



Testimony of Ashleigh Barker
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Before the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs
LD 858

An Act to Ensure Behavioral and Mental Health Services Are Available to Students by
Providing Grants to Schools That Contract for Those Services
LD 1203

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and Mental Health Services
April 8, 2025

Senator Rafferty, Representative Noonan Murphy and members of the Joint Standing Committees on Education and Cultural Affairs, my name is Ashleigh Barker. I am the Executive Director at the Maine Children's Alliance. I am here today to speak in support of LD 858, *An Act to Ensure Behavioral and Mental Health Services Are Available to Students by Providing Grants to Schools That Contract for Those Services* and LD 1203, *An Act to Provide Grants to Schools That Contract for Behavioral and Mental Health Services*.

We are a statewide non-partisan advocacy organization whose mission is to promote sound public policies and best practices to improve the lives of Maine children, youth, and families.

LDs 858 and 1203 represent a critical step forward in addressing the behavioral health needs of Maine's students by supporting school-based behavioral health services.

According to the 2024 Maine KIDS COUNT® Data Book, "about one in three middle and high school students described feeling sad or hopeless, and about one in five reported self-harming and/or that they had thought about dying by suicide" *, while the waitlist for services within the community continues at an alarming level. This trend underscores the urgent need for accessible behavioral health services within our schools.

Educators across Maine are witnessing firsthand the impact of these challenges. A recent study by the Maine Education Policy Research Institute, highlighted that teachers and administrators are increasingly concerned about the rise in dysregulated behaviors among students, which not only disrupt learning but also indicate deeper mental health issues. These professionals emphasize the necessity for additional support and resources to effectively manage and address these behaviors within the educational environment.

From a developmental perspective, early experiences and interactions play a crucial role in shaping brain architecture. Positive, responsive relationships are fundamental in building strong neural connections that support emotional regulation and cognitive development.

By integrating behavioral health services into schools, we can facilitate these supportive interactions, thereby promoting healthier brain development and better long-term outcomes for our students.

These two bills aligns with our core belief that proactive policy within the education system can transform outcomes for Maine's youngest residents. Schools are not only places of learning; they are often the most stable and consistent environment in a child's life. For many students, particularly those in rural and underserved communities, schools may be the only place where they have regular access to behavioral health professionals.

We know from data and direct experience with families across the state that far too many children face barriers to behavioral health services. Provider shortages, especially in rural areas, combined with long travel distances and limited transportation options, mean that students often go without the care they need. LDs 858 and 1203 can help bridge this gap by allowing schools to directly contract with behavioral health providers—making services more accessible, timely, and integrated into the school day.

In addition, these bills present an opportunity for Maine to maximize the use of Medicaid as a funding source for school-based behavioral health services. By supporting schools in navigating the Medicaid billing process and reducing administrative hurdles, the state can help ensure these services are financially sustainable long term. Many schools are willing and eager to provide these supports but struggle with the complexity of Medicaid billing and lack the infrastructure to manage it effectively. Streamlining this process and offering technical assistance would not only expand access but would also lessen the financial burden on local school budgets.

At a time when we are seeing heightened mental health needs among children and youth, we must make it easier—not harder—for schools to step in and be part of the solution.

These bills are not just about services, they are about equitable opportunity and support for all Maine's children and youth. It ensures that all students—regardless of zip code—have a chance to thrive academically, emotionally, and socially.

On behalf of the Maine Children's Alliance, I urge you to support the needed changes these bills support for Maine students. These bills will support children's mental health and well-being which is ultimately fundamental to student success.

Thank you for your time and for your continued work on behalf of Maine's families. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.

* Maine Department of Health and Human Services. (2023). Maine Integrated Youth Health Survey.