

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan and members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee, my name is Joel Furrow and I'm testifying in favor of LD 51.

I am a leader in a nonprofit service provider, primarily serving the diverse immigrant communities in Portland and Lewiston. I am sharing my personal observations and concerns having worked in these communities.

Passed in 2019, LD 798 removed all non-medical exemptions for immunization requirements for public and private school admission. This law has negatively impacted thousands of students across Maine. Most recently, this injustice has disproportionately impacted the growing and diverse immigrant community in Lewiston by threatening to restrict their access to education.

On February 9th, the Sun Journal reported that some 120 students within the Lewiston Public School system had not met the state's mandated vaccine requirements for school admission. This included 70 students at Conners Elementary alone. The article also noted that the majority of these students were from immigrant families. Under Maine's current law, these students will not be afforded access to an education and will be barred from attending school.

There are many reasons that these families may be unable or currently unwilling to meet the vaccine requirements. One may consider the stigma of well documented, failed vaccine campaigns all across the continent of Africa. The Associated Press reported just 2 weeks ago that, "Health officials in Burundi have declared an outbreak of polio linked to the vaccine, the first time the paralytic disease has been detected in the East African country for more than three decades." The prestigious Science Magazine and The Guardian have also followed this story for more than 2 years.

Other challenges such as language access within medical providers or schools can potentially make core issues like Informed Consent difficult for a parent already navigating many new systems in a new home.

Faith is a strong value in these communities. Many of the vaccines on the schedule contain pork bi-products that are used as preserving agents. Although alternate "non-pork" forms of the shots exist, they are not easily accessed by medical providers.

These examples underline just how complicated and nuanced the conversation on childhood immunization can be for a rapidly growing number of Maine families.

The students in Lewiston had a February 1st deadline to meet the requirements. School leaders made the decision NOT to enforce the deadline and continued to provide access to education for each of the 120+ students in question.

This decision should be applauded by all. It is, of course, the just, moral and ethical approach. The opportunity of time, full-access to information and respect of one's personal faith should always be protected. Denying access to education on the basis of vaccine status can only harm these children and further restrict parents from making comfortable, informed choices.

Restoring religious and philosophical exemptions will create the flexibility needed to accommodate the nuanced needs of these and future families.

If restored, these exemptions will preserve the rights of informed consent and access to education for all Mainers. I urge you to vote yes on LD 51. Let's do the right thing and keep our kids in school.

Thank you.

Submitted by Joel Furrow, 38 Collins Rd, Wales ME 04280.

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<https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/sep/02/vaccine-derived-polio-spreads-in-africa-after-defeat-of-wild-virus>

<https://www.science.org/content/article/first-polio-cases-linked-new-oral-vaccine-detected-africa>

<https://apnews.com/article/polio-burundi-epidemic-africa-vaccine-d7489fbf1bd75f8612672414d9a5f2c0>