

May 8, 2025

Dear Senator Carney, Representative Moonen, and distinguished members of the Judiciary Committee,

My name is Patti Forster, and I am a longtime educator at Camden Hills Regional High School with over three decades of classroom experience. I currently serve as president of the Maine Council for English Language Arts and am the 2021 Knox County Teacher of the Year and the 2020 Maine State English Teacher. I am writing today to testify in opposition to LD 1002: An Act to Protect Children's Identification by Requiring Public Schools to Use the Name and Gender Specified on a Child's Birth Certificate

While this bill claims to protect children, it would instead cause significant harm to some of our most vulnerable students—transgender and nonbinary youth. LD 1002 effectively mandates what is known as "deadnaming," or the practice of referring to a person by a name they no longer use, often one that does not align with their gender identity. Deadnaming can be deeply distressing and invalidating, contributing to feelings of alienation, anxiety, and depression.

Schools should be safe, affirming environments where all students are treated with dignity. Denying a student the right to be called by the name and pronouns they identify with creates an environment of exclusion and shame. Educators know that affirming a student's identity supports well-being, improves academic engagement, and builds trust between students and school staff.

This bill is also personally significant to me. I have never gone by the name printed on my birth certificate. For my entire life—through elementary school, high school, college, and my professional career—I have been called by a nickname, one that feels more like "me." Had this bill been in place when I was growing up, I would have been forced to respond to a name that felt impersonal and unfamiliar, even though it matched my birth certificate. That experience, though minor compared to what many transgender students face, gives me a glimpse of how painful it would be to be denied the name that truly reflects your identity.

The impact of affirming a student's identity is not just anecdotal; it is supported by research. According to a study published in the *Journal of Adolescent Health*, transgender youth who are consistently called by their chosen name experience 71% fewer symptoms of severe depression and a 65% decrease in suicide attempts. Affirmation saves lives.

From a developmental standpoint, Erik Erikson's psychosocial theory of human development identifies adolescence as a critical stage characterized by the conflict of identity versus role confusion. During this period, young people are actively exploring who they are, how they fit into the world, and how they wish to be perceived by others. If their identities are invalidated—especially in environments where they spend the majority of their time, like schools—students may experience identity confusion, diminished self-worth, and a lack of belonging. LD 1002 actively works against healthy adolescent development by forcing students to suppress their authentic selves in favor of outdated documentation.

In many cases, students may not yet feel safe coming out to their families or may face unsupportive home environments. Requiring parental permission or legal documentation before a student can be affirmed at school disregards these realities and places additional burdens on students who are already navigating complex personal journeys.

Furthermore, this bill would insert the government into deeply personal and developmental matters best handled with care, compassion, and professional discretion. Educators already work closely with students and families to

ensure open communication and supportive practices. LD 1002 undermines this relationship by imposing rigid mandates that do not reflect the diversity and complexity of student experiences.

Policies that support trans and gender-diverse students are not about hiding information from families; they are about creating a supportive space where students can thrive while building the trust and confidence they may need to engage with family members over time.

I urge you to vote against LD 1002. Let us affirm our commitment to inclusive, student-centered education that prioritizes mental health, belonging, and human dignity. Every child in Maine deserves to be seen, heard, and respected for who they are.

Thank you for your time and your dedication to all Maine students.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Patti Forster". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, prominent initial "P".

Patti Forster