

Testimony on LD 1512
Submitted by Xavier E. Botana, Superintendent, Portland Public Schools to the Maine
Education and Cultural Affairs Committee
May 4th, 2021

Honorable Senator Daughtry and Representative Brennan, and distinguished members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee

Thank you for the opportunity to present my written testimony in support of LD 1512, An Act To Create the Office of the Education Ombudsman and To Establish a Commission To Study the Creation of a Reporting and Response System To Assist Public Schools in Addressing Incidents of Bias, Discrimination, and Harassment by Rep. Traci Gere.

I am here to register my support for this bill. As Superintendent of the Portland Public Schools, Maine's largest and most diverse school district, I have experienced firsthand the importance of creating a support structure to ensure that the lived experience of students and staff are heard and addressed.

Last summer, over 60 current and former Portland Public Schools students wrote anonymous posts on multiple social media platforms reporting on their experiences with close to forty current and past staff in our schools. These posts recounted experiences with misogyny, sexism, discrimination, and lack of professional boundaries spanning more than a decade. The posts ranged from first-person accounts to the recounting of others' experiences.

As a school district committed to finding and rooting out systemic barriers to oppression, we took these allegations seriously. Over the course of the next several months, we engaged in an in-depth investigation and ultimately, a reckoning and acknowledgment of our continuing inability to ensure that our students' in-school experiences were consistent with our aspirations.

We learned a great deal along the way. And, I will say that we are a better school system for those lessons.

We learned that we often sometimes don't live up to our standards. As educators, we often recount with pride the students who return to us and tell us about a moment in which something that we did-- something that oftentimes we cannot remember-- was the moment that they saw their future. These posts were the other side of the same coin. These were students who were injured and traumatized by a moment, an action that we often could not remember.

We learned that we were often less zealous in pursuing the root of allegations as we should be. Many of the posts referenced having brought the issue to those in authority: principals, other adults. Many of the posts made it clear that the allegations were not resolved to their satisfaction. But more importantly, many of them suggested that they never heard back about the allegations.

As a district, we took steps as a result of those lessons. We revised our harassment, sexual harassment, and discrimination policy in partnership with organizations invested in supporting victims. We issued a comprehensive report that quantified the allegations, outlined the investigations and the actions taken as a result, and enumerated the steps we would be taking-- large and small-- to prevent these experiences from continuing to be the norm.

Among those steps was a commitment to creating a position or role similar to what LD 1512 proposes: an Ombudsman. That position is currently a part of our proposed school district budget. While I am confident that we will be able to put this level of resource in place in Portland, I know that I would have greatly benefitted from having this resource in place last summer when we were confronted with the posts. I can only imagine what a smaller district, with more limited resources, might be able to do. More importantly, I strongly believe that a student or parent-facing these experiences in their school would benefit greatly from having a State level resource to whom they can bring their concerns.

I commend Representative Gere for her attention to this issue. I know from having spoken to her along the way that she has seen firsthand what happens when these types of issues occur and there is limited capacity to address them. I am grateful for her advocacy and commitment to bring support for those facing these types of experiences in their schools.

Respectfully Submitted

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