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PORTLAND  
LD 1990

My name is Melea Nalli and I'm a resident in Portland, Maine. I am currently an education consultant and executive coach. My testimony is largely informed by the perspective I gained in my last roles as Assistant Superintendent of Teaching & Learning and Interim Co-Superintendent in Portland, Maine.

I support LD 1990. I am not a technical expert on this matter and know many people here today who are and so I will speak from my perspective on how this law could impact our state's ability to be more responsive to the urgent mental and behavioral health needs we are seeing among our students.

It's well documented that our children are experiencing a rise in mental health challenges. As a mom to a middle schooler and high schooler, and as a district administrator, I did not need the data and research to illuminate this clear pattern. But for purposes of your decision-making on LD 1990 you can be rest assured that the data is a call to action and we need to pull all the levers available to ensure we have the resources our children need, including legislative levers.

During and after the pandemic, our district made the decision to increase the number of social workers in our schools as a way to ensure our students had access to the support that was needed. I thought the hard part was going to be navigating our budget to create space to invest in these vital professionals. While the budget is always complex I was struck by how our bigger challenge was finding a deep pool of talented and diverse candidates. In particular, we were looking to bring a more diverse applicant pool forward since the vast majority of our social workers were white, whereas about half of our students were BiPOC. Once again, data clearly supports why diverse teams get better results. Furthermore, we were seeking people who can speak multiple languages and can therefore communicate directly with our students.

Imagine for a minute being a student who newly arrived here in Maine and who has experienced significant trauma. Now imagine this student speaks Spanish and what it would feel like to meet with a social worker who can communicate in Spanish. And imagine how different it would feel to try to open up to someone who cannot understand you without translation and who you cannot understand without another adult in the room to translate. Picture a child you love in this scenario and I think we'd all agree that it's fundamentally different.

As I tried to understand the root of why we were having a hard time diversifying our pool of applicants, especially with multilingual social workers, I came to understand that the exam was a barrier for people who we already knew and wanted to join our team. Given what I knew about these professionals, I was shocked that this exam was somehow communicating they were not prepared or effective when our lived experience knowing their work in the community and in some cases as interns in our schools, proved otherwise.

I have a background in human resources and as I'm sure many of you know, best practice is to take a competency based hiring approach. This written exam is one way one might evaluate some knowledge but is woefully inadequate for getting at the critical skills and mindsets that are most essential for these roles. Assuming the reason the exam is in place is to ensure we are only hiring highly qualified people, I would suggest that the better way to spend time and energy is thinking about meaningful competency based hiring processes and ensuring districts have the tools and support they need to hire in this way.

I believe strongly that we need to hold a hire bar for who is hired into these essential roles. I further believe that we need to find ways to expand the pool of people we can recruit into these positions and importantly, diversify that pool of people, especially in terms of multilingualism. LD 1990 will remove a barrier standing in the way of these critical needs.

Thank you.