

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

My name is **Sophie Creamer**, I use they/them pronouns, and I am a youth member of **Portland Outright**, which has been representing and advocating for Maine's LGBTQ+ youth since 1988. I am testifying today on behalf of myself and other members of Portland Outright **in opposition** to LD 165: An Act to Allow School Boards to Expel or Suspend Students Regardless of Grade Level.

As a member of Portland Outright, I believe that every child in Maine deserves a learning environment that fosters community, exploration, and critical thinking. I believe that children should be given the opportunity to make mistakes and learn from them. A bill like this takes that opportunity away from them.

Studies show that a punitive environment, one that focuses on punishment and exclusion, doesn't actually lead to better educational outcomes. If anything, those conditions lead to significantly worse outcomes because children are unable to make mistakes or learn about their emotions without worrying about possible repercussions. Disciplinary actions like suspensions and expulsions also impact the child's family. Some families of suspended or expelled students report significant financial impact like losing a job, affording attorney's fees, and the increased amount of spending on everyday things like gas and food. There's also the emotional tension that comes with these types of measures. Parents often feel nervous, angry, and stressed because of the strain that comes with this type of discipline.

This doesn't even take into account how much this costs the taxpayers. Creating a punitive school community requires material goods like security cameras, metal detectors, and security and police officers. A school resource officer (SRO) on average costs each individual district \$75,000 to \$100,000 each year. In contrast, the average Ed Tech costs between \$40,000 and \$45,000 each school year.

This response to misbehavior also historically impacts children living in the margins, the most. Around 13% of Maine's children live in poverty, with Washington, Piscataquis, Oxford, and Waldo having the highest rates respectively. This list doesn't include the three counties that reported increasing rates within the last three years. Nor does this framework account for Black and Indigenous children – who are more likely to be criminalized because of biases not yet addressed in our schools. Nor does this allot for disabled children, whose needs and disabilities are misinterpreted as petulance and misbehavior.

I would encourage the members of this committee and this legislature to remember that the children that we are talking about are ten years old or younger. With the increase of public PreK in Maine, this bill would allow for school boards to expel or suspend children as young as four. I don't need to be a child psychologist to tell you that that response is developmentally inappropriate. The risk of a child becoming a criminal increases the moment you start treating them as one.

Instead I would suggest that our communities and this committee should start thinking about more beneficial ways we can teach our children. Things like social and emotional learning; investing in after school programs and life-skills programs; peer-to-peer support and mentorships; or even just basic community building that focuses on parent and family engagement. All of these things would increase the relationships that our children have with us and with one another. In a moment where political and social divisions are rampant throughout our country, we need to start focusing on healing and repairing our communities. But the question needs to be asked: does this bill do that?

Thank you,

Sophie Creamer
Youth Member, Portland Outright

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