



Testimony in Support of LD 858:

An Act to Ensure Behavioral and Mental Health Services Are Available to Students by Providing Grants to Schools That Contract for Those Services

and

Testimony in Support of LD 1203:

An Act to Provide Grants to Schools That Contract for Behavioral and Mental Health Services

Senator Rafferty, Representative Murphy, and Distinguished Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs, my name is Gay Anne McDonald and I am the Executive Director for the Maine Administrators of Services for Children with Disabilities (MADSEC).

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on behalf of the MADSEC Legislative Committee pursuant to LD 858: *An Act to Ensure Behavioral and Mental Health Services Are Available to Students by Providing Grants to Schools That Contract for Those Services* and LD 1203: *An Act to Provide Grants to Schools That Contract for Behavioral and Mental Health Services*.

MADSEC is in strong support of legislation that provides funding to address the significant mental and behavioral needs of students in our schools. While we understand that available state funding is limited and that many pressing issues demand attention, we urge that the behavioral and mental health needs of Maine's students be elevated as a top priority.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated behavioral and mental health needs among students with increased isolation and academic stress that have led to higher rates of depression and anxiety. Disruptions in routines and reduced access to support systems intensified feelings of uncertainty and distress. We are at a critical point for addressing the escalating behavioral and mental health challenges faced by students.

Recent data obtained from the 2023 Maine Integrated Youth Health Survey (MIYHS) which was jointly released by The Maine Department of Education (DOE) and the Maine Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) on Friday, December 15, 2023, underscores the pressing need for enhanced behavioral and mental health services in our schools.

Integrating behavioral health services within schools offers several advantages, including (1) Accessibility: schools provide a convenient location for students to receive services, reducing barriers related to transportation and scheduling; (2) Early Intervention: on-site services facilitate prompt identification and support for emerging mental health issues, preventing escalation; (3) Reduced Stigma: embedding services within the educational environment normalizes seeking help and encourages utilization.

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In closing, the data clearly illustrate the urgent need for enhanced behavioral and mental health services within Maine's schools to support students in need. LD 858 and 1203 will not only improve student well-being but also foster a more conducive learning environment.

MADSEC deeply appreciates the Committee's recognition of the critical need for these services and we respectfully urge you to move LD 858 and 1203 forward. Your leadership is essential in ensuring students—especially those with the most complex needs—receive the services they deserve in the public schools they attend.

Thank you for your consideration and continued support of Maine students.

Respectfully,

Gay Anne McDonald
Executive Director