

Linda Morrison
Kennebunk

Dear Joint Standing Committee on Education & Cultural Affairs:

I write in strong 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. I am a clinical psychologist in private practice in Kennebunk, a full time university professor, and a mom of two children in the Kennebunk public school system. We have had several high profile cases in our district that could have been assisted with a state Ombudsperson and potentially have saved my district litigation costs as well as community wide harm. School districts across the state are just starting to craft DEI strategic plans (I have served on the RSU 21 Ad Hoc DEI committee for RSU 21 this past year) and they are just at the beginning stages of addressing issues of equity, inclusion and compliance. Having a statewide resource for districts and stakeholders to help shepherd these plans, address issues as they arise, and help direct policy initiatives will be crucial in the coming years.

I am particularly passionate about the issue of bullying and hate speech in our schools. There is a significant disconnect between the number of bullying instances reported to the state and the number of students who report being bullied annually on MIYHS data. Both students and parents do not feel that our schools enforce the rules fairly, and yet at least in my district, we do not collect the demographic data relative to complainants or alleged offenders to indicate that we either do or don't handle complaints fairly. I believe this should be a mandatory part of the bullying response JICK forms for every district in this state.

For these and other reasons, I believe that a state wide ombudsperson (and please use the nonsexist term if this bill passes) would greatly benefit our state educational systems and is a prudent expenditure and investment.

Dr. Linda L. Morrison
Clinical Psychologist
Associate Professor of Psychology