

I am submitting testimony today in support of LD 21.

My name is Sarah Wilkinson. I am a resident of Old Orchard Beach and an assistant professor in the Special Education Department at the University of Southern Maine where I prepare special educators and conduct research in Maine schools. I hold a Ph.D. in educational psychology from the University of Connecticut. My area of expertise is in behavioral interventions, behavior management, and positive behavior supports. I am providing testimony today as a private citizen, and my view does not necessarily reflect that of the University of Southern Maine.

As proposed, LD 21 is stark improvement over the current regulation. As it stands today, Sec. 1. 20-A MRSA §1001, sub-§15, ¶F focuses on removing students from the classroom for disruptive or violent behavior. I recognize that in extreme cases, particularly in instances when a student is engaging in behavior that can cause injury to themselves, another student, or an educator, removal from a classroom is necessary. Disruptive behavior, however, is not defined by the law. In practice, “disruption” can be interpreted in different ways by different individuals and across different students. What one educator believes is disruptive can look and sound drastically different than what another educator believes is disruptive. For example, one adult may find a student humming a song to be disruptive and another may find a student throwing a desk to be disruptive. As a result, the current language of the law leaves open the possibility that a student is removed from a classroom for engaging in a behavior for which such a response is neither appropriate nor evidence-based.

Passing LD 21 is an important shift in the approach to supporting and managing student behavior. Instead of focusing solely on removal from the setting, LD 21 proposes an evidence-based process that is proactive and preventative in nature. When implemented effectively, threat assessment is designed to recognize potential behaviors early on and provide supports to prevent them from happening. Specifically, threat assessment involves identifying students who may engage in dangerous behavior, assessing the level of risk involved, providing interventions to reduce the likelihood the behavior will occur, and responding as appropriate to a dangerous behavior, including removal from the setting if necessary. The goal is to intervene and provide students with help in advance rather than punishment after behavior escalates to a dangerous level. This process is also multidisciplinary and involves professionals with a range of areas of expertise, allowing a more comprehensive structure to effectively manage intensive student behaviors. It is also worth noting that threat assessment is supported and promoted by professional organizations such as the National Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports and the National Association of School Psychologists, as well as government entities, such as the United States Secret Service and the United States Department of Homeland Security.

Personally and professionally, I urge you to vote in favor of LD 21 so Maine schools will be safer for students, educators, and families.

Sarah Wilkinson
Old Orchard Beach
LD 21

Please see attached testimony.