

TESTIMONY

In support of

LD 880: An Act to Protect School Employees from Workplace Bullying

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Before the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs

April 5th, 2021

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

My name is Andrew Mason and I am here on behalf of the Maine Education Association to testify in support of LD 880, An Act to Protect School Employees from Workplace Bullying. The MEA represents 24,000 educators in our great state, including thousands of teachers, ed tech IIs and ed tech IIIs, and nearly 5,000 retired educators. We applaud the sponsor for bringing this bill forward to address what has become an increasingly difficult problem in this technical age.

I am confident that there have been students bad-mouthing teachers behind the teacher's backs since the very first one-room schoolhouse was established. But until the dawn of this digital age threats were generally confined to a small group of fellow students or a small group of parents who worked to bully a teacher behind the scenes. Further, it was the rare case when such attempted bullying resulted in actual damage to a teacher and their reputation. Times, they are a changing...now students have easy access to the internet and can post doctored photos or false information about teachers with ease and can do so with a great deal of anonymity, seemingly adding an air of credibility to the allegations. Social media encourages impulsive behavior. Individuals can make multiple fake accounts and say whatever they want because the likelihood of being exposed is low.

While cyberbullying laws protecting students have been enacted, states have begun seeing the need to also protect school employees and their jobs, their safety, and their reputations. This bill LD 880 is a good first step. Studies have found that at least 1 in 7 teachers have been a victim of cyberbullying. In 2012, the first law that actually criminalizes cyberbullying teachers was passed in North Carolina prohibiting students from intimidating or attacking a teacher online, specifically focusing on attacks that damage the character and career of teachers.

This bill does not go that far – it merely adds school employees to the existing anti-bullying law in the Safety section of Title 20-A Education. This proposal affirms the Legislature's finding that all students have the right to attend public schools that are safe, secure, and peaceful, but takes the common-sense step to add school employees

to this finding. As this pandemic has revealed, school employees already deal with and face a number of challenges in performing their job. They should be allowed to work in an environment free from bullying, just as every student has the same right. Passing this bill does not make any individual's behavior or action a crime that isn't already one. But it does provide a school district the ability to demonstrate its respect for its employees by giving it the ability to take steps to address the bullying of its employees.

Thank you for your time and I am happy to answer any questions.