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SPEAKER OF THE HOUSE

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Testimony of Speaker Rachel Talbot Ross presenting
**LD 2002, An Act to Provide Incentives to Schools That Contract for
Certain Social Work and Family Therapy Services**
Before the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs

Good afternoon Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan, and esteemed members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs:

My name is Rachel Talbot Ross. I represent House District 118 in Portland, and I serve as Speaker of the House. Thank you for the opportunity to present **LD 2002, An Act to Provide Incentives to Schools That Contract for Certain Social Work and Family Therapy Services.**

This bill is an effort to respond to the growing mental health crisis among youth in this State. According to data from the 2023 Maine Integrated Youth Health Survey, administered by the Maine Center for Disease Control, 32 percent of middle school students reported feeling sad or hopeless for two or more weeks in a row, such that they stopped participating in some usual activities in the last year; that figure was 35% for high school students. When asked if students had seriously considered committing suicide over the past 12 months, 22% of middle school students said they had, 17% said they had made a plan to do so, and 8% had attempted to do so; of high school students, 18% reported having seriously considered committing suicide, 14% reported having made a plan to do so, and 8% reported having attempted to do so.

It is incumbent upon us to respond thoughtfully, effectively, and swiftly, and we know that the best form of immediate treatment and support is embedding mental health professionals on school campuses, which are located in hundreds of schools across Maine.

This bill facilitates an investment in these services in two ways, which I'll outline briefly, and then will explore in more depth.

- First, this bill allows a school administrative unit with an appropriate entity to provide social work and family therapy services for students within the school administrative unit;

- Second, this bill requires the Department of Education to administer a grant program to provide money to school administrative units that contract for social work and family therapy services, and provides an ongoing source of funding for this program.

I'll expand first on the central goal of the bill: to allow schools to contract out with mental health providers. These providers, an approved list of which are listed in Section 1, will be authorized to provide contracted individual, group and family therapy services for students. By allowing schools to contract with outside providers, they can supplement the good work of their guidance departments. This has particular advantage for smaller and rural schools, which may not have the resources or the management capacity to support new in-house staff. Additionally, contracted providers will have the benefit of working within an existing network of support for mental health care providers, and will be able to bring the resources offered by those larger provider networks into schools. By contracting with outside providers, schools will be able to offer targeted support according to their needs, facilitating an immediate response that is now so acutely necessary.

Second, I'll touch on the Department's facilitation of a grant program. As you can see in Section 2 of the bill, this bill is specific with regards to the maximum possible allowance for each school: For schools of 250 or fewer students, \$3,000 will be made available, for schools with 250-500 students, \$6,000; and for schools with more than 500 students, \$9,000. Such a program will allow the Department to administer this funding judiciously, with an eye towards maximum statewide impact and minimization of disparities and taking into account each school's existing resources and demands. Schools, in their turn, will be required to be specific and outcome-oriented in their applications. In this way, we ensure that the funding is distributed equitably and thoughtfully.

I would just like to amend the bill with two changes. First, we'd like to add Licensed Clinical Professional Counselors (LCPC) to the list of approved licensed individuals who would meet the requirement of the bill. These providers are listed in Section 1 of the bill. Second, in the same section of the bill, we would like to change "social work and therapy services" to "individual, group and family therapy services".

Amidst a mental health crisis of such magnitude, it is imperative that the state make a significant investment in the health and prosperity of our children and young people. Thank you to the Committee for considering this important bill. I urge you to vote favorably, and I'm happy to answer any questions you may have.