

Good afternoon,

Thank you for providing me the opportunity to speak on behalf of **LD1203, A bill to provide grants to schools for Behavioral and Mental Health Services.**

My name is Sophie Payson and I am a licensed clinical social worker. I have had the very good fortune to spend the past 20 years working alongside our teachers, administrators, coaches and in some districts contracted licensed clinicians to support students in achieving their academic goals. I am not sure how much time you have spent in schools recently or if you have children or grand-children in schools but I would like to start with a brief snapshot of what a day is like for a mental health provider in a school setting to illustrate the dire need that schools have for more behavioral and mental health providers and resources: This was my day yesterday:

- I started a day doing a safety assessment for a freshman boy who is struggling with thoughts of killing himself. In my call to his mother, she told me she wants to get him a therapist but has no insurance so could I please continue to work with him..
- My next appointment was a student whose house burned down and he is working 3 jobs while attending school full-time to help his mother with her bills because he doesn't want to have to switch schools for the 4th time in 3 years.
- The next student came in because she had given the finger to a student who had been making fun of her in class. This is a student who has a disability and has an extensive history of bullying from elementary and middle school and has described how lonely she is everyday at school without any friends
- I made a home visit for a student who is not currently attending because he is worried his family will be deported while he is at school.
- A student came in because she had sent a nude photo to a "friend" who then shared it with his group of friends and she wanted to drop out of school.
- I then had a meeting with a student and a parent because the student feels so much anxiety it is impacting her grades and she has lost interest in extracurricular activities such as sports and her art work.
- I met with a teacher who was worried about a student because she had noticed the student had cuts all up and down both arms.
- I saw a student whose parents are getting a divorce and she is so angry
- A student who lost his dad to an overdose earlier in the year

Everyday is like this in schools all across Maine, and many schools do not have the resources to employ full time social workers so rely on contracting with outside mental health providers. The behavioral and mental health needs are increasing and impacting students' success in schools. The latest numbers I have seen are that more than 1/3 of all students in Maine schools are struggling with mental health

issues(<https://www.pressherald.com/2023/12/15/fewer-teens-vaping-but-mental-health-struggles-remain-common/>). The financial consequences of not supporting students to stay in school are extensive. Studies have shown that students without a high school diploma make 25% less than those with a High School diploma.

(https://nebhe.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/ME-Value-of-Higher-Ed_May-2019.pdf). For

non-graduates, there are higher rates of substance abuse, domestic violence, unstable housing and employment. All this to say, we can save money in the long run if we offer preventive services in schools.

Outside contracted licensed counselors and clinicians play a vital role in students' mental and behavioral health needs as they provide their services in schools reducing the barriers to access. Some of the additional barriers for kids/teens to access therapy outside of school:

- There are transportation barriers, specifically in the more rural parts of the state
- kids may have to miss school to go to appointments
- High school students often have after school jobs
- Older students need to get home to take care of younger siblings
- Reduced stigma if able to access in school
- Most outside therapists are full and not taking new clients

This bill to provide grants to schools for Behavioral Health Services would not only address and support the behavioral health of students throughout Maine, but with the grant funding, it would allow services for the increasing number of Maine's students that do not have Mainecare. Increased access for students to receive Behavioral Health services not only reduces mental health issues but also improves school attendance, improves focus and motivation in school, and reduces disciplinary issues because students are getting the help and support they need.

I urge you to support LD 1203.
Thank you for your time.
Sophia Payson-Rand, LCSW