

Testimony of Lani Graham, MD, MPH

In Opposition to LD's 96, 156, 833, 1082

Before the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee, May 6, 2021

My name is Lani Graham. I am member of the Public Health Committee (PHC) of the Maine Medical Association (MMA) and of the Maine Public Health Association. I am a former Chief Public health Officer for Maine. I live in Freeport.

The four bills you will be hearing this morning are all likely well-intentioned but are dangerous for Maine children and for public health. It is ironic and sad that in this deadly time of Covid when vaccines are providing a path out of our yearlong nightmare, that the value of immunizations remains so poorly understood. Childhood immunization remains one of the greatest public health successes of my lifetime, preventing thousands of cases of terrible illness and death for children. Yet here we have bills, which if passed, could lead to increasing childhood illness and possible death, while offering no significant benefit.

Childhood immunization is a simple, effective, and safe way to protect a child. But unlike many of the other public health interventions, to be really effective we must all work together. This is what has been such a hot topic lately, herd immunity. This is the way to protect the vulnerable, who have significant medical reasons for not becoming immunized, but who could die if they were to become infected with one of these childhood diseases like chicken pox, pertussis, or measles. It is also the way, the only way, that we can completely stop the transmission of these diseases and even eliminate them. The four bills before you all militate against those public health goals. Maine currently has an excellent law in place which allows children with significant medical conditions to forgo immunizations. This approach was upheld by a substantial majority of the public in a recent referendum. Working within the parameters of this law, together we can move forward with our goals of better childhood health for all.

LD 96 seeks exemptions for those children who were in school and were not immunized before our current law was passed. Passing this law would delay the achievement of the higher immunization rates required to protect us all, perhaps by more than a decade. Outbreaks of completely preventable childhood diseases must be expected.

LD 156 could have the impact of creating opportunities for an outbreak in a private school, which would be a challenge to public health resources, but also could mean the infection of vulnerable children or people in the surrounding community.

LD 833 is the worst of the group as it is a clear attempt to circumvent the expressed will of Maine people who supported our current law without a religious exemption. This law if passed would take us right back to the place we had reached when religious and philosophical exemptions were eliminated due to falling immunization rates and resultant outbreaks.

LD 1082, while not as dangerous as the other three, is not advisable. Those children attending a virtual school still circulate in the community. They may be involved in sports and other activities with one another and others in the community when not online. Once again outbreaks must be considered.

I urge you to vote against these bills. Thank you for your attention.