; however, the ratio of school psychologists to students in Maine is currently 1:1,501<sup>6</sup>.

With support from the Maine DOE and grant funding awarded by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, USM is significantly increasing enrollments in our specialist and doctoral-level school psychology programs to address state shortages. Forty-six students are currently matriculated in USM's school psychology programs, and we have extended admissions offers to 18 students for Fall 2023.

Our ongoing collaborative project with the Maine DOE specifically aims to recruit, train, and retain highly qualified school psychologists within the state. This project supports a clinical faculty member responsible for establishing partnerships with local schools for field-based school psychology training, providing supervision to school psychology students during practicum and internship, and training current school psychologists in evidence-based clinical supervision practices.

We also are collaborating with the Maine DOE and local schools to implement the *Maine School Psychology: Collaborative Affiliations in Rural Education* (Maine School Psychology CAREs) project. This project aims to increase the number of credentialed school psychologists in rural, high-needs schools in Maine who reflect the diverse backgrounds of students within those communities and are uniquely qualified to provide effective mental and behavioral health services. We urge this Committee to support LD 829 to establish appropriate practice ratios for school psychologists and thereby advance these efforts.

We also appreciate LD 829's recognition of the value of preparing educators with expertise in applied behavior analysis (ABA). ABA underlies the principles and practices of positive behavior interventions and supports (PBIS), and Board Certified Behavior Analysts (BCBAs) are uniquely prepared to provide assessment, intervention, and consultation services to promote children's skill development and address challenging behaviors that interfere with learning. ABA approaches therefore hold promise for reducing exclusionary disciplinary practices in schools, and ABA professionals play a key role in supporting educators with effective classroom behavior management<sup>7</sup>. Our department currently offers graduate certificate and master's degree programs to support the preparation of BCBAs, and we are committed to expanding ABA services in Maine schools.

If adequate supplemental funding is provided, above the amounts already requested by UMS and recommended by the majority of this Committee to support ongoing university operations and expand affordable access to public postsecondary education and research, USM welcomes the opportunity to collaborate with the Maine DOE to implement a pilot project that aims to prepare educators with expertise in ABA. We are available to participate in subsequent work sessions to identify an approach that will be maximally impactful.

Respectfully submitted,

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<sup>1</sup> Annie E. Casey Foundation (2022). *Kids count data center*. <https://datacenter.kidscount.org/data/tables/10668-children-who-have-one-or-more-emotional-behavioral-or-developmental-conditions?loc=21&loct=2#detailed/2/21/true/1769,1696,1648/any/20457,20456>

<sup>2</sup> Youth.gov (n.d). *How mental health disorders affect youth*. Retrieved March 28, 2023, from <https://youth.gov/youth-topics/youth-mental-health/how-mental-health-disorders-affect-youth>

<sup>3</sup> National Association of School Psychologists (2015). *The importance of mental and behavioral health services for children and adolescents* [Position statement]. Author.

<sup>4</sup> National Association of School Psychologists (2021b). *School psychologists: Qualified mental health professionals providing child and adolescent mental and behavioral health services* [White paper]. Author.

<sup>5</sup> Maine Department of Education (n.d). *School-based mental health supports*. Retrieved March 28, 2023, from <https://www.maine.gov/doe/schools/safeschools/counseling>

<sup>6</sup> National Association of School Psychologists (2023, March). *State shortages dashboard*. <https://www.nasponline.org/about-school-psychology/state-shortages-data-dashboard>

<sup>7</sup> Allday, R. A., Burt, J. L., & Haggard, K. N. (2021). Considering a function-based approach for reducing disproportional disciplinary practices. *Preventing School Failure: Alternative Education for Children and Youth*, 65(4), 332-342. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1045988X.2021.1937023>