



16 KidsPeace Way, Ellsworth, Maine 04605

Good afternoon, Senator Rafferty, Representative Murphy, and distinguished members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee. My name is Rachel Bousquet, and I am the Executive Director for KidsPeace New England Programs for Children Services, which provides inpatient and outpatient programs for Maine's children. I am pleased to submit testimony in support of "An Act to Provide Grants to Schools That Contract for Behavioral and Mental Health Services."

This critical legislation would establish grants for school-based behavioral and mental health services. As an advocate for student well-being and educational success, I strongly support this bill to address the pressing need for expanded mental health services in our schools. The youth mental health crisis we're experiencing demands immediate and sustainable solutions.

Maine's students are struggling with unprecedented mental health challenges. Schools report rising rates of anxiety, depression, and behavioral issues that directly impact learning and development. However, many schools lack sufficient resources to provide adequate mental health support. And, we all know that in many parts of Maine, school budgets are getting more challenging to pass. Maine children need support; educators need help. This legislation offers a practical solution by providing targeted funding for contracted behavioral and mental health professionals.

The structure of this grant program is especially thoughtful. By providing \$20,000 per clinician (increasing to \$25,000 by 2027), the bill ensures schools can access qualified professionals without diverting funds from other essential educational services. The total allocation of \$3 million per year demonstrates Maine's commitment to addressing this critical need.

I particularly support the provision ensuring that funds cannot be used for services covered by MaineCare, preventing duplication and maximizing the impact of limited resources. Additionally, the requirement that contracted providers not supplant existing school staff protects current investments while expanding capacity.

Early intervention through school-based services is not just compassionate—it's cost-effective. Research consistently shows that addressing mental health issues early reduces the need for more intensive and expensive interventions later. Students with access to mental health support show improved academic performance, better attendance, and reduced disciplinary issues.

This investment will benefit Maine communities for generations. Students who receive appropriate mental health support become more resilient, productive citizens. By addressing these needs now, we reduce future costs across healthcare, criminal justice, and social service systems.

I urge you to support this legislation and make this critical investment in Maine's youth. Our students deserve access to comprehensive mental health services that allow them to thrive academically, socially, and emotionally.

Thank you for your consideration and commitment to Maine's students.

Respectfully Submitted,

Rachel Bousquet

Rachel Bousquet, M.Ed., CAS

KidsPeace New England Executive Director/Superintendent of KidsPeace