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## TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF

L.D. 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

L.D. 1203—AN ACT TO PROVIDE GRANTS TO SCHOOLS THAT CONTRACT FOR BEHAVIORAL AND MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

April 8, 2025

Senator Rafferty, Representative Noonan Murphy, and esteemed members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee, I am Steven Bailey, the executive director of the Maine School Management Association, testifying on behalf of the legislative committees of the Maine School Boards Association and the Maine School Superintendents Association in strong support of L.D. 858 and L.D. 1203. Our associations represent more than 1,700 school board members and more than 200 superintendents across Maine.

The investments in this bill will strengthen and expand a proven model of student mental health support – one that is already providing a cost-effective solution across Maine.

Your committee has already heard repeatedly about the lack of mental health services inside Maine school districts. Districts simply cannot find enough guidance counselors, social workers, BHP's, and other mental health staff to address the growing mental health needs of our students. The results of the lack of these services are apparent: students dealing with anxiety, depression, and acting out, with few resources available to tackle the root causes of their challenges.

School-based mental health services – the programming that would be funded through these bills – are already serving as a lifeline for many districts to address these challenges. Under these programs, school districts contract with a clinician from a provider like Northern Light or Sweetser, sometimes for just a day or two per week, who either have a contract with a school or are billed through MaineCare. Clinicians are on-site, available to sit down with students, provide regular check-ins, and offer specialized knowledge to help educators, children and their families.

This is a true win-win situation. Schools can offer the services we know our children need. Other school staff can lean on the mental health expertise of these contracted providers. And students can walk right down the hall for support.

Research shows the clear benefits of these services. By addressing these underlying issues early on, schools may prevent the need for more extensive and costly interventions later. According to the U.S. Government Accountability Office, students experiencing mental health challenges *without* treatment are at higher risk for lower grade point averages, school dropouts, and unemployment.

Unfortunately, failure to invest in these school-based mental health services last year had real impacts on their availability: Sweetser was forced to cut back services in several schools due to a lack of funds, directly leading to less support for students.

We know the state's current budget situation is limited. But passing L.D. 858 and L.D. 1203 will invest in a proven model of mental health support that will directly benefit Maine children in need. MSBA and MSSA urge you to support this legislation.