

BOWDOIN COLLEGE

April 26, 2021

Dear Members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee:

I am a Professor of Education at Bowdoin College, a parent in RSU 78, and a former public high school teacher. I also worked for an alternative to incarceration program in Manhattan for 5 years, teaching court-involved youth. I write in support of LD 474 "An Act Regarding School Discipline for Maine's Youngest Children."

Removing Maine's youngest children from school for disciplinary reasons represents a failure to educate *all* of our students. As an educator, I recognize that there are students who will test and who will need to learn the boundaries expected at school. I also know that there are children who have behavioral challenges that will require support that goes beyond what the classroom teacher might be able to provide at a particular moment.

Yes, these are realities, but suspending a six-year-old, regardless of the circumstances, is traumatizing and cruel. (This holds true for any child in grades 5 and below.) Research clearly demonstrates the *negative outcomes of school suspensions for learning, a sense of connectedness, and future incarceration*. *Suspensions have not been shown to improve student behavior*. Leaning on out-of-school suspensions as the appropriate response to a young child's behavior is a failure on the part of adults.

Furthermore, we know that out-of-school suspensions disproportionately impact students of color and students with disabilities. We also know that overwhelmingly, educators and school/district leaders in Maine are white. Recent research reveals that suspensions are often the result of when school officials "misinterpreted" students' behaviors ([Bell](#)).

In the current Maine law, the first reason listed for potential suspension or expulsion pertains to a student "Who is deliberately disobedient or deliberately disorderly." With substantial cultural differences between students and their teachers, the potential for misinterpretation regarding whether a behavior is deliberate, disobedient, or disorderly is great. Let's now add in the potential for undiagnosed disability and the young age of the children we are considering here. The impacts of those misinterpretations are much harder to repair when they harm a child's (and their family's) relationship to school so irreparably as what occurs with a suspension.

These are discriminatory patterns that are replicated with the same negative effects on students throughout the country. Maine is no exception.

Districts should certainly have input into how they are going to design disciplinary alternatives to suspensions for their Kindergarten-5th grade students. We know that these patterns will continue, even in the best-intentioned districts and schools if left to "home rule."

The State of Maine should ensure that no young child is suspended or expelled from its schools.

Sincerely,



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Professor

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DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION