

Testimony for LD 1203  
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April 8, 20205

Divorce. Lack of food. Homelessness. Parental substance abuse. Parents incarcerated. Placement in foster care. History of abuse. History of neglect. Parent has major mental health concerns. Parent has died.

I work at a small PK-8 school in midcoast Maine and I can tell you definitively that of our approximately 250 students, all of these concerns are real for children in our student body. Some of you may be familiar with ACEs - Adverse Childhood Experiences. This longitudinal study showed that early, negative experiences have a direct correlation to negative health, mental health, and behavioral outcomes later in life. Several years ago, we did an informal estimate of how ACEs were affecting our students. We estimated that 27% of our population had experienced 1 or 2 ACEs. 11% of our students had experienced 4 or more of these negative experiences. Those students are at significant risk for mental health issues, substance abuse, and chronic diseases, as well as an increased risk of risky behaviors like suicide attempt. For us, 11% means 27 students, who are most at risk. But for larger districts, such as Bangor, this could mean over 375 students. Portland - 700 students. We hear the headlines that rates of anxiety and depression are up for kids and teenagers. Alcohol and substance misuse remain major concerns. What can we do now?

LD 1203 helps address the immediate needs that Maine students are facing. School-based mental health and behavioral services aim to improve students' social, emotional, and behavioral well-being. They are delivered by trained mental health professionals like school psychologists, counselors, and social workers, and can include individual counseling, group therapy, crisis intervention, and prevention programs.

Providing these services means we are addressing the issues now rather than incurring the costs later. It is about giving youth the skills they need to navigate life's challenges. When students can self-regulate, resolve conflicts, get along with others, and effectively communicate, their overall functioning improves. Schools are tasked with guiding student learning and preparing them for life after school. But to be ready and able to learn, we need to address the social, emotional, and behavioral concerns that they so frequently experience. By providing these necessary services, we are not only addressing immediate needs, but we ultimately are creating a stronger workforce and more resilient communities. I urge you to support LD 1203.