



## **Maine Education Association**

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### **Testimony In Support Of**

### **LD 1990: An Act to Improve Behavioral Health Support for Students in Public School Before the Committee on Health Coverage, Insurance, and Financial Services January 25, 2024**

Senator Bailey, Representative Perry, and other esteemed members of the Committee on Health Coverage, Insurance and Financial Services,

My name is Mallory Cook (pronouns she/her/hers), and I am the Director of Training and Early Educator Engagement at the Maine Education Association. MEA represents approximately 24,000 educators across the state, including public school social workers. I am here to provide testimony in support of LD 1990: An Act to Improve the Licensing Procedure for Certain Social Workers by Removing the Examination Requirement.

In the 131st regular session, MEA supported LD 829: An Act to Improve Behavioral Health Support for Students in Public Schools, which proposed lowering the student to school counselor ratios and adding social workers to the essential programs and services formula. Our support for the bill was rooted in the extensive behavioral, social, and emotional needs of our students. Though we supported the bill, we acknowledged that finding qualified professionals would be a challenge, which is why we are here today to support this bill, which will remove a barrier to entering this important profession. While it will not solve the shortage entirely, it will work to expand and diversify the behavioral health experts in our state.

As the State Board of Education has considered the educator shortage, they have reevaluated their rules around certification. Throughout this process, there has been a commitment to maintaining high standards, while also reevaluating systems and requirements that may keep qualified candidates or potential candidates out of schools. One such change was the removal of the required Praxis assessment. In lieu of this, the Board has adopted alternative pathways that make an educator eligible for certification. Because behavioral health needs across Maine are at an all-time high and because there is a shortage of licensed social workers, now is the time to do the same for licensed behavioral health providers in Maine. This is especially true when it comes to building a diverse workforce. The Castex 2019 study that others have referenced clearly outlines the racial bias that exists in the ASWB social work exam, which disproportionately keeps BIPOC social workers out of the profession. Relying on the other rigorous academic and clinical experiences for licensure will maintain a high

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standard and create a more equitable landscape. Much like the teaching profession, it is important we develop and diversify the behavioral health professional workforce.

A simple glance at Maine headlines shows the dire need for more behavioral health professionals in our state. Illinois, who dropped the assessment requirement in 2001, issued 3,000 licenses the following year. In a six-month period, licenses were up 7 times compared to the year before. Other states have passed or are working to pass legislation to do the same. This is a step in the right direction to maintain rigorous academic standards, while removing unnecessary barriers.

Thank you and I am happy to answer any questions you may have.