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I, Tracy Williams, have been an educator for forty three years - 14 years as an elementary teacher, nine years at the University level as an instructor and twenty years now as a school Principal at the Elementary level.

Public schools are changing rapidly in response to changes in families and in our society. Sadly, students are exposed to much more violence and have access to a steady diet of content not appropriate for their age. In turn, there's an increase in physical and verbal aggression, threats, sexualized behavior, disrespect, and disruption in our schools' classrooms. Schools and teachers provide as much support as possible for students exhibiting this kind of behavior as that behavior impacts not just the individual students who exhibit it - but all other children around them. Being a classmate of a violent or aggressive child is not the same as being a classmate to a student who needs additional support for learning.

In some situations, dysregulated children turn over furniture, throw books, computers, chairs and other dangerous items (this occurs in part due to previous legislation, namely Chapter #33). In many of these cases, we evacuate classrooms and learning is delayed or disrupted until students and teachers can re-enter their classroom.

Principals, schools and school boards need to be able to exercise judgement of consequences that range from loss of recess to an appropriate period of suspension, individualized, for what has occurred. Keeping a student from recess, which was declared unacceptable four years ago by legislative statute, has twisted the relationship of behavior to natural and appropriate consequences.

To take away consequences, such as a missed recess, increasingly blurs the lines of right and wrong for other young children. Every day there are children who watch their peers swear at teachers, throw books and furniture around the room, hit, kick and destroy, and later see those same peers out at recess; it doesn't really make sense or feel safe. In most of our families, and I live, there are/should be consequences for actions that hurt others. In school, if those consequences are not carried out during recess - it means that principals must find a way to take children from classroom instructional time, often a time that is vital to their own learning and growth. Again, this just doesn't make sense.

I'm guessing the statute was implemented to ensure students get outside, get fresh air and exercise. These are all things I strongly support and want for all children. I don't want kids to miss recess; they need to be out there having fun! Yet, it is necessary at times, to uphold the peace and usefulness of the school, per Maine Education Law - that principals are charged with upholding. Decades ago, students were kept inside with heads down on desks and other punitive measures from days gone by. This is not what I'm talking about; I'm advocating for having recess time as an option for natural consequences - such as cleaning up a mess you made, writing an apology, doing a written reflection and sometimes engaging in practice or role-playing of a behavior you need to learn.

I see a direct line from the lack of appropriate consequences for problematic behavior to an increase in more highly escalated situations. After all - if there are no consequences that matter, what is the deterrent for kids who are prone to disruption and defiance? Along those lines, the length of suspension must be in the purview of school and district administration and expanded to address extreme circumstances, which are unfortunately happening more and more at the elementary level. I detest the idea of suspension and expulsion, but I'm also charged with ensuring that all young children feel safe at school and can learn without frequent evacuations of their classroom.

In the past three years, our Pre-K - 2nd grade school has had a student threaten a teacher with an actual military style knife, another kicked a child in the head, a different student bit a staff member til she bled and some first graders destroyed bus

seats with a knife. For sake of time, these are just a few examples. And all of this is with a great increase in the amount of time spent in proactive teaching and programming to help children learn appropriate skills. What if we just used more common sense and managed inappropriate behavior in a way that had an impact and reduced the likelihood of it being repeated?

Principals must be able to determine what steps are needed to restore safety and productivity in a classroom and in the school, and every situation is different. We need access to all of the strategies and tools that create a safe and respectful learning environment.

Respectfully submitted,

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