

*In Support*  
**LD 858 & 1203**

**Senator Rafferty, Representative Murphy, and honorable members of the Education & Cultural Affairs Committee,**

My name is John McAnuff and I'm the Chief Financial Officer of Sweetser. I am here today to speak in favor of both LD 858 and LD 1203. We deeply appreciate the leadership of both Rep. Lori Gramlich and Sen. Rachel Talbot Ross for working with us to try and save school-based therapy.

Research shows that half of all mental illnesses begin by age 15. Despite this glaring statistic, only about half of these children will receive treatment and even less will receive evidence-based interventions. That is, treatment that proves to make a difference.

Both these bills are designed to change that. Accessing behavioral health services in Maine and across the country is difficult. Sweetser alone maintains an extensive waiting list. Yet we know that early identification and preventative interventions are the hallmarks of effective behavioral healthcare systems.

For parents of youth, barriers to treatment include the need to take time off from work for appointments, travel distance barriers, and inadequate funding to support behavioral health interventions.

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.

A study by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services indicated that youth are more comfortable accessing services through school-based clinics. Schools provide a natural setting in which students can receive needed supports and services and where families are comfortable and trusting in accessing these services.

Studies have shown the value of developing comprehensive school mental health programs in helping students achieve academically and build social skills, self-awareness, and caring connections to adults in their school and community. Schools that partner with behavioral health entities have been proven to significantly decrease rates of truancy and discipline, increase high school graduation numbers, and help create a positive school environment in which a student can learn and thrive in school and in the community.

The purpose of this bill is to improve student access to mental health resources, support students who have experienced anxiety, depression, or trauma, and to support the adults that surround them. It is not to replace existing school support staff – not to replace guidance counselors or school psychologists or school social workers, but to establish, expand or enhance services through a partnership with an experienced child-serving behavioral health organization. Where they exist, school staff can play a critical role in terms of being a liaison to a behavioral health organization and triaging students to the services which the school itself is not equipped to address.

Our school therapists work 12 months a year and have helped thousands of Maine youth navigate bullying, anxiety, depression, parental divorce, and other adverse childhood experiences.

Cost is the biggest barrier of why every school does not have an in-school therapist. In fact, Sweetser operates this program at a loss and supplements it with other programs and donations because we believe in its prevention mission so much. But it's simply not financially sustainable for any provider. As a result, Sweetser has had to reduce our presence from being in more than 100 schools to now about 45. This reduces the number of children and families we can help and causes more Maine families to be put on waitlists.

These bills will stabilize the program, ensure its continuance, and give families in need a critical lifeline to mental health care.

The time to invest in our children's future is now. The time to act is now. Thank you and I'm happy to be a resource for this committee as you work these important bills.

Sincerely,  
**John McAnuff**  
Chief Financial Officer