

IN SUPPORT OF LD 2214

An Act to Make Supplemental Appropriations and Allocations for the Expenditures of State Government, General Fund and Other Funds and to Change Certain Provisions of the Law Necessary to the Proper Operations of State Government for the Fiscal Years Ending June 30, 2024 and June 30, 2025

Senator Rotundo, Representative Sachs, Senator Baldacci, Representative Meyer, and honorable members of both the Appropriations & Financial Affairs and Health & Human Services Committees, I'm Jayne Van Bramer, President & CEO of Sweetser and I'm here again today to speak to how best to utilize the Governor's supplemental budget to meet the critical need for mental health services in our state.

First, Sweetser has over 2,200 of your constituents on a wait list and other providers have similarly long waitlists. We can't just accept that this is the way it has to be in Maine.

We can't have services without a workforce to provide them. The fact is, we need more people to go into the field. We need a workforce to respond to growing demand for mental health services. We are doing all we can to reduce wait lists and increase access to more Mainers but behavioral health providers need help attracting the next generation of employees and we need to make it easier for those out of state to move here to practice. Let's incentivize youth to make this their life's calling by awarding scholarships, tuition reimbursement, loan forgiveness, and pay people what they are worth. Some legislation already passed starts to nibble away at this, but we need to fund it and keep finding innovative ways to address the workforce shortages plaguing behavioral health.

Second, we must address the need for prevention.

100 Maine public schools no longer providing critical mental health treatment for students and their families. That's not a faint possibility, it's an absolute reality if we don't find a path forward together. Sweetser served over 2,300 students last year in schools from Kittery to Bangor. We will lose over a million dollars providing this service this fiscal year because we are not reimbursed for many of the critical service components.

It's not sustainable for us or any provider and it will likely mean a program closure and a loss of therapy for families in your district.

This is the best form of prevention we have, clinicians embedded in schools alongside school staff members to reach those with the highest needs.

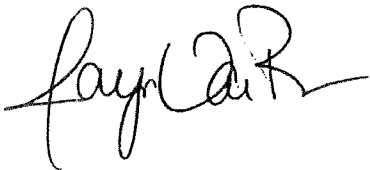
The cost of LD 2002 is a drop in the bucket compared to the costs and risks of incarceration, hospitalization, and other long term strains on our system if youth challenges go unchecked and untreated.

We need to meet this critical moment with the necessary resources, taking some of the \$100 million plus in surplus being set aside on top of the maxed out rainy-day fund and invest in Mainer's mental health. It's not raining in the future, it's pouring today and countless Maine children and families in your district either can't access services or could soon lose services if we do nothing.

The Maine Resiliency Package is a blueprint that the entire behavioral health community supports. Most of the items in the package passed unanimously and are awaiting funding. Please include this in your deliberations going forward to maximize the supplemental budget's impact.

Happy to answer any questions you have.

Sincerely,



Jayne Van Bramer
President & CEO

**Schools/Districts and Communities that Sweetser contracted directly with
or areas Sweetser serves students & their families regardless of contract:**

- 1) **Kittery School District**
- 2) Horace Mitchell Elementary School
- 3) Shapleigh Middle School
- 4) Traip Academy

- 5) **MSAD 60 School (NO. Berwick, Noble, Lebanon)**
- 6) Hanson School (Lebanon)
- 7) Lebanon Elementary School
- 8) Eric Knowlton
- 9) North Berwick Elementary School
- 10) Vivian Hussey
- 11) Noble Middle School
- 12) Noble High School

- 13) **MSAD 35 School (So. Berwick, Eliot)**
- 14) Central School (So. Berwick)
- 15) Eliot Elementary
- 16) Mary Hurd School
- 17) Great Works School
- 18) Marshwood Middle School
- 19) Marshwood High School

- 20) **Sanford School Department**
- 21) Carl J. Lamb School
- 22) Willard School
- 23) Sanford Pride Elementary
- 24) Margaret Chase Smith
- 25) Sanford Junior High
- 26) Sanford High School

- 27) **MSAD55 Sacopee Valley (Hiram)**
- 28) SV/Hiram Elementary School
- 29) SV/Hiram Middle School
- 30) SV/Hiram High School

- 31) **Saco School Department**
- 32) Fairfield School
- 33) Young School
- 34) CK Burns School
- 35) Saco Middle School
- 36) Thornton Academy Middle School
- 37) Thornton Academy

- 38) **Dayton Consolidated School (District)**

- 39) **SAD 57**
- 40) Waterboro Elementary School
- 41) Line Elementary School
- 42) Shapleigh Memorial School
- 43) Alfred Elementary School
- 44) Lyman Elementary School
- 45) Massabesic Junior High School
- 46) Massabesic High School

47) South Portland School District

- 48) Frank I. Brown Elementary School
- 49) Helena H. Dyer Elementary School
- 50) James O. Kaler Elementary School
- 51) Dr. Waldo T. Skillin Elementary School
- 52) Dora Small Elementary School
- 53) South Portland Middle School
- 54) South Portland High School

55) RSU14 (Windham, Raymond Schools)

- 56) Windham Primary School
- 57) Manchester School
- 58) Raymond Elementary School
- 59) Jordan Small Middle School

60) Brunswick School Department

- 61) Harriet Beecher Stowe Elementary School
- 62) Kate Furbish Elementary School
- 63) Brunswick Junior High
- 64) Brunswick High School

65) RSU1 School District (Bath, Woolwich, Phippsburg)

- 66) Woolwich Central School
- 67) Phippsburg Elementary School
- 68) Fisher Mitchell School
- 69) Dike Newell School
- 70) Bath Middle School
- 71) Morse High School

72) West Bath School District

73) MSAD75 (Topsham, Bowdoin, Bowdoinham, Harpswell)

- 74) Bowdoin Central School
- 75) Bowdoinham Community School
- 76) Harpswell Community School
- 77) Williams-Cone Elementary School
- 78) Woodside Elementary School
- 79) Mt. Ararat Middle School
- 80) Mt. Ararat High School

81) RSU16 School District (Mechanic Falls, Minot, Poland)

- 82) Elm Street School
- 83) Poland Community School
- 84) Bruce Whittier Middle School

85) RSU13 (Rockland, Thomaston, Cushing, Owls Head, Ash Point)

- 86) Cushing Community School
- 87) South School
- 88) Oceanside Middle School
- 89) Oceanside High School

90) RSU28 & Five Town CSD (Camden, Rockport, Appleton, Hope, Lincolnville)

- 91) Camden/Rockport Elementary School
- 92) Camden/Rockport Middle School
- 93) Camden/Rockport High School

94) RSU71 (Belfast, East Belfast, Searsmont, Morrill, Swanville)

- 95) Ames School (Searsomont)

- 96) Capt. Albert Stevens School (Belfast)
- 97) East Belfast School
- 98) Gladys Weymouth School
- 99) Kermit Kickerson School
- 100) Troy Howard Middle School
- 101) Belfast Area High School
- 102) Belfast Community Outreach Program in Education (BCOPE)

- 103) RSU20 Searsport**
- 104) Searsport Elementary School
- 105) Searsport Middle School
- 106) Searsport High School

- 107) RSU3 (Brooks, Freedom, Jackson, Knox, Liberty, Monroe, Montville, Thorndike, Troy, Unity, Waldo)**
- 108) Monroe Elementary School
- 109) Morse Memorial Elementary School
- 110) Mount View Elementary School
- 111) Troy Elementary School
- 112) Unity School
- 113) Walker Elementary School
- 114) Mount View Middle School
- 115) Mount View High School

- 116) Union76**
- 117) Brooklin Elementary School
- 118) Sedgwick Elementary School

- 119) Union93**
- 120) Brooksville Elementary School
- 121) Penobscot Elementary School
- 122) Surry Elementary School

- 123) CSD13**
- 124) Deer Isle Stonington Elementary School

- 125) Private/Specialty Purpose Schools**
- 126) St. James School (K – 8) Biddeford
- 127) All Saints School (K – 8) Bangor

- 128) Secondary Schools**
- 129) Southern Maine Community College (SMCC) South Portland

- 130) Districts see several clients in but are not formerly contracted with**
- 131) York School Department
- 132) Wells Ogunquit CSD

- 133) Housing and Recovery Communities**
- 134) Bangor
- 135) Brewer
- 136) Old Town
- 137) Bath
- 138) McCauley Residence (Bangor)

Portland Press Herald

OPINION

School-based therapy not financially sustainable without state support

Providers like mine are creatively subsidizing the cost of mental health services at public schools. That can't last.

To help satisfy the growing demand and need for preventative mental health services for young people in Maine, Sweetser is meeting the moment at a great financial loss.

Last year, we lost \$376,000 on our school-based therapy services. So far this year, our program is operating at a \$438,000 deficit. These negative margins are unsustainable and they're being experienced by other providers as well. We prop up the cost of school-based therapy using other program revenues and donations because this is a best practice in treatment delivery.

According to a study by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, young people are more comfortable accessing services through school-based clinics. Because children spend the majority of their day in educational settings, schools play a critical role in providing a safe, non-stigmatizing and supportive natural environment in which children and families can have access to prevention, early intervention and treatment.

Sweetser provides treatment in more than 35 school districts and in more than 100 schools, including elementary, middle and high schools. Sweetser has approximately 80 school-based clinicians across the state of Maine and we served more than 2,300 students last year in schools, from Kittery to Bangor.

We're embedded in school campuses, working alongside school-hired counselors and school social workers to form a continuum of care to support students' mental health needs. Each role has its own specific purpose. Working together, the team provides a comprehensive support network for the child and family. Mental health

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Joanne Grant is the chief growth officer of behavioral health organization Sweetser.

L.D. 2002, introduced by Maine Speaker of the House Rachel Talbot Ross, would allow the Department of Education to setup a grant-like incentive for schools to contract with a behavioral health provider to provide school based therapy services.

support takes a village and providers like us are one important part of that puzzle.

But how's this for a news headline?

"100 Maine public schools no longer provide youth mental health treatment."

If we don't find a path forward with the Legislature, that's not a faint possibility, it's an absolute reality.

Sweetser places licensed professionals in schools at no cost to the school district. We bill the student's insurance, but the reimbursement rate only covers the actual face-to-face time that the clinician spends in session with the child. There is so much more to the position than simply back-to-back therapy sessions. It requires full integration within a school setting and a number of key activities that we, as a provider, simply cannot bill for. This creates a financial gap that we can't fill alone.

Common-sense activities like meeting with educators about how to remove barriers to the students' learning, getting parental consent paperwork signed, traveling to families' homes for therapy, required continuing education training, documentation, family communication and dealing with urgent mental health or emotional crises that arise on campus are all not billable.

L.D. 2002, introduced by Maine Speaker of the House Rachel Talbot Ross, would allow the Department of Education to setup a grant-like incentive for schools to contract with a behavioral health provider to provide school based therapy services. It would financially stabilize the existing roster of school-based clinicians – not just at Sweetser, but with providers across the state. It would also incentivize school districts and schools without such mental health professionals to work with providers to ensure proper access to therapy and emotional supports.

L.D. 2002 will not only put us on a path towards sustainability by reducing the deficits being absorbed by community agencies, it will allow providers like us to recruit and retain highly qualified clinicians, pay clinicians a livable salaried wage, help school districts provide mental health services and ultimately avoid program closure. It's a win for students, families, schools and our whole state.

Maine is poised to have a budget surplus of several hundred million dollars. This bill is a drop in the bucket compared to the cost and risk of incarceration and other long-term strains on our systems if youth mental health challenges go unchecked and untreated. The time to invest in our children's future is now. The time to act is now.

Get students needed counseling services

As a former clinical counselor working in Maine public schools for over 20 years, I know how important it is

that we make it possible for kids and families to access needed care. By making various mental health services, with parental involvement, available on public school campuses, we remove significant barriers to treatment including the shortage of community resources and transportation challenges. Families are under tremendous stress. Students report high need for support. The more we can do to help increase access to therapy, especially in natural school settings, the better.

As a former legislator, I also know how important it is that we speak out and support much-needed legislation. I ask people to reach out to their legislators in support of House Speaker Rachel Talbot Ross' LD 2002, "An Act to Provide Incentives to Schools That Contract for Certain Social Work and Family Therapy Services."

This proposal will help provide funding for schools to contract with a provider for well-qualified clinicians who have the training and expertise needed to help our children, youth and families with the behavioral health challenges they face.

For the well-being of all, people should please do all they can to encourage support of this important bill now before the Maine Legislature. Let's do all we can to make sure kids and families get the clinical counseling services they need.

Jay McCreight
Harpswell
