

Savannah Mirisola-Sullivan  
Portland  
LD 2239

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Good morning Senator Carney, Representative Kuhn, and Honorable Members of the Judiciary Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to address the committee. My name is Savannah Mirisola-Sullivan. I'm writing to you as an educator to oppose the proposed ballot measure, LD 2239, An Act to Designate School Sports Participation and Facilities by Sex.

All families, no matter their background or political beliefs, want the same things for their child when they send them off to school each day: for their student to be safe, for them to feel like they belong, for them to be seen and loved for who they are, and for their student to have every opportunity to learn and grow into the best version of themselves. I've worked in public schools for eighteen years, and have been a classroom teacher for ten- my most important job has always been to keep my students safe.

Research is clear that without safety, students cannot learn. Belonging is a critical piece of safety, and one tool for creating that sense of belonging is extracurriculars like sports teams. In elementary, middle, and high school, sports teams exist as spaces to make friends, play, laugh, learn to problem solve and collaborate, and develop confidence and perseverance. At my last school for example, our students had access to a fabulous program called Girls on the Run. A few years ago, our fifth grade students took it upon themselves to change the name of the program at our site, because they worried that the term "girls" might make their trans and non-binary friends feel like they couldn't join- they wanted anyone who was interested in running to participate, no matter the words they used to describe themselves. Each afternoon that I observed their practice, I saw a group of kids laughing, encouraging each other, trying new things, building their sense of self, and most importantly, feeling like they belonged. Because our students refused to draw an unnecessary line between cisgender and transgender girls, I believe we had one of the highest rates of participation yet that year. May we follow their lead.

I've taught fourth grade for most of my career. At that age, students are experimenting with all sorts of identities. Do I like Taylor Swift or do I like Kendrick Lamar? Do I want to play ice hockey or field hockey? Do I enjoy reading the Wild Robot series or Wings of Fire? It is developmentally appropriate for students to also experiment and grapple with their gender identity and expression at this age. Does this nickname feel more like me, or does the name my family chose for me not quite fit anymore? Some of the names and pronouns students try on are temporary, while others stick, and all students have access to gender-neutral bathrooms to alleviate undue pressure on deciding which space to use, allowing them to focus on learning. Using the names and pronouns that students share with me while empowering them to make their own choices also clearly communicates to students that I trust them to tell me who they are, creating a foundation of safety. When we teach students to listen to their intuition and trust themselves, that ripples out into every aspect of who they are in the classroom. It empowers them to share their ideas, to take risks in their learning, to advocate for themselves, to solve conflict in respectful ways, and to find their passions. All of these contribute to every family's goals for their students: to be safe, to learn, and to belong.

Teachers have been clear about the changes that actually make schools safe places to learn for all students, including smaller class sizes, adequate staffing, more robust mental health resources, full-time nurses and librarians, and most importantly, gun reform. The proposed ballot measure funded by an out-of-state billionaire for his own personal agenda and power grab does nothing to address the very real needs of Maine students. Instead, it weaponizes the language of student safety while actually

increasing risk for some of our most marginalized students. When we pit some students against others, we make schools less safe for everyone, and waste critical resources that are already scarce. As a life-long educator committed to student well-being, it is frightening to imagine how this ballot measure would impact our students, our schools, and our communities. Studies show that measures like sports bans and bathroom bans cause up to a 72% increase in suicide attempts among trans and non-binary youth. In Maine alone, 4,847 LGBTQIA+ seriously considered suicide last year. There is no safety in that, and that kind of loss harms everyone in a community. These statistics reveal the real purpose of extreme, blanket bans like the ballot measure before you, which is compliance and erasure. Those are not the values of our school, our families, or the state of Maine.

We have an opportunity to act together to make Maine schools and sports teams a place where all students and players can thrive by opposing LD 2239. Thank you for the opportunity to share my perspective.