

Debra C. Susi
61 Pierce Street
Gardiner, ME 04345
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To: Senator Carney, Representative Kuhn and Distinguished Members of the Judiciary Committee

My name is Debra Susi. I am a 38-year educator, the 2022 Somerset County Teacher of the Year and semifinalist for the 2023 Maine State Teacher of the Year. I submit this testimony in strong opposition to the proposed legislation LD 1704 that would prohibit schools from allowing students to use restrooms aligned with their gender identity.

As an educator who has worked with thousands of students across multiple generations, I can tell you with absolute certainty that every child who walks through our school doors deserves to feel safe, seen, and respected. This bill does the opposite. It targets some of our most vulnerable students—those who are transgender or gender non-conforming—and sends a harmful message that their identity is something to be invalidated by state law.

Schools are not just institutions of learning; they are communities that teach by example. When we legislate exclusion, we teach exclusion. When we legally deny a transgender student the right to use a restroom consistent with their identity, we are telling them they are less worthy of dignity and safety than their peers. This is deeply harmful, not just to those students but to the entire fabric of our school community.

Over nearly four decades, I have seen firsthand the toll discrimination takes on students. I have also seen the transformative power of acceptance. I have worked with transgender students who were able to thrive—not because their lives were made easier, but because their schools made it clear they had a right to exist, to belong, and to be treated with dignity. This bill would strip that away.

Furthermore, the fear that underpins this legislation is not supported by data. Numerous peer-reviewed studies and the policies of leading national education and pediatric organizations affirm that allowing students to use restrooms aligned with their gender identity does not compromise the safety or privacy of others. What it does is affirm a student's identity, which is linked to better mental health outcomes, lower suicide rates, and improved academic success.

This is not about politics. This is about people—students, families, and communities. This bill would create confusion and conflict where there is currently compassion and clarity. It would place educators and administrators in a position where they are forced to choose between complying with state law and protecting the well-being of the children entrusted to them.

In closing, I urge you—please do not pass this bill. Reject this legislation and stand on the side of dignity, inclusion, and evidence-based policy. Our children are watching, and they deserve to be affirmed, respected, and safe.

Thank you.

