

TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF

L.D. 1398

AN ACT REGARDING BEHAVIORAL HEALTH SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

April 23, 2025

Senator Rafferty, Representative Noonan Murphy, and members of the Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs, I am Steven Bailey, 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. 1398, An Act Regarding Behavioral Health Support for Students in Public Schools.

Attached to our testimony, you will see a chart shared with you earlier this session from Maine Education Policy Research Institute that highlights the desperate need for this bill. It shows that one of the largest drivers of education cost increases over the past 20 years in Maine is the growth in the category “student and staff support.” These include positions such as instructional coaches, as well as school counselors and social workers.

Expenditures on these services have more than tripled, per-pupil, since 2021, and for a good reason: districts across Maine have recognized their vital importance in addressing Maine’s youth mental health crisis. School counselors play crucial leadership roles, putting in schoolwide programs that better support students, work together with other educators, and address issues such as chronic absenteeism. Social workers help address behavioral concerns and connect students and families with needs and services within their larger communities.

Yet the EPS funding formula has not recognized the full extent of these particular needs in our schools. This creates serious inequities: wealthier districts can – and do – afford counselors, social workers, and other support staff. Smaller, more rural, and less wealthy districts – the ones who need the services the most – must often go without. The original goal of the EPS funding formula was to provide equity across our state in helping every student reach their educational goals, and in this one area, superintendents and school boards believe the formula simply is no longer “adequate.”

We believe the changes put forward in L.D. 1398 would strengthen our schools by updating the staffing ratios in the funding formula and recognizing the need for these important positions in all of their schools. This will send a strong signal that Maine is serious about correcting these inadequacies and addressing Maine’s youth mental health crisis. For the first time, many schools would be able to offer the mental health services that every educational and child welfare organization across our state knows are desperately needed.

We also have clear evidence these services improve student results. Research shows¹ that adding more mental health supports within a school leads to fewer disciplinary referrals, with higher test scores and graduation rates.

We do not believe L.D. 1398 is the only solution to Maine students' behavioral and mental health challenges, and our association advocates for other investments, such as other bills providing grants for behavioral and mental health services. We also acknowledge the state's difficult budget situation. However, our associations firmly believe that these investments will provide substantial monetary benefits that will directly improve the lives of students and families across Maine. We urge you to support L.D. 1398.

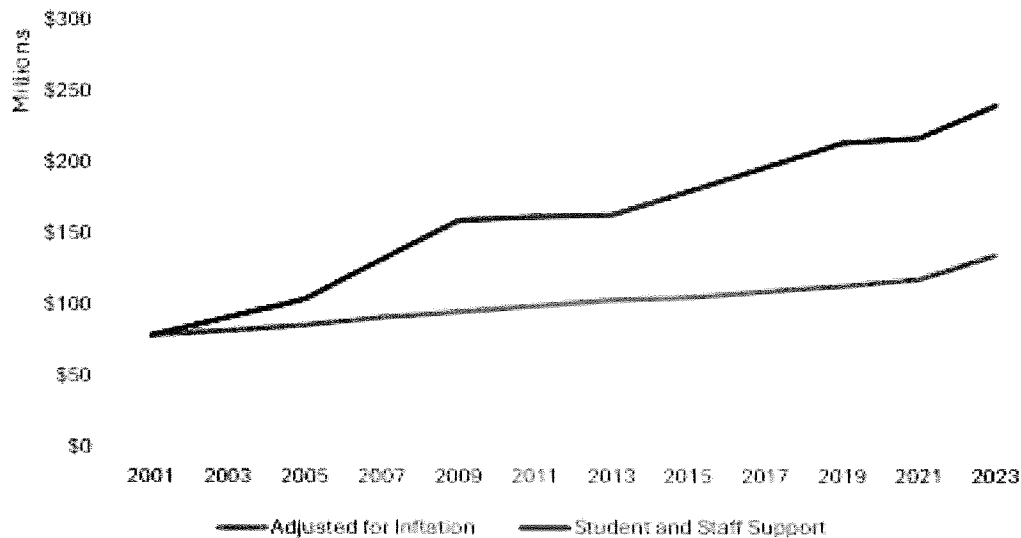
¹ <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s12310-013-9116-2>

Student & Staff Support

Student support: Guidance, Health, Instructional technology, and Other student services

Staff support: Improvement of instruction, Instructional staff training (professional development), Library services, Student assessment

6a. Student & Staff Support



6b. Per-Pupil Expenditure - Student and Staff Support

