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Senator Carney, Representative Kuhn, and Honorable Members of the Judiciary Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to address the Committee. My name is Heather Webster, I'm a resident of Wiscasset, and I am the 2020 Lincoln County Teacher of the Year and a 2021 Maine Teacher of the Year Finalist. I am writing today in opposition of the bills before the committee today.

To put it simply, these bills would change the way I do my job. Some would say that my job only requires me to teach the content of my class, but my role as an educator goes beyond that content. My role as an educator is to create the safe, welcoming environment that allows each and every one of my students to interact with and learn that content. It is not my job to tell students who they are, but it is my responsibility to allow them the opportunity to be who they are without fear of judgement. When students tell me they have a preferred name, I don't question it because there are many reasons for using a different name—maybe a student prefers the name created by their initials, or maybe it's a family name that is different from what is on an official document. My own brother has been called "Chip" his entire life even though his legal name is Howard. Banning names other than those on a birth certificate impacts more than the trans community and contributes to all students feeling like they can't be themselves. The safe space that is my classroom is safe for all students regardless of their sex, gender, race, ethnicity, religious affiliation, or even their political party. And students shouldn't have to hunt to find safe spaces at school. All spaces—from the playing field to the stage, from the ball court to the bathroom—should be anxiety free for all students.

High school students are already considered a high risk population for suicidal ideation—22% of all high school students have had serious thoughts of suicide. That number more than doubles for the LGBTQAI+ youth population (45%). But I know that meeting all students where they are at, accepting them for who they are, and building connections with them significantly decreases their risk. And those connections should not be limited to the classroom. The lessons learned from participating in sports and other extracurricular activities are myriad: perseverance, dedication, self-assurance, and teamwork. We should want to encourage more young people to participate, not put up barriers for students across Maine that subject them to invasive interrogation or make them risk public ridicule. Rather than buying into the loud political agenda that is playing out on the national stage, we should stand firm in following the rule of law established by the Maine Human Rights Act, a law that has included gender protections since 2005.

Many of the current loud voices wax nostalgic for more "traditional times" such as, perhaps, the 1950s or the 1980s. I attended high school in the 80s, and I remember the fear of being different in any way, the fear of showing who you really were, whether that was something as complex as sexual orientation or as simple as not being one of the cool kids. I am constantly amazed by the many, many kind and accepting youth of today who welcome peers from all walks of life into their circle of friends. Please believe me when I say to you that telling some students they can't be who they are will make all students feel afraid to be who they are. And that is what all these bills will do.

Thank you for the opportunity to share my perspective with the Committee. I urge you to vote "Ought not to Pass" on these bills. Thank you!

Heather Webster

