

May 13, 2023

Testimony re: 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” – **OUGHT NOT TO PASS**

Senator Carney, Representative Moonen, and honorable members of the Joint Standing Committee on Judiciary:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide these comments in strong support of LD 678. My name is Chris McLaughlin, and I am a licensed clinical social worker with over 22 years of experience providing behavioral health services to children and families across a variety of treatment settings here in Maine. For all of those years, I have worked directly in some capacity with transgender and gender diverse youth and their parents and families. For two decades, I have provided training to schools, community organizations, and healthcare facilities around the unique needs of transgender and gender diverse clients. I am also honored to be the Executive Director of the Maine Chapter of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW-ME). A large part of my job at NASW-ME is to represent the interests of Maine’s social workers as they endeavor to meet the behavioral health needs of Maine people across all settings and ages, from Fort Kent to York and all places in between. On behalf of our over 1,000 members here in Maine, I’m honored to share thoughts on this important proposed legislation.

We are in firm opposition to LD 678. NASW-ME, along with our national organization and countless other behavioral health professional organizations across Maine and the United States, understands just how important it is to show respect and affirmation for a youth’s personal pronouns and chosen name. Conversely, we also understand how dangerous it is to blatantly disregard the identity of these young people. It can be a big step for someone, especially a young person, to share their pronouns. Disregarding them can lead to feelings of invalidation and distress. New data from The Trevor Project (2023) from a study of more than 28,000 LGBTQ young people (aged 13–24) across the United States found that transgender and nonbinary young people who reported that all of the people they live with respect their pronouns reported lower rates of attempted suicide. It's crucial to respect their courage and their identity by using the pronouns and chosen names they've shared. Respecting names and pronouns for youth has several positive outcomes for students:

- **Affirmation of Identity:** When you use the correct pronouns and names, you're affirming the youth’s identity and acknowledging their sense of self. This is especially important for young people who are still in the process of understanding their identity and establishing their place in the world.
- **Respect and Dignity:** Everyone deserves to be treated with respect and dignity. Using the correct pronouns and names is a basic way of showing respect. It sends the message that you see and accept them for who they are.
- **Inclusion and Belonging:** When you respect a young person’s pronouns and chosen names, you contribute to an environment where people feel included, safe, and valued. This can make a significant difference, particularly for young people who are navigating their way through societal norms and expectations.
- **Reducing Harm and Discrimination:** Many transgender and nonbinary youth face discrimination, harassment, and violence because of their gender identity. By using correct pronouns and names, we’re standing against such harmful behaviors and attitudes, and creating a safer space for all.
- **Promoting Understanding and Empathy:** Respect for pronouns can lead to greater understanding and empathy, breaking down barriers and stereotypes about gender. It helps to facilitate conversations about individuality, diversity, and respect.

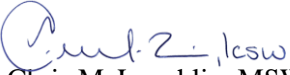
- Educational Opportunities: By using and respecting a youth's chosen pronouns and names, we are also setting an example for others. This can serve as an educational opportunity for those who may not understand the importance of pronouns, which can further foster an environment of respect and acceptance.

In an ideal world, this transition to updated pronouns and names would be done in lockstep with families, parents, and guardians. NASW-ME strongly believes that when school teams and behavioral health providers partner together with families, the outcomes for youth are more successful. However, having submitted testimony to this committee multiple times during this session and hearing the public comment associated with bills related to transgender and nonbinary youth, it's clear to me that this is sadly not the world we live in currently, even here in Maine. For many LGBTQ+ youth, school is their "safe place". It's where they can be comfortable being their authentic selves and safely explore feelings related to sexual orientation and gender identity. While educators, counselors, and school social workers try hard to help youth prepare themselves to share these pieces of themselves with family members, this isn't always able to happen, especially when queer youth are living in homes that are not ready to affirm them.

NASW-ME is frankly concerned for the wellbeing of our state's young people in light of the growing number of anti-LGBTQ+ and misguided "parental rights" bills that have come forth this session. Trust me when I say that our state's young people are watching. The same Trevor Project research referenced earlier also found that nearly 1 in 3 young people said that their mental health was poor most of the time or always due to the anti-LGBTQ+ policies and legislation that are currently sweeping the country. At the time I am writing this testimony, the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) has identified more than 520 anti-equality bills related to the lives of LGBTQ+ people that have been introduced across the United States. More than 50 of these hateful and harmful bills have already been enacted this year. We must work together to keep Maine above this fray and elevate our state to be a role model for our country by showing how we care for and provide for ALL of our children. The American people are asking for better. In recent HRC polling, 64% of all likely voters think there is "too much legislation" aimed at "limiting the rights of transgender and gay people in America," including 72% of Democrats, 65% of Independents, and 55% of Republicans.

I urge this committee to take action to protect the lives of transgender and non-binary youth by voting "Ought Not to Pass" on LD 678. I want to thank you all for your work on this issue. Please do not hesitate to reach out to NASW ME for any support we can offer, including any social work representation and participation in any future work sessions for LD 678.

Thank you again,


Chris McLaughlin, MSW, LCSW
Executive Director
Maine Chapter – NASW

References:

<https://www.thetrevorproject.org/survey-2023/>

Alvarez, B. (2022). Why pronouns matter. *NEA*. <https://www.nea.org>