



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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April 8, 2025

Testimony of Rep. Lori K. Gramlich presenting

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

Before the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs

Senator Rafferty, Representative Murphy and honorable members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee, I am Lori Gramlich. I have the privilege of representing the lovely seaside community of Old Orchard Beach in House District 131 and the distinct honor of serving as assistant House majority leader. Thank you for the opportunity to introduce ***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***.

As some of you may know, I am a Licensed Master Social Worker and have been practicing in the state of Maine for nearly 35 years. As a social worker, advocate and now as a four-term state legislator, the focus of much of my work has been on how to protect Maine children and ensure they have the support they need to thrive. That is also the goal of the proposal before you today.

According to data from the John T. Gorman Foundation, Maine kids are facing serious mental health challenges. One in six Maine children have been diagnosed with anxiety, and 7% are struggling with depression. Furthermore, 20% of Maine children have experienced two or more Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) - higher than the national average of 17%. ACEs include experiences like violence, abuse, and other traumatic events, and the stress and trauma that accompanies these experiences can have a lasting negative impact on a child's wellbeing, both mental and physical, and their future.

That means one in five Maine children are dealing with not just one but multiple life-altering experiences that they are not emotionally or developmentally equipped to process on their own - because they are kids, and no child should have to process traumatic events on their own. And despite their need for support as they navigate these challenges, Maine children do not have adequate access to the mental and behavioral health care they need to overcome the adversity they face.

LD 858 would provide Maine's school-aged children with the support they need by meeting them where they most often are: in school. It establishes a grant program within the Department of Education, which would provide funding to schools in order to offer much needed, evidence-based services through contracts with licensed behavioral and mental health service providers. Returning members of the

committee may recognize that LD 858 mirrors a bill that was passed out of this committee last session and made it to the Special Appropriations Table with bipartisan support.

Some school districts do offer these types of services in a school-based setting, and this bill is intended to augment - not replace or minimize - the important work that is already happening in this arena. However, you will hear from clinicians and advocates today who will share that the current availability of school-based services is simply not adequate. And even where school-based services are currently available, the funding of these services is so lean and precarious that the future of these programs is constantly in question.

LD 858 would be an important step toward ensuring Maine students have the mental and behavioral health services they need, when and where they need them. I ask the committee to consider this: These kids are our entire future. What more important investment can we make than to invest in their wellbeing and ability to succeed?

Thank you for your thoughtful consideration. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have for me.