

TESTIMONY OF MATT BERNSTEIN
Ought to pass LD 474
An Act Regarding School Discipline for Maine's Youngest Children
Submitted to the
Committee On Education and Cultural Affairs
April 26, 2021

Representative Brennan, Senator Rafferty, and members of the Committee On Education and Cultural Affairs, greetings. My name is Matt Bernstein, and I am a high school teacher in Portland Public Schools. I believe strongly that out of school suspension is both ineffective and inequitable. As such, I strongly support this proposed legislation.

I am writing to testify that LD 474 ought to pass. It is a bill that seeks to better support Maine's youngest people and to reduce harmful practices in schools. I urge you all to support it.

First, and foremost, out of school suspension does not work. Research shows that out of school suspension is ineffective as a deterrent or preventive measure. Students do not learn about their behaviors or about how to make amends from out of school suspension and, as such, it does not lead to behavioral changes. It is purely punitive without any education.

Furthermore, it leads to students missing school work, which makes school more challenging for students - many of whom already find school to be a challenging place. We are not setting students up for success when we remove them from their classrooms, their peers, and their teachers. Instead, we are isolating young people for their behaviors, invoking potential shame, and making it harder for students to grow academically and socially and emotionally. I think that it is important to consider that the purpose of schools is not to punish children, but rather to educate children. When children exhibit undesirable or challenging behaviors, it is an opportunity for education. In addition, we must recognize that all behaviors are forms of communication and as educators we should seek to communicate with students and families to better understand why students are behaving in certain ways. We have to make sure that education is a collaborative endeavor between schools, students, and families rather than a top down imposing of discipline that, ultimately, is harmful and does not serve to help students grow.

Finally, and of essential importance, we know beyond a shadow of a doubt that suspensions and expulsions are inequitable practices. The data on this is clear. For example, research shows that Black students are three times more likely to be suspended or expelled than white students. Further, there is alarming correlation between out of school suspension and future imprisonment and interactions with the criminal justice system. These facts only scratch the surface of the outstanding research that has been done, which proves definitively that racial and other forms of bias are directly tied to suspensions and expulsions. We cannot allow a practice that we know is so deeply entrenched in bias and discrimination to continue. To do so, would mean willingly accepting the continuation of racist and inequitable policy.

I want to close by saying that I know that for many of us, it is hard to imagine schools without suspensions and expulsions. I know that every school I have ever attended or worked in included suspensions and expulsions. It can be hard, and even potentially scary, to picture what it would look like to have schools without these

practices. However, just because we have done something for a long time, does not mean that it is inherent to the institution of school and does not mean that we have to keep doing it. The reality is that these practices do not work and are actively harming our students. At their core, these practices are grounded in punishment instead of education and are directly counter to the purposes of school. There is no way to reform these practices to make them effective or equitable. The only answer is to remove them because we know that they are harmful. For this reason, I believe that LD 474 ought to pass.

Thank you for your time.

Matt Bernstein
Portland, ME