

## 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 1861: An Act to Reduce Chronic Student Absenteeism**  
**Mallory Cook, Director of Training and Early Educator Engagement,**  
**Maine Education Association**

**Before the Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs**

**May 9, 2023**

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

My name is Mallory Cook (she/her/hers), and I am the Director of Training and Early Educator Engagement at the Maine Education Association. I am also a certified English teacher and building administrator. On behalf of MEA, a labor union representing almost 24,000 educators, I am here to testify in support of LD 1861: An Act to Reduce Chronic Student Absenteeism.

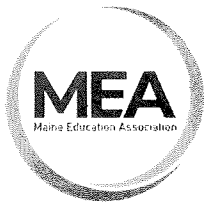
This session, MEA has stood before you in support of legislation that would increase the number of school counselors, social workers, and other wrap-around services for our students. This bill is an additional step we can take to ensure we are meeting the social, emotional, mental health, and academic needs of our students. The National Education Association released data showing that during the 21-22 school year, Maine had around 173,237 students enrolled in schools. Each day, though, around 57,346 students were absent; that's about 3,500 kids per county. Pre-pandemic, 16.8% of Maine students were considered chronically absent, but that percentage was much higher for migrant students, students experiencing homelessness, students in foster care, and American Indians/Alaskan Natives.

During the pandemic, our educators took tremendous strides in making their course content digital and accessible from afar. As a secondary educator, this made me notice some concerning behavior once we were back in-person—students feeling a sense of connectedness, despite their absence in the classroom. I had students complete entire units, while their seat remained vacant. While I appreciated their diligence in staying current, the work did not meet the expectations, as they missed out on key instruction, peer interaction, scaffolding, and interventions. In short, if a student wants to make academic progress, the best place for them to be is in the classroom.

For many students, though, attending school is a lot more complicated than hopping on the bus. Some are caretakers in their homes; some are working to support their families; some have debilitating mental health struggles that make going to school a challenge, and others might not have access to bus routes, sidewalks, or reliable transportation. Whatever the reason, chronic absenteeism is rooted in challenges that professionals in our schools are trained to address. This legislation calls for districts with a chronic absenteeism rate of 10% or higher or a single school within the district with a chronic absenteeism rate

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of 15% or higher to establish an attendance review team. This team, like many that exist across the state, will be tasked with reviewing who is chronically absent and developing plans to address the barriers and challenges keeping them from attending. The legislation calls for the team to convene monthly.

We acknowledge that this is a tall ask for the administrators, social workers, school counselors, and educators who support our students, but the benefits are incredibly worthwhile. Those who have high levels of absenteeism are more likely to drop out of school. Data suggests that those frequent absences begin as early as kindergarten and first grade. Having a preschool student myself, I find it hard to imagine a child who would rather stay at home than be in school playing and learning with peers. If a student is in that circumstance, there are certainly supports the school can provide to help address those challenges.

This bill would also support our students who are exhibiting challenging behaviors. State board rules define an absence as being excused, unexcused, or disciplinary. Formation of these attendance review teams would hold teams accountable for discussing supports needed by students exhibiting behaviors that result in suspension. Social workers, guidance counselors, and educators can offer supports and interventions to help meet student needs, hopefully resulting in fewer behaviors and suspensions.

Many schools have already implemented attendance review teams. If passed, this legislation would ensure they are meeting routinely. For the districts who have not yet implemented an attendance review team, we hope models and methods used with success by other districts can be shared. Some of our most vulnerable students are sure to benefit from this legislation, which is why we urge you to vote “ought to pass” on LD 1861.

Thank you and I’ll do my best to answer any questions you may have.