

Senator Rafferty, Representative Murphy and other members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee,

My name is Rie Larson and I am employed at Brunswick High School as a teacher in an alternative education program. Prior to my current position, I spent the majority of my teaching career as a special education teacher for students with significant mental health diagnoses and autism, who required intensive behavioral interventions and emotional supports. I continue to be involved with special education as a member of our local association's special education committee. I am here today to testify in support of LD 1097, LD 1248, and LD 1398.

When I began my career at the high school level, the behavioral support classroom averaged 8-10 students per year. That number began to grow to capacity of 15 students, so that by the 2019-2020 school year, an additional behavioral support classroom was added and since, yet another classroom has been added for a total of three behavioral support classrooms at the high school level. The schools at every level in our district report increasing behavioral management needs within special education and the general population. School staff have suffered physical injuries to include repeated bruising from being hit or kicked, bites, hair-pulling and concussions.

I cannot account for why schools are experiencing higher rates of concerning and violent student behavior, but we are under-resourced in our ability to respond in a way that keeps students and staff safe, while also responding to escalating student behavior in a way that promotes compassion and maintains dignity. Providing trauma informed and basic behavioral intervention training to all staff would be one resource to improve outcomes for all. I do not support this lightly, knowing that precious professional development time for other equally as important educational objectives will be compromised. However, we cannot continue to provide haphazard responses with the growing number of students who come to school emotionally dysregulated. I therefore support LD 1097 and LD 1248.

My strongest plea to you today is to increase access to mental health services in our public schools through the passage of LD 1398. I am fortunate to work in a district that has special education and general education social workers available at all of our schools: elementary through high school - and it is still not enough to support the overwhelming numbers of students who need access to it. Social work is a vital service for our students who have difficulty managing their emotions or other pressing concerns to successfully benefit from their education. In my current position, I work with a number of students who present with anxiety and depression or other mental health conditions that make it difficult for them to regulate well enough to learn or to make education a priority in their lives.

One student has shared how she developed many ways of avoiding class (we call it coming to school, but not *doing* school). When the general education social worker became dogged in her attempts to help the student develop skills to communicate appropriately and to self-regulate things changed incrementally. Two years ago, this student failed almost all of her classes, while this year she has made the honor roll and no longer sees the social worker. Another difficult personal situation has recently arisen for this young person, but she is using skills previously learned from the social worker to manage. To quote the student, the social worker "saved my life."

This student is not unlike many other students who do not or will not see a community-based social worker. Some students completely reject going to an office to talk with someone, but become open to talking to the social worker who is a part of the school community. Some families cannot afford a co-pay for services or have difficulty managing appointments. Providing social work to students at school can make a real difference in their educational careers and their lives. It is also an important component to

improving student behavior while at school. I urge you to consider the lives of our young people now and in the future with all of the challenges they face. Please support LD 1398.