

Savannah Mirisola Sullivan
Portland
LD 1002

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Portland, ME
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Good morning Senator Carney, Representative Kuhn, and Honorable Members of the Judiciary Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to address the committee. My name is Savannah Mirisola-Sullivan, and my pronouns are she/her. As I tell my students, those are just the little words you can use to talk about me when you don't use my name; that makes a lot of sense to them. I teach fourth grade in Portland, ME, where I also live. I'm here in opposition to a series of bills that would put Maine students at risk, including LD 233 An Act to Prohibit Biological Males from Participating in School Athletic Programs and Activities Designated for Females When State Funding Is Provided to the School, LD 868 An Act to Ensure Equity and Safety in Athletics, Restrooms, Changing Rooms and Housing at Elementary, Secondary and Postsecondary Schools, LD 21002 An Act to Protect Children's Identification by Requiring Public Schools to Use the Name and Gender Specified on a Child's Birth Certificate, LD 1134 An Act to Prohibit Males from Participating in Female Sports or Using Female Facilities, and LD 1704 An Act to Prohibit a School Administrative Unit from Adopting a Policy That Allows a Student to Use a Restroom Designated for Use by the Opposite Sex.

I've worked in public schools for eighteen years, and have been a classroom teacher for the past ten. I also served as my school's Equity Leader for three years, supporting teachers in ensuring that our classrooms and schools are safe and inclusive for all students, because every teacher's central priority is student safety. Research is clear that without felt safety, students aren't able to access their academic learning. Belonging is a critical piece of safety, and one tool for creating that sense of belonging is extracurriculars like sports teams. In elementary, middle, and high school, sports teams exist as spaces to make friends, play, laugh, learn to problem solve and collaborate, and develop confidence and perseverance. At Rowe School, for example, our students have access to a fabulous program called Girls on the Run. A few years ago, our fifth grade students took it upon themselves to change the name of the program at our site, because they worried that the term "girls" might make their trans and non-binary friends feel like they couldn't join- they wanted anyone who was interested in running to participate. Each afternoon that I observed their practice, I saw a group of kids laughing, encouraging each other, trying new things, building their sense of self, and most importantly, feeling like they belonged. Because our students refused to draw an unnecessary line between cisgender and transgender girls, I believe we had one of the highest rates of participation yet that year. May we follow their lead.

In Portland, we have an explicit policy that requires teachers to respect student name change and pronoun change requests without requiring parental consent. In fourth grade, many students are experimenting with all sorts of identities. Do I like Taylor Swift or do I like Kendrick Lamar? Do I want to play ice hockey or field hockey? Do I enjoy reading the Wild Robot series or Wings of Fire? It is developmentally appropriate for students to also experiment and grapple with their gender identity and expression at this age. Does this nickname feel more like me, or does the name my family chose for me not quite fit anymore? Some of the names and pronouns students try on are temporary, while others stick, and our policy allows me to make space for students to explore these different ways of being without unnecessarily looping in families each time they make a different choice. Using the names and pronouns that students share with me also clearly communicates to students that I trust them to tell me who they are, creating a foundation of safety. When we teach students to listen to their intuition and trust themselves, that ripples out into every aspect of who they are in the classroom. It empowers them to share their ideas, to advocate for themselves, to

solve conflict in respectful ways, and to find their passions. I would imagine these are our shared hopes for all youth.

Teachers have been clear about the changes that actually make schools safe places to learn for all students, including smaller class sizes, adequate staffing, more robust mental health resources, full-time nurses and librarians, and most importantly, gun reform. The bills before you today do nothing to address these very real needs for students, and instead weaponize the language of student safety while actually increasing risk for some of our most marginalized students. As a teacher, it is frightening to imagine how these bills would impact our students, our schools, and our communities. Studies show that anti-transgender laws like sports bans and bathroom bans cause up to a 72% increase in suicide attempts among trans and non-binary youth. In Maine alone, 4,847 LGBTQIA+ seriously considered suicide last year. Where is the safety in that? These statistics reveal the real purpose of these bills, which is to erase trans youth. Those are not the values of our schools, or of the state of Maine.

I encourage you to honor the incredible leadership of our fifth grade students with your vote by voting “ought not to pass” on LD 233, LD 868, LD 21002, LD 1134, and LD 1704.