

Rebecca Cole  
Sebago East Shore Education Association

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan, and members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee,

My name is Rebecca Cole. I am a 25-year veteran educator who teaches first grade at Windham Primary School in RSU#14. I am also the President of Sebago East Shore Education Association and serve as Maine's representative on the Board of Directors for the National Education Association. I stand in full support of L.D. 880.

When you hear the word "bullying", what comes to mind? Most of us picture overt aggression, physical intimidation, and relentless teasing or ridicule. Bullying is generally considered unjust, unfair, hurtful, and even dangerous to those who experience these kinds of behaviors.

"Bullying" is often confused with "harassment". Both cause physical, mental, and emotional harm. Both represent a power inequity between the victim and the aggressor. Both are prohibited-for students-under Maine law. However, "bullying" and "harassment" are not interchangeable terms. Harassment is targeted, harmful behavior toward a protected class, such as race, color, religion, sex, age, disability, or national origin, and anti-harassment laws and policies do protect employees as well as students. Some bullying in our public schools may meet the definition of harassment. Workplace bullying, though, can also include retaliation, humiliation, isolation, exclusion, verbal and nonverbal aggression, belittling, and unjust portrayals of employee performance-none of which would qualify for protection under anti-harassment legislation OR collective bargaining language.

What does this look like in some of Maine's public schools?

- Educators being consistently excluded from professional opportunities
- Educators receiving evaluations which minimize competencies or unfairly/inaccurately exaggerate situations
- Educators being excluded from communication they need in order to perform their duties
- Educators being belittled or ridiculed for their views and practices
- Educators being involuntarily transferred to a different workspace, team, building, grade level, etc. after expressing a particular point of view or asking questions/sharing concerns about various topics

Some specific examples include:

- A Maine educator with over 20 years of experience being called "too old to learn anything new" and excluded from a number of professional learning opportunities
- A Maine educator who applied for an in-house leadership position; the hiring team was advised to not consider their application because building leadership did not feel the person would "follow administration's lead"
- A Maine educator being repeatedly told that administration "does not care" about the teacher's feelings
- A Maine educator being moved to a different grade level/teaching team after asking a question about student placement-and being told that the move was made "because I can" by the administrator
- A Maine educator being physically cornered in their classroom space by an administrator who "perceived" that the educator disagreed with a statement made in a staff meeting-then stating that the educator lied about the incident
- A Maine educator whose administrator asked a number of other staff members, retired staff volunteers, and parents to "let them know how" that educator was "doing"-then denied it
- A Maine educator whose administrator said in multiple evaluations that the educator "needed to improve", but would not give examples as to what was lacking nor how they could improve. The administrator shared the educator's personal and evaluation information with administrators in other buildings.

"All harassment is bullying, but not all bullying is harassment."

Maine students are protected from harassment and from bullying in our public schools. Maine educators deserve the same. Protection for our public school employees does not, in any way, diminish protection of our students. Rather, it demonstrates a commitment to safe public school communities for all who are part of them. We lose highly-qualified staff every year, whether from a particular district or from the profession altogether, due to this type of mistreatment. If Maine public schools are truly committed to hiring and retaining high-quality staff for our students, we must support this measure. We know that there are many healthy public school workplace environments in our state. Shouldn't they ALL be that way?

One closing note: the examples above illustrate the experiences of just two Maine educators who felt safe to share their stories. Imagine, with thousands of educators in

our state, the stories that have not been told.

Thank you for your time, attention, and thoughtful consideration of this incredibly important topic. I know that you want our students and our educators to all feel and truly be safe in our public schools.