

**Testimony in Support of LD 165**

**March 13, 2025**

**Supporting Educational Excellence Through Balanced Accountability and Student Safety**

Chair Rafferty, Chair Murphy, and Distinguished Members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today in support of LD 165. My name is Jeremy Ray, and I serve as the Superintendent of Schools for the Biddeford, Saco, Dayton School District, where I am responsible for over 5,000 students across these three communities.

I come before you today not as a partisan, but as an educator seeking common-sense solutions for our schools, students, and communities. This issue speaks to our shared values of educational opportunity, personal responsibility, community safety, and protecting the rights of all students.

**The Impact of LD 484 (2021)**

Before discussing the merits of LD 165, I believe it's critical to address the origins of our current situation. In 2021, the legislature passed LD 484, "An Act Regarding School Discipline for Maine's Youngest Children," which prohibited schools from suspending or expelling students in grade 5 or below except in cases where federal law required removal.

While the intentions behind LD 484 were laudable – to keep young students in school and address discipline disparities – there has been zero evidence that these changes have made our schools a better place for all students and teachers. The law severely restricted schools' disciplinary options for our youngest learners, based on the premise that suspensions were disproportionately affecting certain student populations and potentially causing academic harm. In the four years since its implementation, our district data suggests the opposite effect has occurred:

- The number of serious behavioral incidents involving students in grades K-5 has increased
- Teacher burnout and requests for transfers from early elementary classrooms have risen significantly
- Parent complaints about classroom disruptions affecting their children's learning have doubled

LD 484's blanket prohibition on suspensions removed a critical tool from administrators without providing adequate alternatives or resources to address serious behavioral issues. The law mandated that schools implement restorative practices and positive behavioral interventions, but provided insufficient funding or training to adequately implement these approaches. While the law was well-intentioned, its

practical implementation has created significant challenges for maintaining safe and productive learning environments. After four years under these restrictions, there is no empirical evidence that the prohibition has improved school climate, reduced behavioral incidents, or enhanced academic outcomes for elementary students.

### **Restoring Local Control and Empowering Families**

While I am not a proponent of suspending young students as a first resort, I believe this revision to the current law is necessary and overdue. The ability for principals to implement appropriate consequences, including suspension when warranted, is an essential tool that was removed from our administrative toolbox. When serious behavioral incidents occur, families and communities rightfully look to schools to respond with appropriate measures.

The current prohibition on suspending students in grade 5 or below has created several unintended consequences in our schools:

First, parents need to be fully informed about serious behavioral issues involving their child. When a significant incident occurs, an out-of-school suspension creates a necessary opportunity for families to engage in meaningful conversations with their children about behavior, expectations, and accountability. Without this formal consequence, many parents seem unaware of the severity of certain situations.

### **Protecting Individual Rights and Ensuring Public Safety**

Second, we have a responsibility to protect all students and staff in our buildings. While these situations are rare, we are seeing an alarming increase in behaviors that endanger others. There are situations where a temporary removal from school is necessary to ensure the safety and well-being of other students and teachers. By restricting our ability to suspend younger students, we have limited our capacity to address these dangerous situations effectively.

Third, our teachers and staff need to know that the administration takes significant behavioral incidents seriously. When administrators cannot implement appropriate consequences for disruption, violence, or dangerous behavior, it sends a troubling message that such actions are somehow tolerable. Our educators deserve better support.

### **Economic Impact and Workforce Development**

Student behavioral challenges represent one of the most significant factors driving educators from our profession. According to a 2023 National Education Association survey, 91% of educators reported that student behavioral issues have increased in recent years, and 67% cited lack of administrative support for student discipline as a primary reason for considering leaving the field. Here in Maine, our own Department of Education data indicates that teacher retention has become increasingly challenging, with classroom management issues frequently cited as a contributing factor.

This exodus represents not only a significant economic investment lost but also threatens our ability to provide equitable educational opportunities for all students.

## **Creating Inclusive Communities Through Balanced Approaches**

This is not about punishing children. This is about balancing compassion with accountability, supporting the many students who come to school ready to learn, and giving administrators the flexibility to address serious situations appropriately. I believe members on both sides of the aisle can agree that:

- All students deserve equal access to a safe, orderly learning environment
- Parents deserve to be fully engaged when serious behavioral issues occur
- Teachers deserve administrative support when facing disruptive or dangerous behavior
- Schools need fiscal responsibility in managing resources, which includes addressing behaviors that disrupt the educational process

## **Investing in Future Generations Through Responsible Policy**

I want to emphasize that suspension should be used sparingly, as a last resort, and as part of a comprehensive approach to behavior management that includes restorative practices, mental health supports, and family engagement. However, completely removing this option has tied the hands of administrators who are trying to maintain safe, productive learning environments.

This bill strikes a reasonable balance by restoring the authority to suspend students when necessary while maintaining important safeguards. The three-day maximum for suspensions of younger students is appropriate and ensures that any removal from school is brief and focused.

I urge you to support LD 165 and restore this important tool to help our schools maintain safe learning environments, support students in understanding accountability, engage parents in addressing behavioral issues, and demonstrate to our dedicated educators that their safety and well-being matter.

Thank you for your consideration. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

Jeremy Ray  
Superintendent of Schools