

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

Good morning, and thank you for the opportunity to share what I see and hear in schools across Maine.

My name is Audrey Bartholomew. I live in Portland and am speaking today in a personal capacity—my testimony does not reflect the views of my employer. I am a former special education teacher, and my primary role now is preparing future teachers. However, I also work as a substitute teacher in local schools about once per week. Over the past year, I've been substituting part-time, primarily in programs for students with challenging behaviors. After twenty years out of the classroom, I realized I needed to update my perspective on the current realities educators face. I encourage all of you to spend time in schools as Representative Sargent has done.

I truly appreciate Representative Sargent's commitment to our Maine teachers and students, particularly her focus on improving teaching conditions. Like her—and as shared in other testimony—I've seen behaviors that make teaching incredibly difficult and sometimes nearly impossible. Thank you to the teachers who have spoken candidly about these realities. This is a real problem, and it demands a real solution.

Unfortunately, this bill is not that solution. It will not recover lost instructional time, reduce disruptions, or make it easier to teach. What it *will* do is make it easier to restrain students and isolate them in seclusion rooms. Suggesting otherwise is simply not true. The bill will lead to more restraint and seclusion, and it shifts responsibility away from district administrators who should be working to support students by increasing behavior supports and providing staff training.

I want to specifically respond to Representative Lyman's comments about data. I can only speak from my personal experience, but I did report what I believed to be an illegal instance of restraint and seclusion. The school's administration wasn't even aware it had happened. That calls the accuracy of the data into question. Maybe it was overlooked because it occurred in a specialized program setting, beyond Tier 3 supports—but it certainly didn't appear to have been documented. In addition to staffing and training, we need consistent, systemic practices, especially around data collection and analysis.

This is a complex problem that requires interprofessional expertise—behavior specialists, social workers, administrators. That's not an easy or inexpensive fix. But passing this bill will come at an even higher cost: it will increase trauma for students who often cannot speak for themselves and rely on people like me—and like you—to advocate for them. Let me be clear: restraint and seclusion are not appropriate responses to challenging behavior. They are not strategies. They are not treatments. They are not solutions.

As a substitute teacher, I've seen both the best and worst of what's happening. In one school for students with significant needs, staff used blocking pads and preventative strategies to

de-escalate behavior without ever laying hands on students. In another, behavior specialists and social workers provided proactive support and training that helped staff respond effectively before situations escalated. These examples show what's possible when training, teamwork, and supervision are prioritized.

But I've also witnessed restraint and seclusion being used as a first response. One day, a second grader was physically restrained and dragged into a seclusion room—for waving a piece of cardboard and refusing to put it down. There was no attempt to talk to him, no support from the social worker. He cried, calmed down, and was returned to class. Another time, I took a student for a walk. As we passed the cafeteria, he lingered, sneaking glances at me for attention. I waited. But another staff member approached and immediately lifted him by the arms to move him—no words, just physical intervention. It felt automatic.

Expanding the language in this bill to allow more restraint and seclusion will only make those responses more common. I understand how difficult it is to run a school—balancing staffing, costs, and family engagement is no small task. But when it comes to policies that could lead to further trauma for children, the direction we choose should be clear.

I urge this committee to do the hard work: address teacher concerns *and* protect students. Their safety must come first.