

LD1990 Testimony

Good afternoon Senator Bailey, Representative Perry, and honorable members of the Health Coverage, Insurance, and Financial Services Committee.

My name is Erika Boulware, and I am the Assistant Director of Clinical Supports for Portland Public Schools. I am also a Licensed Clinical Social Worker in the state of Maine. I thank you for the opportunity to explain why Portland Public Schools and I are in full support of LD1990, An Act to Improve the Licensing Procedure for Certain Social Workers by Removing the Examination Requirement. The passage of this vital act will reduce barriers to mental health access for all Maine residents, and especially our most vulnerable populations. All clients should have the right to be treated by social workers who reflect their various identities. I am here today on behalf of our educators, administrators, mental health staff, and, most importantly, the students and families we serve.


I'd like to share a bit about where Maine is in comparison to the rest of the country during this mental health crisis. According to Mental Health America's latest study, Maine has the 6th highest rate in the country of K-12 students who have Individual Education Plans (IEPs) for "emotional disturbance". In 2020 nearly 20% of 12-17 year olds reported having a major depressive episode, again the 6th highest rate in the country. 7.5% of Maine youth meet the criteria for a substance use disorder, the 7th highest rate in the country. And where does Maine rank in terms of access to services that can treat these diagnoses? 32nd in the country. Finally, Less than half of the young people who met criteria for a major depressive episode or substance abuse and had health insurance actually received treatment. Thus, even when young people have the resources to access mental health care in Maine, they often don't receive it.

The passage of LD 1990 would allow more social workers to assist in our state's mental health crisis. Currently, social work licensing procedures in the state of Maine contain an examination that many peer-reviewed and published studies have found to be detrimental to the field of social work by disenfranchising individuals trained in social work who are not white, ~~elder~~^{younger}, or whose first language is not English. There is no empirical evidence supporting passage of the ASWB standardized exams effectively measures the competence of prospective social workers entering or within the field (Albright & Thyer, 2010; DeCarlo, 2022). And there is no evidence to suggest that eliminating this examination negatively affects the quality of mental health care. But there are indications that exam content does not reflect the most up-to-date and evidence-based practice. When we are confronted with this data, we are compelled to ask not "what is wrong with the test-takers,?" but rather "what is wrong with the test"?

As a result of these findings, the National Association of Social Workers has openly come out to oppose the ASWB exam. Further, at least ten other states and Washington D.C. are in the process of, or have already passed legislation similar to LD1990 to allow for exceptions for social workers to practice without completing the ASWB exam.

Our Social Work Code of Ethics establishes that we must work toward the maintenance and promotion of high standards of practice. It also requires that we address barriers to treatment and challenge social injustice, especially in our efforts to promote sensitivity to and knowledge about oppression and cultural and ethnic diversity. As previously stated, the current examination has been found to be a barrier for individuals who are not white and who do not speak English from joining the profession of social work. In my district, 52% of students identify as a race other than white, and there are 53 different languages spoken by students enrolled in Portland Public Schools. As Maine's largest and most diverse school system in the state, we sorely need a more diverse community of social workers to support the unique needs of our students.

As an organization that values diversity, equity and inclusion along with the broader community of Portland and the State of Maine, we are in full support of the passage of LD1990. This statement is signed by district administration including our Superintendent of Schools.

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