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Testimony in support:

LD 254, "An Act to Update the Sex Education and Consent Curriculum"

Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs

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Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs, my name is Lynette Johnson and I am the Director of Prevention Programs at Maine Family Planning (MFP.) I live in Wayne. I am here today to speak in support of LD 254, "An Act to Update the Sex Education and Consent Curriculum" as amended by Senator Daughtry's proposal and to ask you for your support.

MFP provides comprehensive sexual and reproductive health care to adults and teens through telehealth and at 18 health centers statewide. For more than 50 years, MFP has also served as the non-profit administrator of Maine's statewide family planning network, which includes around 50 providers, including federally qualified health centers (FQHCs) and school-based health centers. MFP's Prevention Program promotes education around sexual and reproductive health by working with schools and community organizations to provide comprehensive sexuality education that is medically accurate, age-appropriate, and affirming for people of all identities. We are deeply committed to promoting sexual and reproductive health among youth and families.

Maine Law and Maine's health education standards require medically accurate and age-appropriate comprehensive family life education. Research shows that comprehensive sexual health education works, empowering youth to make healthy, informed, and responsible decisions about their bodies and relationships. Comprehensive and inclusive sex ed is critical to improve the lives and wellbeing of all young people. With comprehensive sex education, teens are more likely to wait longer to engage in sexual activity and use protection when they become sexually active. Our education staff work closely with the Maine CDC and Maine Department of Education (DOE) to support school and community educators statewide to implement evidence-based teaching materials including *Puberty Happens* for youth in grades 4-6; the *Middle School Scope and Sequence* for grades 6-8; and *Best Practices in STI/HIV and Pregnancy Prevention* for youth aged 13-18. These age specific curricula are factual, inclusive, and align with state and national health education standards. They include topics ranging from bodily autonomy and consent, STI/HIV and pregnancy prevention, and relationship safety.

Our work is based on the belief that young people achieve brighter, healthier futures when they have the knowledge and skills to navigate sexual and relationship issues. Young people are capable of making healthy choices and want adults in their lives to talk to them about sex and relationships. When we do not step up, youth will find answers to their questions elsewhere. Consider the 2022 Common Sense Media study on Teens and Pornography that found 73% of teens aged 13-17 have accessed porn online. More than half reported seeing pornography before the age of 13. Maine teens report that they are not receiving adequate education that is relevant in helping them make healthy sexual decisions, and the education they receive can vary widely by school or community. This information confirms data from a recent survey of 1,500 Americans, 90% of whom said that the sex education they received had not prepared them for real world sexual experiences.

In Maine, we can be proud of the commitment to comprehensive sexuality education. MFP's Prevention Program has experienced increasing demand for professional development and resources from schools and community organizations, to support youth from puberty through high school and beyond. State funding that supports comprehensive sexuality education has remained flat funded for nearly a decade, while the costs associated with delivering programming have increased. Last fall, MFP faced a funding gap and instead of reducing critical education services, we raised private funds to cover our losses. This isn't sustainable and Maine has historically shared the commitment to providing these services.

Over the past two months we've worked with Senator Daughtry to put together a proposal to not only fill the funding gap so that we can maintain the programming we've offered for the past decade, but also to improve upon it. With an additional \$500,000 annually we could support more schools and educators with updated curricula, resources, and supplies and expand access to professional development opportunities through in-person, virtual and self-paced learning modules. We could adapt curriculum resources to meet the needs of vulnerable youth populations, such those experiencing housing insecurity, youth in foster care, individuals with physical, intellectual and developmental disabilities, and new Mainers.

All young people deserve education that includes information about protecting their sexual and reproductive health. Knowledge about their bodies, healthy relationships, and where to access resources is one of the most important gifts we can offer young people on their journey to adulthood. In closing, we ask you to join us in investing in our young peoples' future.

Thank you for your attention and I'm happy to answer any questions you may have.