



Maine Education Association

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Rebecca Cole NEA Director | Rachelle Bristol Executive Director

**Testimony
In Opposition to
LD 678: An Act to Require Parental Approval for Public School Employees to Use a Name or
Pronoun Other than a Child's Given Name or Pronoun Corresponding to the Gender on the
Child's Birth Certificate
Before the Joint Standing Committee on Judiciary
May 15, 2023**

Senator Carney, Representative Moonen, and other esteemed members of the Committee on Judiciary,

My name is John Kosinski (he/him), and I am proud to serve as the Director of Government Relations for the Maine Education Association (MEA). The MEA represents 24,000 educators in the state of Maine, including teachers and other professionals in nearly every public school in the state and faculty and other professional staff in the University of Maine and Community College Systems.

I am here today to testify on behalf of the MEA in **opposition** to LD 678, *An Act to Require Parental Approval for Public School Employees to Use a Name or Pronoun Other than a Child's Given Name or Pronoun Corresponding to the Gender on the Child's Birth Certificate*.

Public schools are committed to helping **all** students succeed. **All** of them. The more public schools and the educators can help students learn and grow, the better our country and our society will be. As you have no doubt seen over the past many years, the Department of Education, the Governor, the Maine Education Association, and public schools everywhere are committed to **ALL** students and are working to meet the needs of **ALL** students.

In order to help all students succeed, educators recognize and understand that we must remove the barriers that inhibit or prohibit the healthy learning and development of students. Schools must treat students with respect and dignity. We must be inclusive and welcoming for all students who come through the door each morning. Only if schools are seen as a safe place and a welcoming environment will authentic learning take place.

The bill before you is an attempt to disrupt all the work happening in schools to make our schools more inclusive and more welcoming for all students and families. LD 678 attempts to interfere with the student/teacher relationship by requiring parental approval before a teacher can respect the wishes of the student. This bill is a threat to inclusive practices, and this is why we are opposed.

Many times this session in this Committee and others, we have heard the mantra of “parents rights.” As a father, I totally understand and appreciate some of these arguments, but many who make the claim for “parents rights” act as if students do not have rights. The right to feel respected at school. The right to live an authentic life.

35 Community Drive, Augusta, ME 04330 | 1349 Broadway, Bangor, ME 04401
7 Hatch Drive, Suite 220, Caribou, ME 04736 | 29 Christopher Toppi Drive, South Portland ME 04106

207-622-5866 | 207-888-2070 fax | www.maineea.org

There can and should be communications with parents, and these communications happen, when the student feels comfortable sharing that information with their parents. But when they come through the school door, the job of educators is to make sure they feel welcome regardless of their gender identity.

And we all know some parents may have unhealthy or hostile reactions to their child experiencing questions about their identity. There is no law requiring the parents to respect the gender identity their children express. Nor is there a law requiring parents to help their child find counseling services or other help their child may need. Nor is there any prohibition on parents saying harsh things or taking unhealthy paths in response to their child's expressed needs or desires.

But the courts and the law are clear – public schools must provide an inclusive environment for all students, and this includes respecting the wishes of our students. Schools have an obligation to all students. Please respect educators and the students they serve by rejecting this legislation.

Lastly, I must add how unfortunate it is that with many pressing issues impacting our students and our public schools there have been so many bills and so much time used to debate issues that will have little to no impact on school improvement or directly helping students. We have major workforce shortages in our schools, especially in teacher and ed tech positions. Salaries and wages in public education have not kept pace with other private sector jobs. We have major concerns about the overall mental health challenges of students, evidence by the student mental health survey. Educators report a sharp uptick in dangerous, challenging or otherwise disruptive behavior of students in schools. The pensions of teachers and ed techs are in dire straits due to the cuts made in 2011 by the previous Governor and the impact of inflation. Gun violence. There are many other issues that need the attention of our legislators. Pronoun usage is not one of those issues. Please vote ought not to pass on LD 678 and please help educators in classrooms today by addressing the real issues impacting students, our public schools and the people who work in them.

Thank you for your time and your service to the people of Maine. I will do my best to answer any questions you may have.