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SUBSTANCE USE	MENTAL HEALTH
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March 28, 2023

Testimony In support of LD 829: *An Act to Improve Behavioral Health Support for Students in Public Schools*

Good afternoon, Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan, and members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to offer testimony in support of LD 829, “An Act to Improve Behavioral Health Support for Students in Public Schools. My name is Greg Bowers, and I am the Chief Executive Officer of Day One, an organization that has provided substance use and mental health treatment to adolescents and families in Maine for well over forty-five years. Throughout much of its history, and continuing today, Day One has provided substance use and mental health counseling within school settings as an essential component of its mission and continuum of care.

Research has shown that early identification and treatment of mental health and substance use disorders improves long-term outcomes. For example, early interventions conducted by comprehensive school-based mental health and substance use treatment systems have been associated with enhanced academic performance, decreased need for special education, fewer disciplinary encounters, increased engagement with school, and elevated rates of graduation.*

In our experience, how individual school districts respond to mental health and substance use needs within the student population vary greatly based on perceptions or misperceptions regarding the extent of the need, disparate views on the role of the school in providing treatment, lingering stereotypes, and fears within the community, and of course, competing budget demands and overall fiscal pressures. The number of clinical positions budgeted, the focus of those positions (whether it be mental health or substance use), and the approach in outreaching and working with students and families varies greatly. What we do know is that all of these school systems are experiencing significant and increasing challenges when it comes to addressing the complex behavioral health needs of their students.

*Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) and Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) Joint Informational Bulletin, July 1, 2019, “*Guidance to States and Schools Systems on Addressing Mental Health and Substance Use Issues in Schools*”



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Pandemic related funding and the heightened awareness of the mental health impacts of student isolation, over reliance of social media, and knowledge of the greater availability and lethality of illicit substances, has helped in making these services a funding priority. However, the same school systems that may have taken steps to increase clinical resources during this time, now are likely to find themselves in a budget crunch as the pandemic related funding comes to an end.

It is because of this variability in approach and in the staffing used, as well as the fiscal pressures which school systems are increasingly facing, that Day One believes this bill represents common sense legislation which acknowledges both the overwhelming need and the immense challenge in meeting it. It not only provides a minimum standard of care within the school setting, but also addresses the fiscal reality of providing it by including the cost in the funding formula.

In supporting this bill, Day One also urges this Committee to ensure that it acknowledges the current difficulty presented by the significant workforce shortage in clinical professionals. The definition of social workers should be broad enough to encompass varying professional licensures that could be instrumental in meeting the complex needs of the students, including the use of Licensed Alcohol and Drug Counselors. Employment as defined in the statute should include workers that are directly employed by the school system, as well as those professionals that are provided through agreements with local mental health agencies. There are benefits to both approaches and this bill should make it clear that either is acceptable in meeting the standards which are called for.

Thank you again for the opportunity to speak with you today and I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.

Respectfully Submitted

Gregory Bowers
Chief Executive Officer