

State of Maine  
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Testimony of James Babcock, Threat Assessment and Mental Health Program Coordinator of the Maine School Safety Center

In Support: L.D. 21

An Act to Update the Provision of Law Concerning Student Codes of Conduct in Order to Reflect Best Practices Regarding Behavioral Threat Assessment and Response

Before the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs

Sponsored by: Senator Rafferty

Date: March 13, 2025

Senator Rafferty, Representative Murphy, and Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs:

My name is Dr. James Babcock, and I serve as the Threat Assessment and Mental Health Coordinator for the Maine School Safety Center at the Maine Department of Education. While I have been in this role for just 2 months, I bring over 30 years of experience in public education. As a licensed psychologist and certified school psychologist, much of my career has been dedicated to leading the implementation of school-based threat assessment teams. I am honored to be here today to advocate for the use of behavioral threat assessment in our schools.

I am here today representing the Department speaking in support of L.D. 21, An Act to Update the Provision of Law Concerning Student Codes of Conduct in Order to Reflect Best Practices Regarding Behavioral Threat Assessment and Response. The purpose of this bill is to amend the statutory language regarding student codes of conduct to reflect the Department of Education's Whole Student Approach and nationally-recognized practices in the field supported by the Maine School Safety Center. Specifically, this bill updates statute to reflect current best practices related to behavioral threat assessment and response.

The Department supports this bill because it provides a balanced and proactive approach to school safety that prioritizes both safety and student well-being. By focusing on preventative and supportive interventions, behavioral threat assessment helps schools address the root causes of concerning behavior before they escalate into serious incidents. Research consistently shows that exclusionary practices, such as suspensions and expulsions, disproportionately affect marginalized students and increase their likelihood of academic disengagement and future involvement with the juvenile justice system. By implementing behavioral threat assessment, schools can reduce these negative outcomes while maintaining a secure and supportive environment conducive to the learning of all students.

Behavioral Threat Assessment and Management (BTAM), or threat assessment, is a structured, multidisciplinary approach to identifying, assessing, and managing potential threats of violence in schools. It emphasizes early intervention, supportive responses, and evidence-based decision-

making to prevent violence and ensure the safety of all students and staff. A key feature of threat assessment is that it includes team-based collaboration, where school-based teams of administrators, mental health specialists, other school staff, and law enforcement work together to evaluate and respond to threats of violence. Threat assessment also focuses on contextual analysis. This means teams seek to determine the motivation and capability behind a threat, which is important in distinguishing threats that are serious from those that are not serious. Further, as a violence prevention strategy, threat assessment prioritizes early identification and connecting students to mental health and/or other services to address root causes of concerning behavior.

Threat assessment differs from traditional forms of school discipline in several key ways. First and foremost, threat assessment focuses on reducing the risk of violence by seeking to understand the context and motivations behind concerning behaviors. This approach allows teams to respond with interventions that address the underlying challenges or problems the student is facing rather than relying solely on punitive measures. By taking a holistic and preventative stance, threat assessment aims to support both the student and the broader school community in maintaining safety.

This change is being suggested because there is clear evidence that threat assessment is highly effective when it comes to school safety and fairness. Over the past 25 years, research has consistently shown its effectiveness in preventing violence and supporting equitable disciplinary practices. According to the US Secret Service National Threat Assessment Center (NTAC), most school shootings are preventable through proactive measures such as threat assessment. Schools implementing threat assessment report fewer instances of severe disciplinary actions and increased ability to intervene before situations escalate. They also report a renewed culture of care and trust within schools, encouraging students to report concerns without fear of harsh consequences. Threat assessment aligns with recommendations from the US Department of Education, Department of Homeland Security, and NTAC.

To ensure the continued safety of our schools, the Department recommends fully trained behavioral threat assessment teams in each of our school buildings. The Maine School Safety Center is dedicated to continuing the training and support of this program. This training and support has been provided at no cost to schools. Adopting threat assessment in our schools is a proactive step toward preventing violence, improving safety while reducing school exclusion and fostering an inclusive environment where every student can thrive.

For these reasons, the Department of Education is in support of L.D. 21, An Act to Update the Provision of Law Concerning Student Codes of Conduct in Order to Reflect Best Practices Regarding Behavioral Threat Assessment and Response. Thank you for your time and consideration. I am happy to answer any questions the Committee may have, and I can be available for work sessions on this critical issue.