

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

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Before the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs

May 4th, 2021

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan, and esteemed members of the Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs,

My name is John Kosinski, and I am here on behalf of the Maine Education Association (MEA) to testify 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. The MEA represents educators in nearly every public school in the state.

In recent months, students in some communities have come forward to detail the bias, discrimination, and harassment they have faced while attending public schools in Maine. In some cases, the press has covered these stories, but not all the stories make the papers. I will not go into details about these stories, many of them you can easily find with a simple Google search. But the facts are right in front of us: according to the Maine Center for Economic Policy, Black students in Maine are 2.4 times more likely to be suspended, yet white students are 1.6 times more likely to be enrolled in AP courses.¹ This is just one of the many data points to explain the powerful problem of implicit bias, discrimination and racism in our schools, but the stories of the students and the families impacted by racism and discrimination are the most powerful and I encourage this Committee to seek out those voices.

Here is what former Bangor Superintendent Betsy Webb had to say when former students in Bangor came forward to describe the racism they experienced while attending Bangor schools: "Schools in general, and

¹ Maine Center for Economic Policy Fact Sheet, Data on racial inequality shows need for solutions to advance racial justice, found here: [MECEP-racial-inequality-fact-sheet-FINAL.pdf](https://www.mecpep.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/MECEP-racial-inequality-fact-sheet-FINAL.pdf)

certainly the Bangor School Department, have been too silent,” Webb said. “We cannot be silent anymore. We have to talk about these things, and we have to listen to our students, our employees and our families.”²

We know our schools must do a better job of meeting the needs of all students and rooting out implicit bias and other ways schools may unintentionally disadvantage students of color. The MEA has prioritized racial equity and that is why we support bills such as LD 633 to require more educators to have some training in implicit bias and racial equity. We agree with Betsy Webb – our schools have been “too silent” in addressing racism, discrimination, and bias.

LD 1512 is an important bill for ensuring our schools are the safe and secure places we need our schools to be. In the cases that have come to light in recent months, some students and families have said they were unsure where to turn when they face racism, either from other students or even staff. In other cases, their concerns may have been ignored or swept under the proverbial rug. And we must recognize the uncomfortable situation some families are in when attempting to address racial discrimination and bias. The overwhelming majority of administrators and school board members are white. Is it any wonder why some families may not feel comfortable raising up these issues and concerns of racism and discrimination?

LD 1512 will provide families and students with another option to seek resolutions to bias and discrimination. The Ombudsman could counsel families through local dispute resolution mechanisms, without needing to rely on the glacial pace of official proceedings through the Maine Human Rights Commission or other legal avenues. The Ombudsman could and should be a solutions-oriented position, focused on supporting families of color and working with administrators and school leaders to address real or perceived concerns of racism, discrimination, and bias. Whatever drawbacks there may be for such an Ombudsman position pale in comparison to the real impact this position could have for families of color during a traumatic moment.

We also support the component of LD 1512 calling for a Commission to better understand the breadth and depth of racism, bias, and discrimination in our schools. We are fearful of what we may find, but also realize that data and analysis are necessary, as well as improved response mechanisms to allegations of racism. A reporting system is critical for understanding the problem we face, and even more important is a better system of response to allegations for the impacted students and families. And while we always want to encourage individuals to seek resolution to problems at the most grassroots level, but we also know this environment may not be the most comfortable for some families in some situations and access to an Ombudsman could help.

For these reasons and many more, the MEA supports LD 1512 and we hope you will vote “ought to pass” on this important legislation.

Thank you for your time and service to the people of Maine and I will do my best to answer any questions.

² Please see “Racism is My High School Experience,” Amjambo Africa, found here: [‘Racism is my high school experience’ - Amjambo Africa](#)