



STATE OF MAINE
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
23 STATE HOUSE STATION
AUGUSTA, ME 04333-0023

JANET T. MILLS
GOVERNOR

PENDER MAKIN
COMMISSIONER

January 11, 2024

Senator Rafferty, Co-chair
Representative Brennan, Co-chair
Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan, and Distinguished Members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee:

LD 2002, An Act to Provide Incentives to Schools that Contract for Certain Social Work and Family Therapy Services establishes the ability for school administrative units (SAUs) to contract with certain mental health professionals for mental health services and establishes a grant fund for those SAUs that do contract for mental health services.

The mental health of Maine's young adults and children continues to be of utmost concern and we greatly appreciate the spirit of LD 2002. We believe legislation and policy that strengthens access to school-based mental health services is an important avenue for meeting the needs of Maine students. The funding provided for in the bill will certainly be welcome to many SAUs.

It is important to note that SAUs currently have the ability to contract for mental health services, and many do. The ability for SAUs to continue to be able to do so is vitally important for addressing the mental health needs of Maine students and families. One concern of the Department of Education (DOE) is that by introducing the statutory language proposed in this bill SAUs will inadvertently be limited in the kinds of mental health services they can contract for. The proposed bill is limited to social workers and family therapists. In addition to these types of mental health workers, SAUs are frequently looking for substance, drug, and alcohol mental health professionals among others. We want to make sure that SAUs continue to have the flexibility to contract with the mental health professionals appropriate for their local needs.

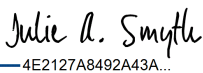
The DOE would like to ensure that the student mental health and wellbeing supports and resources for all schools in Maine continues. With an investment funded through the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act, the DOE was able to increase school-based mental health staff and services through our Expanding Access in School Environments (EASE) Maine program. Through the EASE Maine grants, the Maine DOE will partner with these SAUs to develop and implement whole student-focused strategies to meet the unique needs of each community, increase student access to much-needed mental health services, and recruit, retain, and re-

specialize staff to support the mental health and wellbeing of students, staff, and families. This bill could help us achieve our common goal of enabling SAUs to collaborate with one another and with community organizations, state agencies, and other partners to confront growing mental health needs following the pandemic by increasing the number of highly qualified mental health services providers in schools.

To sustain these efforts, there may be an opportunity to explore the ways in which counselors and other student support staff are accounted for in the Essential Programs and Services (EPS) funding formula. While other components of EPS are being considered for potential further study or revision, we may have an opportunity to reconsider how these supports are addressed in the school funding formula.

Sincerely,

DocuSigned by:

Handwritten signature of Julie D. Smyth in black ink.

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Julie Smyth

Director, Office of School and Student Supports

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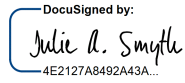
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