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May 4, 2021

Testimony of Rep. Lori K. Gramlich presenting

LD 1502, An Act To Clarify Safety Issues in Schools with Respect to Health-related States of Emergency *Before the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs*

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan and distinguished colleagues of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs, I am Lori Gramlich, Representative for House District 13, which is the town of Old Orchard Beach. I am pleased to present **LD 1502, An Act To Clarify Safety Issues in Schools with Respect to Health-related States of Emergency**.

This past year has been unlike any other we have seen in our lifetimes. The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted all of us in ways we would never have fathomed possible. Presenting this testimony on Zoom is but one example of how we all have had to adjust.

As faculty at the University of Southern Maine, I have seen firsthand how remote learning has impacted our adult learners. My sister, who is a school nurse, has also shared the hardships of remote learning and keeping younger children safe in elementary and middle schools. Additionally, my interactions within my own school district to ensure students and staff continue to have the tools they need to be safe and healthy has led me to present this proposed legislation to you.

There has been discrepancy and inconsistency in how districts across the state interpret definitions of “deep cleaning” versus “sanitizing” as related to CDC directives.

One of the objectives of LD 1502 is to assure consistency across the state as we implement directives from the Maine CDC to adhere with public health directives so that all schools and facilities are cleaned and sterilized in a manner determined adequate by our leading public health experts. Certainly, these directives are responses based on the global pandemic that has impacted all of us; however, this pandemic has identified the inconsistencies across the state as school districts have made good faith efforts in interpreting these directives.

Another important issue revealed because of this pandemic is the fact that many of our schools do not have adequate and up-to-date ventilation systems. The effects of indoor air quality are not necessarily related to infection and contagions as we have seen with this pandemic. However, we know that air quality is an important issue as it related to our schools and has been elevated because of the pandemic and requires our attention. Adequate ventilation in schools minimizes exposure to airborne pollutants, including airborne virus particles such as COVID-19, but further ensuring proper ventilation with outside air can help reduce the concentration of airborne contaminants, including viruses, indoors.

LD 1502 would also ensure that a ventilation system in a school or facility used or occupied by school administrative unit staff or students is adequate to protect the staff or students as determined by the Maine CDC.

Consistent air quality standards across our school districts will play a fundamental role in assuring children and staff have clean well-ventilated air that will not only protect them from not only viral contagions such as COVID but will also provide a safer environment overall.

I have attached, for your reference, news articles regarding educators' reactions to safety standards during the pandemic.

I urge you to vote ought to pass for LD 1502 and would be happy to try to answer any questions for you. Thank you!



The Rural Maine Reporting Project

In Letter, Western Maine Teachers Describe Struggle With Remote Learning, Call For More Resources

Maine Public | By [Robbie Feinberg](#)

Published November 25, 2020 at 5:37 PM EST



LISTEN • 6:10



Esperanza Raimirez works on a laptop in a classroom in Newlon Elementary School in Denver, Colorado, early Tuesday, Aug. 25, 2020,

Many educators across Maine continue to absorb the stress of a school year that's been unlike any other.

In a public letter released Tuesday, seven teachers' unions from across western Maine say that teachers are working long, unsustainable hours and are struggling to balance remote, hybrid and in-person learning.

The teachers are calling for districts and the state to give them more planning time, provide extra staff to teach remote students, reduce testing and include educators in planning conversations moving forward.

Alison Litton, president of the Lewiston Education Association, spoke with All Things Considered host Robbie Feinberg about the letter.

This interview has been edited for clarity.

Feinberg: Can you explain how this letter came about?

Litton: As a supportive measure, we meet regularly and discuss what's going on in our local areas and then what we can do to support each other. The last few meetings, we've been discussing that some areas are definitely being more proactive and responsive to teachers' concerns, to educators' concerns, but other areas are having a hard time with that. So we felt we should take a stance together, and really just stand shoulder to shoulder with it and say, 'These are the concerns that we are having in our public schools here in Maine. And you know, something's gotta give.' So in your letter, I think

of schools right now to help improve things for both students and teachers. They include more time for planning, more autonomy for teachers, adequate PPE and more things beyond that. But school officials have told me in recent months that they've been trying to work with teachers on several of the issues and support them. In general, do you feel like districts have been listening to teachers on these issues so far? I think to some extent. Here in Lewiston, we've been quite fortunate. We've had a good working relationship with the school committee and they have been, within their constraints, proactive. PPE is not a concern here in Lewiston, but in other districts it is. A lot of the times the response for things that can't be dealt with is either a monetary constraint, or it's a constraint from the Maine Department of Education saying that these are things that are not to be bent, right? There's no flexibility in them for this year. The pieces that we've run into in the last few months that we have been back, we're talking about pacing guides that are set by the state, and there isn't any flexibility to say, 'Some of these kids missed three months of instruction.' At the end of last year, there was no summer school the way that it typically is managed. So many children that would have received an extended year or would receive some remediation during the summer didn't get that either. So at this point, we need to meet the kids where they're at. School officials have told me that while many districts

if they can, they say they're often hamstrung by the budget constraints, and specifically the lack of additional federal funds that hasn't come down yet for schools. How do you think we solve some of these problems when there are those kind of constraints and limits right now? The CARES Act funding was absolutely helpful, the way that the state handled it and allowed locals to make those decisions on how it was spent. But there were a lot of constraints on how that money was used. And just in general, we have here in Lewiston I believe it's 78 openings for ed techs, and we can't fill those. Those are budgeted, but we can't fill them. So we have services that either aren't supported or at times are not being adequately rendered because we have no applicants, or we don't have the quality of applicants that we're looking for. So I think a shortage in educators – the majority of our certified positions are filled, but we're looking for speech therapists, we're looking for a multitude of ed techs and in different roles, and that's just not being filled. Why was this letter released right now, right before Thanksgiving break? We we felt it was important to be proactive, and also just to give some time – many school committees are going to be meeting the Monday after. So just to kind of kind of give this air, allow time that we're not dedicated to teaching to be able to discuss these matters, and truly have a good dialogue before we come right back to being responsible for our students.

Maine Public reached out to multiple superintendents in Western Maine, but they were either unavailable or didn't return requests for comments.

Steve Bailey, the executive director of the Maine School Management Association, says he was surprised by the letter. He says schools and teachers have been working hand-in-hand in many districts to support both students and educators. And Bailey says that statewide, he's seen many examples of districts reducing class sizes, adding more teachers to assist with remote learning, and adding early release days or even shortening school days to give teachers more time to plan.

"I do know that they have had challenges, though, in terms of trying to find ed techs to be able to fill some of the support staff positions. But they are in the plan. And they are trying to do that to make sure that support is there for students, as well as for staff," he says.

Bailey says many administrators are also hoping that the federal government can pass more coronavirus relief, since funds from the stimulus bill passed earlier this year expire at the end of this month.

For disclosure, most of Maine Public's news staff is represented by the Maine Education Association.

Tags

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Robbie Feinberg

Robbie grew up in New Hampshire, but has since written stories for radio stations from Washington, DC, to a fishing village in Alaska. Robbie graduated from the University of Maryland and got his start in public radio at the Transom Story Workshop in Woods Hole, Massachusetts. Before arriving at Maine Public Radio, he worked in the Midwest, where he covered everything from beer to migrant labor for public radio station WMUK in Kalamazoo, Michigan.

[See stories by Robbie Feinberg](#)

'It is overwhelming': Maine teachers unions call for support as pandemic surges

In a letter, teachers from at least 8 school districts across Western Maine described 'struggling' students and 'palpable stress.'

Teachers call for more support

Author: **Zach Blanchard** (NEWS CENTER Maine)

Published: 5:27 PM EST November 27, 2020

Updated: 5:27 PM EST November 27, 2020



FARMINGTON, Maine — As students across the state slept off their Thanksgiving feasts Friday morning, Doug Hodum was in his classroom.

"The work is exhausting. It's overwhelming," Hodum, a science teacher at Mt. Blue High School in Farmington said.

He and hundreds of teachers across the state are calling for more support as the pandemic continues to put a seemingly unending strain on them, their administrators, and their students.

Hodum, who also serves as president of the Mt. Blue RSD Education Association, was among at least seven teachers union leaders across Western Maine to pen a letter about their ongoing struggle this week.

RELATED: [Maine Department of Education announces new team of nurses to support contact tracing efforts in schools](#)

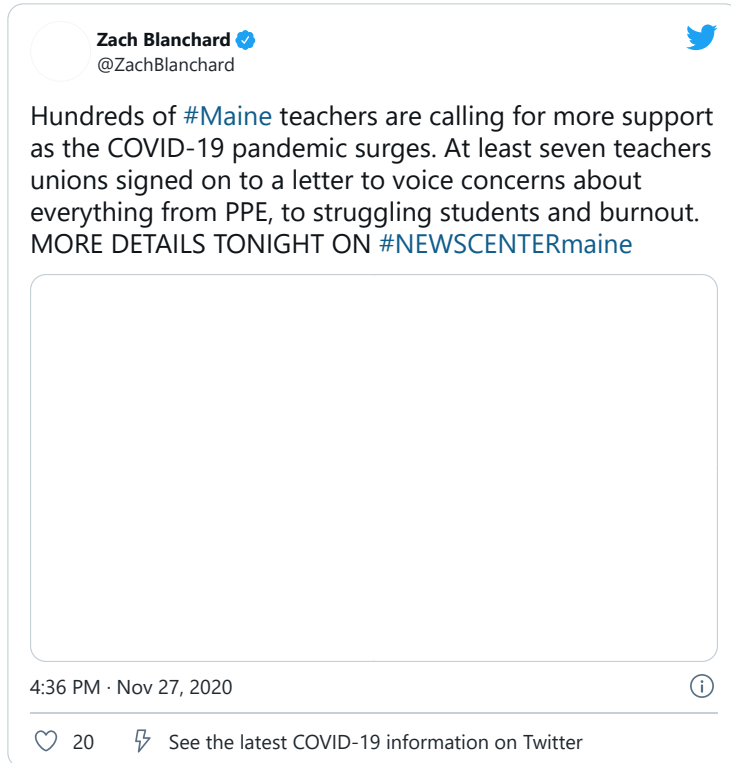
The letter sent to news organizations and published in local papers described 'burnout,' 'struggling' students, and 'palpable stress.'

"We're not complaining. We're stating the facts," Hodum said. "This is where we are. This is where our students are. This is where the families are. This is what we're trying to tackle."

While the letter entitled 'What's Really Happening Inside Our Schools' acknowledged widespread efforts by state and local leaders, it also called for more continuity and change.

"As leaders of Education Associations in Western Maine, we have dire concerns about our students and the future of public education in our state," it read.

It listed eight demands, including remote-only teachers, removal of testing requirements, and more time to connect with students and plan.



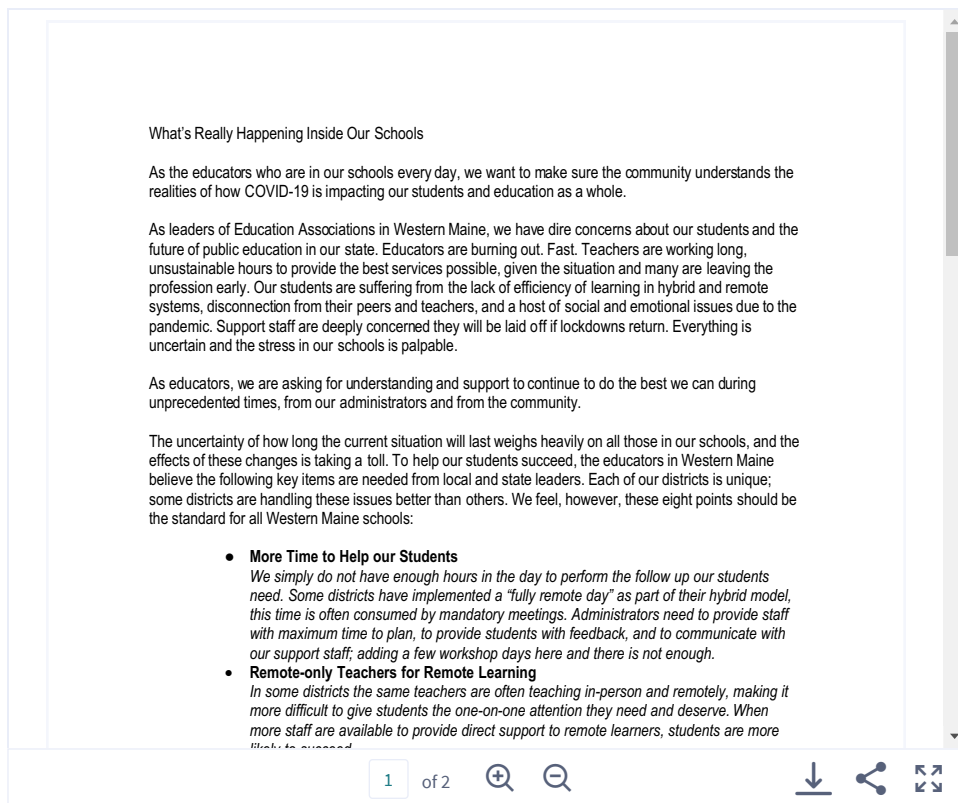
"It has just been extremely tiring," Allison Lytton, President of the Lewiston Education Association told NEWS CENTER Maine. "The biggest resource we're lacking right now is simply time. There's not enough time in our contracts to allow for the work that's required of us at this point."

Lytton said she has received countless emails and messages from teachers statewide in recent weeks. She said they 'all have the same story.'

RELATED: [Mills' economic committee: Federal stimulus 'is an absolute imperative now'](#)

"It's not just one place. It's not a county line. It's not a town line. We're all facing the same thing," Lytton said.

Early this week Maine Dept. of Education Commissioner Pender Makin thanked teachers across the state for their tireless dedication ahead of the Thanksgiving holiday.



The lengthy letter and recorded video message empathized with teachers' ongoing hardships.

"We've been asking more of our schools than we've ever had to ask before," Makin said. "I wanted to take a minute today to thank you for your extraordinary efforts and deep commitment to the education of Maine's children."

Makin also noted that it was teachers' hard work that allowed 100-percent of Maine's public schools to safely get back to learning in one way or another.

But for teachers like Hodum, in his empty classroom on his day off to just get caught up, they want more than a 'thank you.'

"We just needed to make sure people understood how hard it is to do what we're trying to do," Hodum said.

The head of the Maine School Management Association said he was surprised by the letter and did 'have specific information regarding many of the districts referenced.'

RELATED: [Mills announces nearly \\$6M to build internet infrastructure in rural Maine communities](#)

"Workload for all involved in this effort has been immense: by teachers, educational support staff, building administrators, central office staff, superintendents, school board members, and parents who are employees in other businesses that have been impacted by COVID-19," Steve Bailey said.

Bailey noted that plans and practices in districts statewide are evolving and changing regularly to meet the needs of the individual communities.

He also said more action from the federal government to get a new COVID relief package is required. Funding provided through the federal CARES Act is set to run out come Dec. 30.

"None of this has been easy and all are concerned," Bailey said. "The effort needs to continue to be a combined effort and everyone is not going to be happy all the time as opinions will vary."

Due to the holiday, the Dept. of Education as well as superintendents for Mt. Blue and Lewiston schools did not return immediately return NEWS CENTER Maine's request for comment.

Teachers call for more support



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