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Count Me In
LD 165

Testimony Regarding LD 165: The Impact of Exclusionary Discipline on Attendance and Student Engagement

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As an organization dedicated to supporting schools in improving student attendance through building positive connections, monitoring data, and implementing collaborative, evidence-based interventions, we have concerns regarding the proposed amendments to Maine's school discipline policies under LD 165. Our work has demonstrated that fostering supportive school environments and addressing the root causes of absenteeism lead to improved student outcomes. The expansion of exclusionary discipline practices threatens to undermine these efforts by increasing absenteeism, disengagement, and the long-term criminalization of students.

Research consistently shows that exclusionary discipline leads to increased absenteeism. When students are suspended or expelled, they are removed from the very setting meant to support their academic and social development. Rather than addressing the root causes of behavioral challenges, such policies often exacerbate disengagement, making it less likely that students will return to school ready to learn. This is particularly concerning for students who may already struggle with attendance due to trauma, disabilities, or unmet mental health needs. Once disconnected from school, these students face significant challenges in re-engaging, leading to further academic decline and an increased risk of dropping out altogether.

The foundation of effective education is built on trust and positive relationships between students and educators. The proposed expansion of expulsion for disobedience or disorderly conduct, alongside longer suspension periods for young children, threatens to erode these critical relationships. Research underscores that punitive discipline alienates students, making them feel unwelcome and unsupported. When students perceive school as a punitive environment rather than a place of growth and learning, their willingness to engage meaningfully diminishes. Restorative practices, on the other hand, offer evidence-based alternatives that prioritize accountability while keeping students connected to their school communities.

The overuse of suspensions and expulsions has been directly linked to increased interactions with the juvenile justice system. Students who experience exclusionary discipline are significantly more likely to face incarceration later in life. The proposed amendments to LD 165 risk disproportionately impacting students of color, students with disabilities, and those from low-income backgrounds—groups already overrepresented in both exclusionary school discipline and the criminal justice system. By removing students from the classroom instead of addressing the underlying issues contributing to behavioral challenges, these policies perpetuate cycles of disadvantage rather than breaking them.

Rather than expanding the use of suspensions and expulsions, consider investing in strategies that support students while maintaining a safe and structured school environment. Evidence-based approaches such as restorative justice, trauma-informed practices, and positive behavioral interventions have proven far more effective at reducing disruptive behavior while keeping students engaged in their education. Schools should be equipped with resources to address behavioral challenges proactively, ensuring that students remain in the classroom and receive the support they need to succeed.

For these reasons, we are concerned with the proposed amendments to LD 165 and urge policymakers to prioritize equitable, research-backed approaches to school discipline that keep students in school and engaged in their learning.