

TESTIMONY OF MICHAEL KEBEDE, Esq.

LD 829 – Ought to Pass

**An Act to Improve Behavioral Health Support
for Students in Public Schools**

Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs

March 14, 2023

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs, greetings. My name is Michael Kebede, and I am policy counsel for the American Civil Liberties Union of Maine, a statewide organization committed to advancing and preserving civil liberties guaranteed by the Maine and U.S. Constitutions through advocacy, education, and litigation. On behalf of our members, we urge you to support this bill because it would help Maine address its youth mental health crisis.

If passed, this bill would require that school social workers spend at least 80% of their time providing direct services to students, that every school administrative unit employ someone who has completed a national board-certified assistant behavior analyst training program, that the state must pay the costs of this training, and that for the purpose of the calculation of salary and benefit costs in the school funding formula, the elementary school and middle school level student-to-guidance staff ratio is decreased to 250-to-1.

Maine’s children are facing a crisis. They walk into schools and classrooms burdened by a barrage of social, emotional, and psychological issues. The pandemic has only deepened this crisis. Today’s school children are experiencing record levels of depression and anxiety alongside multiple forms of trauma. School counselors and social workers are a crucial part of the solution to this crisis.¹ They assist with the various barriers such as poverty, inadequate healthcare, community violence, homelessness, domestic violence, and other issues that impact students and their performance in school. School social workers also facilitate

¹ *Cops and No Counselors How the Lack of School Mental Health Staff Is Harming Students*, ACLU, 2019, available at <https://www.aclu.org/report/cops-and-no-counselors>.

innovative prevention and intervention programs in areas like substance use, bullying, anger management, and more.

According to the American School Counselor Association (“ASCA”), Maine employs 581 school counselors to serve 172,455 students.² That works out to a student-to-counselor ratio of 297-to-1, which falls short of the ASCA’s recommended ratio of 250-to-1. Compare this with New Hampshire’s student-to-counselor ratio of 208-to-1 and Vermont’s ratio of 186-to-1.³ According to the Hopeful Futures Campaign, the ratio of social workers to students in Maine is even worse, at 1 social worker for every 617 students.⁴

We must invest resources and serious attention to make headway against the mental health, housing and overdose death crises Maine faces. This bill is one way to do just that. We urge you to vote *ought to pass*.

² *Student-to-School-Counselor Ratio 2020-2021*, American School Counselor Association, available at <https://www.schoolcounselor.org/getmedia/238f136e-ec52-4bf2-94b6-f24c39447022/Ratios-20-21-Alpha.pdf>.

³ *Id.*

⁴ *Maine*, Hopeful Futures Campaign, available at <https://hopefulfutures.us/action-maine/>.