

DIANNA LEIGHTON
FORT FAIRFIELD
LD 51

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Regarding LD 51 - An Act to Restore Religious and Philosophical Exemptions to Immunization Requirements and LD 1098 - An Act to Restore Religious and Philosophical Exemptions Regarding Immunization Requirements

3/31/2023

To Senator Rafferty and esteemed members of the Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs:

My name is Dianna Leighton, a concerned citizen and parent from Fort Fairfield. I am writing against LD 51 and LD 1098 being discussed today.

In 2019 and into 2020, I worked as a volunteer advocate for the No on 1 campaign to uphold LD 798 and remove religious and philosophical exemptions from public school attendance requirements.

At that time, the statewide average coverage immunization rate for Kindergarten students for the school year 2019-20 was below the standard herd immunity target of 95% for polio, measles, mumps, rubella, diphtheria, and pertussis. A statewide average across a state as large as ours is only one piece of the puzzle though. When zooming in to individual counties or even individual schools, the state of things became more dire:

Franklin County had a coverage immunization rate for Kindergarten students in 2019-20 as low as 89% for measles, mumps, rubella. Maine Coast Waldorf School in Freeport had an exemption rate of 46.2% of students, meaning that coverage immunization would be well below the 95% standard at a staggeringly low 53.8%

Even in my home of Aroostook County, which historically boasts robust vaccination rates, there have been pockets of concern, such as Woodland School at 83% coverage and Greater Houlton Christian Academy at 87.5% coverage across all required school immunizations.

These numbers had been slowly dropping in the years prior, driven by the ease of access to religious and philosophical exemptions. Most religions do not prohibit vaccinations. One's philosophical beliefs regarding vaccinations were not questioned. Rather, a parental statement was all that was required to allow a student to attend school without the required vaccines.

If it was only a matter of personal risk, I probably wouldn't be writing to you today. But I do ask you to imagine a scenario where I am stopped by a Maine State Police officer for driving 30 mph over the posted speed limit on I-95. In response, I provide a statement that I have written that explains my philosophical belief that speeding does not increase the risk of traffic fatalities to myself and others. That's it. I'm exempt. The officer tips their hat and I continue to drive 105 mph. Maybe I even remove my seatbelt and my child's booster seat as well since I don't philosophically believe in those either.

Suddenly, the range of risk moves beyond me and to others. In the case of schools, these are often the hub of our greater communities, serving as large employers and providing education to several family members at one time. If an outbreak occurs in a school, it can easily spread beyond a school to vulnerable members of our communities, including infants, the elderly, and the immunocompromised. The choice not to immunize [outside of medical reasons] is never solely personal.

In Fort Fairfield, it doesn't take long to meet someone who grew up with polio. Many can share tragic stories of the loss of friends, neighbors, and even siblings. Like many of his generation, my father recalled a painful childhood case of mumps, a disease that can lead to inflammation of the brain and ovaries/testicles in some cases. I still bear the scars of chicken pox that took me out of school for weeks, a disease I would

never wish upon my son today.

Each of these diseases is now preventable through vaccination, but especially in maintaining a coverage vaccination rate of 95% or higher. Since LD798 was upheld in 2020, Maine has seen a rise...from 94% to 96.3%...in the statewide average coverage immunization rate. By placing the religious and philosophical exemptions back in place, we place the future of public health for all Mainers at a severe disadvantage and remove a necessary layer of safety for Maine students.

Respectfully submitted,
Dianna Leighton
Fort Fairfield, ME