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Maine Association for the
Education of Young Children

Testimony of Heather Marden,
on behalf of the Maine Association for the Education of Young Children (MaineAEYC),
before the Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs, in support of
LD 474: An Act Regarding School Discipline for Maine's Youngest Children

April 26th, 2021

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan, and distinguished members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee, my name is Heather Marden and I am writing on behalf of the Maine Association for the Education of Young Children (MaineAEYC).

MaineAEYC promotes high-quality early learning for all children, birth through age 8, by connecting practice, policy, and research. We advance a diverse, dynamic early childhood profession and support all who care for, educate, and work on behalf of young children and families.

MaineAEYC is in support of LD 474: *An Act Regarding School Discipline for Maine's Youngest Children*. Research shows that the relationships and experiences are instrumental in shaping the development of young children. Yet, in Maine we have a large population of children who are experiencing traumatic events in their developing years.

“According to the National Survey of Children’s Health, almost 50,000 Maine youth have experienced two or more Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), such as divorce, violence in the home, death of a parent or other events that can create trauma and toxic stress. Research has shown a link between multiple ACEs and challenging social and emotional behaviors in adolescence and continued health problems into adulthood. Children build resilience to counteract these adverse experiences through positive relationships at home, at school and feeling as if they matter in the community. For many, access to mental health services and community supports are critical to ensure children and adolescents thrive and reach their full potential.” Maine Kids Count Data 2021

https://www.mekids.org/site/assets/files/1773/2021_kidscount_final_interactive.pdf

The school environment plays an important role in supporting children at all ages to build resilience and tools that will help them become healthy adults who maximize their potential. This means tailoring educational needs to provide appropriate supports for their whole development; social, emotional, physical, cognitive, and cultural. Children who are showing aggressive, angry, or defiant behaviors need the support of trusting adults, not punishment. “Starting treatment early is important. Treatment is most effective if it fits the needs of the specific child and family.” Center for Disease Control and Prevention,

<https://www.cdc.gov/childrensmentalhealth/behavior.html>

Maine has made strides in incorporating social/emotional learning into curriculum and educator training across the state. In 2016 Maine was highlighted by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services for being a policy innovator. “Maine’s legislature passed a resolve to create a Study Commission on the Social Emotional Learning and Development of Maine’s Young Children to promote the social-emotional learning and development of young children and reduce expulsions in early child care and education settings. The work includes developing an inventory of policies, rules, funding and services regarding early child care and education in the State and making recommendations, including suggested legislation, to strengthen the support for young children's social-emotional learning and development and to address young children's behavioral needs.” DHHS,

https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/ece/expulsion_resource_guide_11_4_16_final.pdf

Maine has funded an early childhood mental health consultation program that has expanded this year. It is through supporting children in the early years, identifying developmental disabilities as early as possible, and providing the resources and support to educators from birth through 12th grade to maintain equitable and inclusive environments that will be the foundation for successful educational settings for all students.

There is no significant body of research showing that expulsions or suspensions work. What we do know from research is that these methods reduce children’s in class time, increase their educational gap, and lead to higher rates of dropping out in high school, which in turn leads to higher rates of incarceration, poverty, and poor health. When the use of expulsions, suspensions, and exclusion of recess are taken off the table as possibilities of addressing behavior in young children, it forces us to be accountable for intervention plans that reduce the school to prison pipeline, get at the root of the behaviors, and reduce implicit bias that may prompt these disciplinary actions.

We support L.D. 474 while also recognizing that children exhibiting harmful behaviors in an educational setting need safe, nurturing outlets and environments where they can be supported by professionals trained in healthy de-escalation practices and co-regulation techniques. With additional funding coming in from the American Rescue Plan, it creates opportunities to invest in early intervention and mental health supports for children.

Maine’s success starts with the societal value we place on children and what they rightfully deserve; relationships and experiences that will support their healthy outcomes. Please consider supporting L.D. 474 to use best practices in supporting children’s healthy development.