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GARDINER  
LD 51

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan and members of the Education & Cultural Affairs Committee, I am testifying in SUPPORT of LD 51.

I took my son out of school, and left my job as a substitute teacher the day after the veto of this original bill failed. I took him out as soon as possible because I did not want him waiting the two years before he was actually "kicked out" of school. I did not want him forming stronger bonds with peers only to have that ripped away. I did not want him getting used to the public school system only to have it ripped away as well. At age 6, this was still devastating to his poor little heart. He still feels "different" than other kids his age. He sees his siblings go to school every day, he sees what he thinks is "normal" in every single TV show ever made, kids going to school and playing out that dynamic with peers who over time become friends. It is heart breaking as a parent to watch. Yes my other two are fully vaccinated. Despite the stereotype most have in their heads about an unvaxxed kid and their families, my son has medical issues that do NOT fall under the "exemption standards" if you will. I think if we learned anything through the pandemic it is that EVERYONES BODIES ARE DIFFERENT and that SCIENCE IS NOT ALWAYS RIGHT. Why do we force things into children's bodies then? Why are some ok with emotionally damaging children by changing their whole lives and withholding their education and social lives from them? Why is it ok to hurt my son in that way due to medical issues he cannot help?

Other than the emotional toll this has taken on my son, I was also forced to leave my job. This of course caused a huge financial burden to my family. Especially in such a time as this with food, electricity, and all living expenses at an all time high. My family of 5 lives off of one income, often putting groceries on credit cards and living in a home that is too small for us. There are so many jobs out there and I hear the complaint of "no one wants to work" all the time. I do, I want to work, but your committee voted to take that option away from me when you forced me to homeschool my son. Our school district already didn't have enough substitutes when I worked there and I have heard of times when one teacher had to teach two classrooms. My husband was forced to take a travel military job just for us to make ends meet. He has been in the military since 2001, but was in the guard as to stay home with his family. Now, he is not home very often and that too takes it's toll on our whole family.

I really do believe that this taking away of exemptions has caused more harm than good to the state of Maine. My son sees most of these kids anyway, at after school programs and sporting events, so taking these exemptions away has really only excluded children for no reason. You are a new and refreshing group, please have it in your hearts to let my son go back to school, let me go to work in a desperately needed time, and my husband be home with his family.