

April 26, 2023

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan, and Members of the Joint Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs:

Thank you for allowing me to speak today regarding LDs 52, 518, and 1557. My name is Sherry Pineau Brown. I am a native Mainer and resident of Benton. Over my 23 years in education, I have worked in 5 high schools, 1 middle school, and 4 colleges. I am so passionate about education that I earned three advanced degrees, including a PhD in 2020 – where my research focused on student and teacher trauma.

The possibility of gun violence has been a reality throughout my career. I began teaching in Littleton, Colorado at Columbine's sister school, and I have huddled in corners with my students too many times to count. Just this week, after hearing a loud crack behind us in our school foyer, a colleague and I both flinched, caught our breath, and realized that due to rain, the baseball team was practicing in the gym. I know that we are more likely to be hit by lightning than to be involved in a school shooting. But fear is a funny thing – it makes us react in irrational ways. I wonder, what would have happened if one of us had been armed?

I want to be clear: this legislation and *any* legislation that would allow school staff to carry guns would fundamentally shift the relationship between educators and students. As a trauma researcher, I know relationships are critical to stop the mental health crisis we are in. I am also a mother of a 7th grade public school student. When I explained this legislation and asked, "How would you feel if your teacher had a gun?" Her eyes got big, and she said quickly "I would feel less safe." Her eyes got even bigger when I told her about the gun that was found by a 3rd grader in a Texas elementary school – left by the Superintendent.

One of these bills could also allow *students* with basic firearm training to bring a gun into the building. As an educator, as a parent, as a human – this is horrifying. When I told my daughter about this she said, "That would make me feel even less safe. Do you know how stupid students are, mom? Do you know how many students would try to steal those guns? They would probably make bets about it." As for my own experience, I have worked with teenagers for decades. When they say, as they often do, "I don't know why I did that. I just couldn't stop myself." They aren't lying. The prefrontal cortex, the area of the brain that is necessary for executive functioning, rational thinking, and impulse control – doesn't fully develop until the mid-20s. Think about that recent birthday party in Alabama or even closer, the shooting at the Colby dorm in Waterville.

Finally, in 2020 of the 154 firearm deaths in Maine, 132 or 86% were by suicide. I have worked at schools where students have attempted suicide on campus. Thankfully, in my experience, these attempts were unsuccessful as they did not have access to the most lethal way to kill themselves. More guns in schools could give them access to that method. Remember that mental health crisis I spoke of?

Please oppose all of this legislation. Thank you.

Sherry Pineau Brown, PhD; spineaub@gmail.com