

## **In Support of LD 829 An Act to Improve Mental Health Supports in Schools**

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs:

My name is Jeremy Lynch. I live in Gorham, Maine and I work as an elementary school social worker in the Westbrook School Department. I am here to express support for LD 829 to improve mental health supports in schools.

As a school social worker I deal with a lot of things that most people would rather not, even at the elementary school level: students disclosing suicidal ideation; students talking about and/or engaging in sexualized behaviors; determining the need to contact DHHS due to possible abuse or neglect; coordinating ways to connect food to families experiencing food insecurity; managing student conflict everyday in small groups to help teach children emotional regulation, social skills, and how to be in community with one another.

And you know what? I love it. I welcome all of it and know that many if not all of my school counselor and school social work colleagues feel the same. We have trained for and accepted this great responsibility to help those most in need. It's not the difficult or admittedly disturbing nature of some of this work that tends to burn us out. It's the sheer volume.

For perspective, even prior to the pandemic a 2016 report stated that nearly 1 in 5 students show signs of a mental health disorder, 80% of which "won't receive counseling. Or therapy. Or medication. They won't get any treatment at all."<sup>1</sup>

And it's not for lack of trying. It's been all hands on deck. We've seen front and center what happened when a system of perpetually under-resourced mental health supports met the full blown mental health crisis created by the pandemic. We were not able to implement enough of the proactive mental health supports urgently needed to help many students before things escalated into full blown crises—classrooms being torn apart; fist fights; suspensions; suicidal ideation and self-harm. And to add insult to injury, police officers, who are already asked to go above and beyond are too often now asked to fill the gaps and support safety issues in schools resulting from a lack of school mental health supports.

I know what it's like to feel like you are trying your hardest to tread water but are still getting pulled under. I would love to be more able to provide the proactive supports I was hired to do, investing in students and celebrating their achievements. Giving that high five to the student who took the deep breath and walked away like we practiced instead of using their fist. To celebrate the student who is finally making friends after using the social skills we worked on. To have time to be with the student who may be quiet, but is likely struggling silently because their father just passed away.

---

<sup>1</sup> Anderson, Meg & Kavitha Cardoza. "A Silent Epidemic: Our public schools are struggling to handle millions of students with mental health problems. Here's why." *NPR*, 7 September, 2016, <https://apps.npr.org/mental-health/>

## **In Support of LD 829 An Act to Improve Mental Health Supports in Schools**

The pandemic, through all its tribulations, has also provided us an opportunity: it laid bare some of the flaws in mental health supports for our children and we now have a chance to invest in those mental health supports that our children are so desperately showing us they need.

Thank you for your time and consideration in supporting this bill and in improving mental health supports in our schools.

Sincerely,

Jeremy Lynch, M.A., LCSW  
School Social Worker