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TO: Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs

FROM: Ben Harris

RE: In Support of LD 696, An Act to Bolster the Maine Teacher Residency Program

DATE: March 13, 2025

Senator Rafferty, Representative Murphy, and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs.

My name is Ben Harris, and I am a principal of an elementary school. I have served as a school administrator for 13 years at both an elementary and a middle school level. I urge you to **vote ought to Pass on LD 165**. This bill will give school administrators the opportunity to keep our schools safe while schools develop plans that allow for the inclusion of all students.

Over the past several years schools, particularly elementary schools, through well intentioned legislation have lost the ability to keep all students safe, in the name of protecting the individual. While there are several parts to the current law on restraints and seclusions, the fact is that schools struggle to protect students because we must allow destructive behaviors until the point that others are in an imminent risk of serious physical injury.

From the Maine DOE Rules on Chapter 33:

**“Unlawful seclusion**

- A. Seclusion may not be used for punitive purposes, staff convenience or to control challenging behavior
- B. Seclusion may not be used to prevent property destruction or disruption of the environment in the absence of an imminent risk of serious physical injury to the student or another person.”

Thus, when a student is throwing computers, chairs, flipping desks, or other forms of challenging behavior, and property destruction, schools spend their time removing other students from the classroom. This adds to teacher stress and requires multiple staff members to stop everything they are doing to assist and wait out the student.

Since the 130<sup>th</sup> legislature enacted the law that no longer allows schools to suspend students which again is a well-intentioned law, I have seen students and staff injured, classrooms destroyed and many students who do not have the same level of behavior challenges stay home from school because they are afraid or worried to return to school because of the trauma they been exposed to. I believe that since these laws took effect in school we have seen an increase in student absenteeism.

I can only think of a couple of occasions when I would have suspended some of our youngest learners. These occasions are only because of extreme behaviors resulting in bodily injury, or substantial property destruction, we, the school, need time to develop a reentry plan, and replace destroyed items so the student in question can return safely to school as well as to help all students feel safe at school. I believe ALL STUDENTS SHOULD FEEL SAFE AT SCHOOL. I believe LD 165 allows school districts the latitude they need to ensure everyone’s safety and increase student attendance.

I urge you to support LD 165 to strengthen our schools, support our teachers, and ensure that all students in Maine are safe at school. Thank you for your time and consideration.