



## Maine Education Association

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**Testimony  
In Support of  
LD 829 An Act to Improve Behavioral Health Support for Students in Public Schools  
Grace Leavitt, President, Maine Education Association  
Before the Joint Standing Committee on Education & Cultural Affairs  
March 28, 2023**

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan, and members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee,

My name is Grace Leavitt. My pronouns are she, her, hers. I am serving as President of the Maine Education Association while on leave from teaching Spanish in MSAD 51. I have over 43 years of classroom teaching experience with 20 years as a National Board Certified teacher. The MEA represents nearly 24,000 educators in our Maine system of public education in pre-K-12 schools as well as in our institutions of higher education, both the University of Maine System and the Maine Community College System, along with students in teacher prep programs as well as many retired educators.

I am here to testify on behalf of MEA in support of LD 829, An Act to Improve Behavioral Health Support for Students in Public Schools.

It is difficult for me to find the words to fully express the struggles that too many of our students are experiencing and how vitally important it is that we do more, so much more, for them. There are numerous studies and reports<sup>1</sup> about the extent of the issue. Increased misconduct, sometimes dangerous to self or others, outbursts, inability to self-regulate, disruptions in classes, large numbers of children and adolescents experiencing anxiety and/or depression—you can read something nearly every day about the crisis we are facing. Our educators are making a tremendous effort to promote social/emotional wellbeing—but more is needed. We hear from members all the time about the student behaviors they are dealing with and the needs of our students. I heard just recently about a district that was able to hire an additional school counselor—and the counselor's schedule was completely filled their first day on the job! Every school counselor and social worker I have spoken with this year has said they are racing non-stop to put out fire after fire and are having to miss time they planned to spend with students for work on supporting students and preventing troubling behaviors.

LD 829 aims to increase the staffing and the training that will help with addressing the extensive and more prevalent needs we are seeing in our students today. The key element of this proposal is recognition of the need for mental health professionals in our schools by decreasing the counselor to student ratios in grades preK-8, and by also including social workers in the funding formula. These changes will help to better address the very challenging behaviors and the needs of our students. For children to be able to learn and grow, they must feel safe and well. Our schools need more support for that to happen. The proposed funding formula changes may not provide all that our students need, and we know that finding qualified professionals is a challenge. Nonetheless, LD 829 is an important part of the solution to help develop and provide the supports that are necessary to help more students.

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While more may be needed to ensure we can help all students who are struggling, let's at least pass and implement LD 829 to be sure we do what we can to move things in the right direction. With the increased support that LD 829 calls for, our students will be better able to be successful in their learning. I'm sure you all agree that our students deserve that.

<sup>1</sup>[https://nces.ed.gov/whatsnew/press\\_releases/07\\_06\\_2022.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/whatsnew/press_releases/07_06_2022.asp)

<sup>1</sup><https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2022/12/05/crisis-student-mental-health-is-much-vaster-than-we-realize/>