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# Letter: Maine should find ways to avoid bias in social work licensing

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by **Opinion Contributor**

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Natalie Rincon poses for a photograph outside a Houston elementary school on Nov. 17, 2022, in Houston. Credit: David J. Phillip / AP

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I am writing in support of **LD 1298**, An Act Establishing Alternate Pathways to Social Worker Licensing. As a clinical social worker and director of mental health for a Maine school district, I know that students of color often don't see themselves reflected in the adults who support their mental health. Most school social workers are white and female — not because others aren't qualified, but because our licensure system reinforces barriers rooted in structural racism.

The Association of Social Work Boards licensing exam, required for social work licensure, has come under **national scrutiny** for significant racial and age-related **disparities** in pass rates. Black and Indigenous test takers — and those for whom English is a second language — pass at lower rates than their white peers. These outcomes point to implicit bias in the exam's design and implementation, and this matters deeply for our schools.

Students deserve support from professionals who understand their lived experience. When licensure hinges on a flawed standardized test, we may shut out community-rooted, multilingual, and culturally

responsive candidates who are ready to serve — and who could make a critical difference for our most marginalized students.

Other states have already implemented **changes** in their pathways to licensure. Alternate pathways to licensure — grounded in supervision, mentorship and demonstrated skill — can uphold professional standards while dismantling exclusionary practices. And all of this could lead to better outcomes for our young people.

Maine reports **higher rates** of depression, anxiety and death by suicide than the national average. Let's reduce the barriers to licensure for some of our most qualified mental health providers by creating alternate pathways to licensure.

**Erika Boulware**

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