

Dear Distinguished Members of the Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs,

My name is Claire Schroeder, I reside in Portland Maine. I have worked with young people, their communities, schools, other organizations and educators for the past 20 years. My work has focused on centering the voices and experiences of young people to ensure that our education system works for underrepresented young people and all young people. I have worked and learned alongside young adults from middle school, through high school and beyond. I am here today because of everything they have taught me.

I want you to know I love public schools. I love the positive possibility within school walls. I also know that not everyone experiences schools this way. I know that for many children and families schools can be harsh, unwelcoming environments, and that breaks my heart. As a society we need our schools to be places of learning, transformation, and opportunity. We need schools to be all the protective factors, and all the promised possibilities for all children.

This bill takes a step in the direction of ensuring that schools are positive places of possibility for all children. Suspension is a practice that harms. Furthermore it is a practice that disproportionately and negatively impacts Black, Brown, Indigenous children, children with disabilities and children from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. We know the data. It is for this reason that we cannot allow schools to continue to use suspension as a tool that harms, isolates and separates children from their right to education. I understand the importance of each school deciding what is right for its community and at the same time we would never allow a school to put a policy or practice in place that causes harm. Suspension causes harm. Listen to the young people who are here today, listen to what they say about the stigma, shame and internalization that comes along with suspension.

Lastly I also work closely with child welfare and I have been a resource/foster parent here in Maine. When I think of what children most need in order to succeed it is support and connection in our schools, communities and organizations. School is a safe haven for many children and it should be that for all children. I know it can be a challenge to have a disruptive child in a classroom, I also know our schools are full of smart, creative professionals whose job it is to figure out how to support that child in a way that is restorative. The behaviors that lead to suspension are the earliest of warning signs, behaviors that help us collectively say “what more can we do for/with this child and family to help them engage in their education, thrive and grow?” The behaviors that lead to suspension are the behaviors we need to focus on, not the punishment. We need to spend more time with that child, not less. We need to identify the root cause, not banish the child outside of the school walls.

As staff on the Young People’s Caucus and formerly staff with Portland Empowered I have heard from too many young people about the harm that comes from suspension. We must do better by our young people. Please vote Ought to Pass for LD 474.

With courage & compassion,
Claire Schroeder