



Maine Education Association

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**Testimony
In Opposition to
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, and
LD 1209 An Act to Reinstate the Religious and Philosophical Vaccine Exemptions for Private
Schools and Virtual Public Schools**

**Grace Leavitt, President, Maine Education Association
Before the Joint Standing Committee on Education & Cultural Affairs
April 3, 2023**

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan, and members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee,

My name is Grace Leavitt. My pronouns are she, her, hers. I am serving as President of the Maine Education Association while on leave from teaching Spanish in MSAD 51. I have over 43 years of classroom teaching experience with 20 years as a National Board Certified teacher. The MEA represents nearly 24,000 educators in our Maine system of public education in pre-K-12 schools as well as in our institutions of higher education, both the University of Maine System and the Maine Community College System, along with students in teacher prep programs as well as many retired educators.

I am here to testify on behalf of MEA in opposition to 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, and LD 1209 An Act to Reinstate the Religious and Philosophical Vaccine Exemptions for Private Schools and Virtual Public Schools.

In the spring of 2019 during my first year serving as President of the MEA, I gave testimony in support of LD 798, An Act to Protect Maine Children and Students from Preventable Diseases by Repealing Certain Exemptions from the Laws Governing Immunization Requirements. At that time we were facing many instances of outbreaks of measles in our schools across the country as well as some here in Maine. My testimony included the following headlines:

“Kids Pay the Highest Price in Measles Outbreak; The youngest children are at the greatest risk of getting—and dying from—measles.” (U.S. News & World Report, March 11, 2019)

“At least 107 measles cases confirmed across 21 states” (CNN, January 29, 2019)

“One New York City student with measles sickened 21 people amid outbreak” (NBC News, March 8, 2019)

“Cost of measles outbreak: 800 students kept out of school” (NBC News, March 7, 2019)

“Measles Is Making a Comeback” (The New York Times, March 11, 2019)

LD 798 passed and the law went into effect in September of 2021. Perhaps the global COVID-19 pandemic has caused people to forget that measles and the other preventable childhood diseases for which there are safe, effective vaccines pose a serious threat. But the fact is that they still do. And it is also fact that there are some who, for valid medical reasons, may not be able to be vaccinated, but the

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rest of us who have no need of a medical exemption can keep them safe by being vaccinated. It is a matter of all of us acting on behalf of the common good, for the benefit of the greater society. The Centers for Disease Control¹ has extensive information on how important, safe, and effective vaccinations are.

The majority of voters in Maine showed clearly that they support what is now the current law by voting against the referendum question that tried to undo it. The result of that vote on that question in March 2020 was **73% to 27% in favor of upholding the current law**. The voters had the opportunity to overturn the new law but the vote was not even close. We should respect the voices of the voters who have weighed in on this issue and very clearly support allowing only medical exemptions.

Our schools do all they can to provide a safe learning environment for all students. It is a top priority and a responsibility that must continue to be taken seriously. Maintaining the current law is an extremely important part of that. In addition, given the mobility of some of our students, the current law needs to continue to apply not only to the students in our public schools, which includes charter schools, but also to students in any of the virtual charter schools as well as in private schools, as we have seen students who find their decision to attend a virtual or private school turned out not to be what they expected and they are then students in their public school.

We urge you to oppose these proposals. We should not go backwards, especially when it comes to keeping our children safe.

¹<https://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/parents/why-vaccinate/vaccine-decision.html#:~:text=Vaccines%20can%20prevent%20common%20diseases,as%20measles%20and%20whooping%20cough.>

²<https://wgme.com/news/local/maine-election-officials-surprised-by-high-turnout-after-polling-places-run-out-of-ballots>