

TESTIMONY In Support of LD 1502:

“An Act to Clarify Safety Issues in Schools with Respect to Health-related States of Emergency”

Grace Leavitt, President, Maine Education Association

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 Grace Leavitt. I am a Spanish teacher on leave from Greely High School while serving as President of the Maine Education Association. The MEA has nearly 24,000 members—faculty and staff in our pre-K-12 public schools, our institutions of higher education, and many dedicated retired educators.

I am speaking on behalf of our members in support of LD 1502, “An Act to Clarify Safety Issues in Schools with Respect to Health-related States of Emergency”.

I wish this bill were not needed.

I wish the legislation called for in this bill would not be needed in the future.

I wish I could be guaranteed that we never again would be confronted with a global pandemic or widespread health crisis.

But we all know the saying about wishes: “If wishes were horses, beggars would ride”. We cannot rely on wishes, especially when we are talking about keeping our students safe and providing what the adults who support and teach our students need for them to also be safe, and to also keep our communities as safe as possible.

The MEA and the many educators we represent greatly appreciated that the Maine Department of Education and Maine Centers for Disease Control delineated the six safety requirements that needed to be implemented in order for schools to have in-person instruction this year.

Adherence to these requirements were key to keeping our schools in Maine open relatively safely throughout this pandemic, even as other states went to full-time remote instruction for most of the year across the country. True, there were limitations and disruptions, but our schools adapted and remained open while following the six requirements.

I say this, and the vast majority of districts have done a phenomenal job of following these requirements with great care. However, there have been reports of instances where some requirements were followed less strictly and less carefully than others, maybe unintentionally or perhaps not, causing not only frustration and distrust, but also extreme stress in some cases and perhaps even contributing to cases of COVID-19. For months we took reports of infractions and followed through, first encouraging members to speak to their administrators in hopes of the problems being readily addressed, and if that didn't happen, then MEA reached out to the other education organizations or the Department of Education to be sure districts were reminded of the six safety requirements. Members who witnessed infractions were also encouraged to report this on the Department of Economic and Community Development tip line. However, there was no communication back to let people know if they had been heard.

Things have been rather quiet on that front for a while, but it is uncertain if it is due to complete adherence to the requirements, or to a sense of futility. We can only hope it is the former. And even now, especially since some have pushed against the distancing requirements, there are reports of 'various ways' to measure the distances; some ways that have been used seem to have students closer than others.

Had there been a requirement for reporting on what is being done to follow the safety measures and how well this is going, likely much of the worry and stress would have been greatly reduced. Educators, and of course everybody else, all of us, are exhausted from the past year and two months. We hear weekly about educators who not only do not have the wherewithal to staff the summer programs that are being designed to help address the unfinished learning of some students, but also of the number of educators who are considering leaving, or have already decided to leave, the profession—a huge concern, given the shortages we were already experiencing in the profession.

Nobody wants to add more work to any educator at any level, and while LD 1502 would require that of superintendents, it would also go a long way towards helping ensure accountability that keeps students and staff—and communities—as safe as possible by providing more transparency regarding how districts are following protocols and requirements that are necessary during a health crisis.

We urge your support of LD 1502.

Thank you for your time, and I am glad to answer any questions.

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