

**May 4, 2023: Legislate testimony regarding LD 123, LD 618 and LD 1008**

**Dana Carver-Bialer, MPP/MA, PhD Candidate**

**Position: Oppose**

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan, and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs, my name is Dana Carver-Bialer and I serve the students and community members of the Bangor School Department in my role as Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging Coordinator. This is a role to which I've brought a 16 year career in teaching instruction, higher education research, and public policy analysis. For the sake of time, I have provided a brief synopsis of my credentials, education, and professional affiliations at the conclusion of my written testimony submission.

I provide the following statement representing the Bangor School Department, notably Superintendent James Tager and the Bangor School Department School Committee in strong opposition of LD 123, LD 618 and LD 1008.

Throughout today's public hearing, you will undoubtedly be provided expertise and data that challenge the measurable harm of codifying LD 123, 618, and 1008. Having spent the last 16 years of my career engaging in education research, civil rights investigations and policymaking—including 11 years of teaching—this is for good reason. As educators, we turn to research to make informed decisions: research across countless disciplines—education, medicine, public health, child development, and sociology, to name a few—highlight the overwhelming benefits for both majority *and* underrepresented populations of curricula, teaching methodology and policies that acknowledge diverse lived experiences and sources of knowledge. Instead, I wish to provide a deeper glimpse into the human faces, here and now, that will be impacted by the limited access to diverse texts and inclusive curriculum that these bills promote.

As the third largest district in Maine, the Bangor School Department serves approximately 3,500 students across 10 schools. Our students and families reflect dynamics emblematic of American public education in 2023: families have diverse income levels, political ideologies, faith traditions, nationalities, ethnicities, racial identities, and family structures. Our students identify as LGBTQ+, navigate the challenges of visible and invisible disabilities, and hold an endless expanse of opinions, interests, identities, and visions of their futures. And, like all districts, our staff work tirelessly to mitigate a post-pandemic "return to normal" and ensure our students are safe from violence, all while cultivating academic excellence. Navigating these complex dynamics has led us to a "back to the basics" approach to public education. The basics of kindness, consistent attendance, paths to

graduation, and partnering with parents and guardians for their students' educational needs. In the spirit of getting "back to the basics," I wish to highlight other basics that inform our practice:

- Education, in its purest form, functions to promote self-reflection *as well as* an increase in understanding the world beyond one's perspective and experiences. To reference a phrase I frequently use when training educators, critically engaging with students is a function of creating mirrors AND windows. Mirrors to self-reflect; windows to understand experiences beyond one's own. Why do we do this? For the idealized goal of promoting empathy and deeper connection to the experiences of others, *and*, because that's what is demanded of us: Whether you measure academic excellence through standardized testing, aggregated building-level assessments, or promoting a lifetime of inspired learning, we have a commitment to provide students with the tools to challenge assumptions, examine their world, and be informed consumers and creators of knowledge.
- We recognize that educators hold the profound responsibility to cultivate a passion for and accumulation of knowledge into a skillset that positions Maine's youth to become tomorrow's global leaders. With this, we trust them to make countless curriculum and instruction decisions, every day, and empower them through administrative support, adherence to standards, and alignment with countless benchmarks established locally through federal policies. The bills being considered at today's hearing suggest a "one size fits all" approach to education, removing choice and undermining administrators, school boards, students, and families to specialize education to community needs.
- We understand the most important form of diversity to be diversity of *thought*. We equip our students with complex histories and global experiences to promote critical thinking. How can we possibly expect students to make informed decisions, innovate, or navigate problem solving otherwise?
- We know our students are not solely students, they are people. Students show up to school every day with complex and diverse lives. They turn to their caretakers, peers, news cycles, media, and sometimes even us, their teachers, to make sense of their world. They are not simply indoctrinated with curriculum at school as a sole source of knowledge.
- Reducing access to language and stories of diverse identities does not reduce prevalence of diverse identities, it shuts the windows and shatters the mirrors that students rely upon to see themselves and make sense of the world. Research<sup>1</sup> tells us that LGBTQ+ identified youth—particularly transgender youth—experience exponentially higher rates of poor

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<sup>1</sup> Kosciw, J.G., Clark, C.M., Truong, N.L., & Zongrone, A.D., *The 2019 National School Climate Survey: The Experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer Youth in Our Nation's Schools* (New York, NY: GLSEN, 2020).

outcomes, including poor mental health, suicidality, unstable community and family support, substance use disorder, homelessness, vulnerability to violence, and feeling lack of connection to their school communities. Every day, I work with students of underrepresented populations and can say with zero hesitation that programming, texts, mentors, and instruction that recognize their unique contributions to our community make a world of difference. On a deeply personal note, I know inclusive curriculum and educators who champion a culture of inclusion and belonging would have made an invaluable difference for my own childhood, too.

The text of these bills suggest educators prioritize a politicized agenda over education. To this, I implore you to better understand what terms like *social-emotional learning, diversity, equity, and inclusion, and critical race theory* mean. What you will find are frameworks immersed in decades of research to better understand the complex human experience. Like people of diverse identities, these terms are not inherently political. These terms have been politicized to promote fear, intolerance, and discrimination. When nationally recognized research points to growing mental health challenges faced by American youth<sup>2</sup>, how can removing care, cultural competency, belonging, and safety *possibly* be endorsed by our elected officials? When state and federal anti-discrimination laws demand schools infuse education, prevention and remedial measures into Title IX and Affirmative Action protocols, how can these goals effectively be met under L.D. 618? Measures to subvert knowledge and eradicate diverse experiences erase the sense of belonging and critical skills *all students deserve* and educators are entrusted to navigate. In an evolving world, education must evolve too.

For these reasons, we strongly urge the Committee to unanimously vote “ought not to pass” for LD 123, LD 618 and LD 1008. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Respectfully submitted,

James Tager, Superintendent, Bangor School Department

Marwa Hassanien, Chairperson, Bangor School Department School Committee

Timothy Surette, Vice Chairperson, Bangor School Department School Committee

Dana Carver-Bialer, Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging Coordinator, Bangor School Department

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<sup>2</sup> “Youth Risk Behavior Survey: Data Summary and Trends Report,” Centers for Disease Control. Accessed April 20, 2023, [https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/data/yrbs/pdf/YRBS\\_Data-Summary-Trends\\_Report2023\\_508.pdf](https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/data/yrbs/pdf/YRBS_Data-Summary-Trends_Report2023_508.pdf)

*Dana Carver-Bialer submits this testimony as cumulatively informed by professional roles, formal education, and lived experience as an educational leader who embodies historically and contemporarily underrepresented identities. She holds a B.A. in Women's Studies and Political Science from Simmons College, a dual Masters of Public Policy and Masters of Women and Gender Studies from Brandeis University, and is a PhD Candidate in Communication at The University of Maine. After over a decade teaching, researching, and advising in higher education, she transitioned to K-12 education and is currently serving the Bangor School Department as their Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging Coordinator—the first standalone K-12 “DEI” position in Maine. In this role she supports the district's DEIB curricular and training efforts and through advanced Association of Title IX Administrators (ATIXA) certifications conducts Title IX and Affirmative Action investigations.*