

Written Testimony for LD 165

March 2, 2025

Dear Representatives, Tuell, Carlow, Mingo, Poirier, Strout, and Woodsome and Senator Cryway and the members of the Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs:

I am **Roy Ulrickson III, LCSW**, a father of a special needs child and former paraprofessional in the public-school setting. I am seriously concerned regarding the proposed language in **LD 165: An Act to Allow School Boards to Expel or Suspend Students Regardless of Grade Level**.

My son was diagnosed with Autism at age 3 in part by exhibiting disruptive behavior at his preschool. He often struggled in the public-school setting. This was especially true in second grade when he was frequently removed from the classroom. The school's contention was that he was not suitable for inclusion in the setting. We strongly disagreed with this conclusion. After months of advocacy from me and his mother, a consultant was engaged to determine the underlying issues. He determined that my son's behavior was a reaction to the very old fluorescent lights in his classroom. After they installed diffusers in the lights, my son was able to stay in the classroom nearly 100% of the time.

I could share dozens of similar stories regarding students that I supported as an educational technician. I engaged in this work prior to and during my Master of Social Work program at the University of Maine. I supported several students with special and behavioral needs from kindergarten through 5th grade who had a history of suspensions. As a LCSW, I have provided in-home family therapy with children ages 3 to 16. Many of these children experienced difficulties at school as well as in the home.

In nearly every case, the reason for the mental health and behavioral challenges that led to disruptive behaviors was **trauma**. Adverse childhood Experiences (ACEs) include verbal, emotional, physical and sexual abuse and neglect. Common symptoms of early childhood trauma as a result of this abuse include:

- Acting out in social situations
- Imitating the traumatic event
- Being verbally abusive
- Poor impulse control
- Self-destructive behavior
- Oppositional behavior
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Using punitive approaches to these behaviors **do not** do anything to help these children. They only lead to re-traumatization!

According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, each year, nearly 5 million children in the U.S. are suspended or expelled from school. As we learned during the COVID pandemic, being away from school is harmful for kids. Just like adults, they need a sense of belonging to stay healthy and balanced. It is this lack of sense of belonging that leads to depression and other mental health challenges. New research from the University of Arkansas found this type of school discipline can lead to significantly higher rates of depression through adolescence and into early adulthood. Other research suggests that students that experience school absenteeism have a 20% increase in suicidal ideation and a 37% increase in self-harm behaviors. Ostracizing children, especially at a young age, can result in severe mental and physical, health problems.

Additional and more concerning data are the populations that are unfairly subjective to suspensions and expulsions. American Academy of Pediatrics research indicates the following populations are at especially high risk of being removed from public schools:

- **Male students** account for 70% of all expulsions in 2020-2021.
- **Black students and other students of color receive more and longer suspensions as compared to white students who exhibit the same behaviors.**
- **Native American students** were suspended or expelled 2.4 to 4 times more often than their white peers.
- **Students with disabilities**, especially those with [ADHD](#), autism, intellectual disabilities and emotional disturbances.
- **Students who identify as LGBTQ**

This research confirms my anecdotal evidence, that children from low-income families or those experiencing [serious childhood trauma](#) are more likely to be suspended or expelled from school. NIH research demonstrated that individuals who experienced suspension are 878% more likely to experience incarceration compared to individuals who were never suspended. Additionally, individuals expelled from school are more likely to face difficulties finding stable employment due to lack of qualifications and potential negative perceptions from employers related to their disciplinary history. As a result of lower income, these individuals may contribute less to tax revenue and utilize social services at a much higher rate. Individuals who have experienced school suspension or expulsion also have significantly higher rates of substance use.

Decades of research have proven the significant adverse effects on the personal, social, economic lives of individuals who experienced school suspensions and expulsions. Dozens of states have initiated alternative approaches such as **trauma-informed** framework for understanding the difficulties a child faces outside school and putting negative behavior in perspective. Restorative practices that help students see the impact of their actions, requiring them to make things right with anyone they have harmed. Anti-bias training helps teachers and staff avoid punishing some children more harshly than others.

The proposed language in LD 165 is a move in the wrong direction. Expanding the ability of schools to suspend or expel students at even younger ages is misguided and short-sighted. Punitive approaches with children further alienate a population who often experience trauma or discrimination from a very young

age. There are literally **zero** benefits to this proposed legislation. Our teachers, schools and students deserve better!

Sincerely,
Roy Ulrickson III, LCSW
Father of Roy “Andrew” Ulrickson IV and Thomas Ulrickson
Autism Society of Maine Treasurer