

Isaac Badenya Thomas
Waterville
LD 1647

Dear Senator Carney, Representative Kuhn, and Members of the Committee on Judiciary,

My name is Isaac Badenya Thomas. My family is from Dennysville and Embden, I grew up in Levant, and I now live in Waterville. I am a former teacher. I write to express my strong support of LD 1647, An Act to Amend the Maine Human Rights Act to Provide Additional Remedies for Educational Discrimination.

I worked in Maine public schools for 8 years. I taught world languages to high school students and history and civics to adults continuing their education. I loved teaching, and I was good at it. I worked hard to connect with students, support them, and help them succeed. I was proud of the positive relationships I developed with my students. In December 2018 and February 2022, I was chosen by students as faculty member of the month. In February 2023, I was nominated for County Teacher of the Year.

In my last three years teaching high school, I observed and heard reports of severe sexual harassment and overt racial prejudice in my school district. I saw the district attempt to deny enrollment to students based on their national origin and then deny language support services to students and families with limited English. I was called a pedophile for hanging a Pride flag in my classroom. I saw students single out their peers for severe bullying and harassment because of their sexual orientation. I witnessed a group of students threaten to kill a classmate because of her perceived sexual orientation and joke in graphic terms about having sex with her. I heard from other students that they had been subjected to threats of physical assault, sexual assault, and hate speech based on their sex and sexual orientation. I heard reports that a student was shoved and yanked around while other students shouted anti-gay slurs in their face. At least one student reported suicidal thoughts caused by ongoing, unchecked sexual harassment.

I also observed and learned of students drawing swastikas at school, creating swastika symbols out of rulers, and making anti-Semitic comments, comparing a student of color to a monkey, yelling the N-word, and carving the N-word into surfaces in the school bathroom. On one occasion, I was called the N-word. At a school board meeting, other adults stated that their children had been called the N-word and heard racial slurs at school.

I repeatedly told the school's administrators about the severe discrimination and harassment my students and I experienced, but I did not see sufficient action taken to stop it. The persistent sexist, racist, anti-immigrant, anti-Semitic, anti-gay, and anti-transgender harassment at the school caused me increasingly severe distress and took a toll on my health. Eventually, with the help of a lawyer, I decided to file a complaint of employment discrimination and retaliation with the Maine Human Rights Commission.

Although I no longer work at the school today, I still think about my students. It is not fair that I got legal help for employment discrimination based in part on discrimination which they suffered, but they are generally not able to get the same help for their potential claims of educational discrimination because of the lack of meaningful remedies under the Maine Human Rights Act. LD 1647 would help address this injustice and give students who can prove they were subjected to severe or pervasive harassment a fair chance at a remedy.

I strongly urge the Committee to vote "ought to pass" on LD 1647.

Sincerely,
Isaac Badenya Thomas