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LD 165

LD 165: An Act to Allow School Boards to Expel or Suspend Students Regardless of Grade Level.

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I have served Maine school public education for the last 38 years, the last 28 years as an elementary principal in a myriad of school settings. The students attending Maine Schools have changed dramatically over the last decade with dramatic swings in social-emotional, behavioral and academic skills and abilities. In this twenty-first century, we are inundated with a multitude of students presenting with increased adverse childhood experience; such as generational poverty, trauma, and substance abuse. The majority of students attending school are requiring additional support for social emotional development, behavioral expectations and academic as well as intellectual deficits. In sum, school is now a place for whole student development and programming much of which includes behavioral supports due to persistent and now common behavioral and safety concerns.

The inability to send a student home for more than three days to develop a safety plan has had significant negative impacts on our school environment. When a student stays in school when they continue to present as highly dysregulated and unsafe, it requires additional “trained” support to ensure safety for all. It is not uncommon for individuals (some as young as five and six) requiring 2:1 and 3:1 support in an attempt to keep them and staff safe. This takes away from the trained support other students qualify for and require for success in a less restrictive environment. Further, understaffing occurs due to student inflicted injuries and social emotional burnout due to the intensity of the behaviors exhibited, which in a number of cases exceed our skill set for safety, instruction, and therapy. Because we sometimes struggle to meet immediate safety concerns, increased disruptions in the classroom and a compromised learning environment occur for students across educational settings.

Traditional punitive measures, such as removing recess privileges, have been shown to be less effective in promoting positive behavior. Instead, restorative practices focus on repairing harm and restoring relationships within the school community. These practices involve all stakeholders in addressing behavioral issues, fostering accountability, and building a supportive environment. Implementing restorative justice has been associated with improved classroom climate, increased student engagement, and a reduction in bullying incidents. We find that the non-instructional time of recess (which often triggers the negative behaviors) is an efficient and effective time to employ restorative practices and therapies in order to grow student skill sets and make repairs. Regaining authority that has been diminished by legislation since the 130th legislature is crucial for effective school leadership. Having the autonomy to make decisions tailored to the needs of students, staff, and the school community enables leaders to implement strategies that address specific challenges. This flexibility can lead to a more responsive and adaptive educational environment, ultimately benefiting student outcomes.

Empowering educators to make decisions that directly affect students' well-being and behavior can lead to a more disciplined and respectful school culture. When students understand that certain behaviors have clear consequences, it reinforces the importance of personal responsibility and respect for the school community. This also sends the message to the multiple victims, namely classmates, that adults are in control and are addressing their safety and well being.

The increasing demands of managing behavioral issues and the multitude of mental health issues of today's students, coupled with limited support and extensive mandated reporting requirements, can significantly hinder an educator's ability to focus on instructional leadership. This imbalance not only affects the quality of education but also contributes to educator burnout, whether it be education technicians, teachers, specialists or principals. Addressing behavioral challenges effectively requires adequate support systems and resources to ensure that educators

can fulfill both their teaching and leadership roles effectively.

While the goal is always to keep students in school, there are instances where sending a student home is in the best interest of the individual and the broader school community. Such decisions should be made thoughtfully, considering the safety and well-being of all students. Further, adequate time for more thorough planning provides schools crucial collaboration with guardians as well as applicable outside resources and supports in the development and Implementation of a safety plan. This gives the team the necessary time to address underlying issues and develop strategies for reintegration, contributing to a safer and more supportive school environment for all.

In summary, balancing authority, restorative practices, and effective behavior management strategies is essential for fostering a positive and productive educational environment. By addressing behavioral issues proactively and supporting educators, schools can enhance student well-being and academic success.