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I've been a high school teacher for almost 30 years. Before that I was a lawyer and journalist. And before all of that, I was a teenager who watched her best friend struggle in the world, and try to end her life.

As a child I didn't understand why, I just knew she didn't feel like she belonged in this world – it wasn't effortless for her like it was for me. As an adult I understand better, and am grateful every day she did not succeed, for she is an inspiring teacher and education leader who has saved more lives than she knows and makes the world better every day.

Over the last 30 years, in and out of the classroom, I have listened, read and watched as young people – family, neighbors, friends and students – poured their hearts out, struggling to figure out how to fit into the world. I have sat with them as they talked through their pain and confusion: I've sat with them at school, in their homes, in the Emergency Room, the hospital room ... and at their graveside.

Too many of them tried to destroy themselves. Too many succeeded.

Their suffering and their deaths shattered my heart and forged my resolve: I will do anything to spare another human – young person, family member, classmate, teacher, neighbor – the anguish that comes when bright young lives end because every message they received reinforced that that death was the only solution to their pain.

That's why I'm speaking out now.

In Maine, there are currently eight proposed bills targeting transgender youth: LD 1734, LD 1735, and LD 227 aim to restrict access to medically necessary, evidence-based gender-affirming care.

LD 678, LD 1741, and LD 1856 would limit how schools support trans students and how students express their identities.

LD 1761 and LD 1926 could criminalize or stigmatize families and providers seeking to affirm and protect trans youth.

Every one of these bills puts young lives at risk. None of them makes anyone safer.

According to The Trevor Project, more than 50% of transgender and nonbinary youth seriously considered suicide in the past year. Those who had access to gender-affirming care, supportive school environments, or affirming families reported significantly lower rates of depression, substance misuse, and suicidal thoughts.

Gender-affirming care is endorsed by every major medical association in the U.S., including the American Academy of Pediatrics and the American Medical Association — not because it's political, but because it saves lives.

I know what happens when young people are shamed, erased, or demonized by society for who they are. I know what it's like to bury those who didn't get the support, love and acceptance they needed. These bills don't protect families — they will ultimately destroy them.

No matter where we stand politically, I know we all want Maine's children to grow up healthy, loved, and safe. That means rejecting legislation rooted in fear and misinformation. It means trusting the evidence. It means choosing compassion over cruelty.

Let's not cause more Maine citizens and their families to suffer needless heartbreak. Please reject the codified cruelty these bills represent.