



Maine Education Association

Grace Leavitt President | Jesse Hargrove Vice President | Beth French Treasurer
Rebecca Cole NEA Director | Rachelle Bristol Executive Director

Testimony

In Support

LD 405: An Act to Prevent False Reporting Leading to Evacuation, Shutdown or Lockdown

Ben Grant, General Counsel, Maine Education Association

Before the Criminal Justice and Public Safety Committee

March 6, 2023

Senator Beebe-Center, Representative Salisbury and other members of the Criminal Justice and Public Safety Committee,

My name is Ben Grant (he/him) and I am proud to serve as the General Counsel for the Maine Education Association (MEA). The MEA represents 24,000 educators in the state of Maine, including teachers and other professionals in nearly every public school in the state and faculty and other professional staff in the University of Maine and Community College Systems.

I am here to testify on behalf of MEA and in support of LD405. We believe this to be an important step in standing up for students and educators against the perpetration of hoaxes on our schools. While we can never stop every bad actor with malevolent intention, we can make steeper the consequences – and in doing so hopefully deter these actions from recurring. As you heard from the sponsor, this bill increases the stakes for those who would purposefully traumatize our students and educators and our communities by qualifying these actions for a higher criminal class.

The people responsible for locking down schools based on false information are preying on the fear and trauma built into our culture after decades of truly horrific tragedies. I still vividly recall watching Columbine on the television in the lobby of my college dorm. The history of this country's relationship with school shootings is far too vast to outline here, but it is also all-too familiar. And that fact is the connective tissue between a twenty-five-year history of tragedy and the bill before you today. The people who would perpetrate a hoax on a school are purposefully using that history to cause more trauma in a system already under stress.

No one needs to be reminded that we are coming out of the pandemic era, and we will be dealing with its after effects for years to come. Those impacts include a further erosion of mental health among young people. Just Friday, I was listening to an interview on my way to Augusta that examined new data about youth depression and anxiety. One of the many components to good mental health is a safe and welcoming school. Every school lockdown, even when the result of a hoax, only serves to threaten a place that needs to be seen as a positive by all children.

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Our educators are no different. They bravely worked through the most difficult of circumstances over the last three years, and they are now reporting extremely high levels of interest in other careers. Our students and our society can't afford any more erosion in the number of educators available to our schools. However, we all know the myriad sources of stress on educators in this age. With this bill, we hope that at least one source of stress will be suppressed.

Personally, I live in Portland, and one of my daughters attends a school that was targeted in the rash of hoax threats across Maine last fall. I happened to drive by the school that day when all of the law enforcement vehicles had encircled the school – but before we knew there was no actual threat. It's an image that is hard to shake from my memory, and I am sure it is the same for everyone who was affected. Let's take the time now to stiffen the penalties and give our system more tools to deter this from happening again. The MEA urges you to support this bill.