

Dear Members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee,

I am sharing my testimony in support of LD 51, to restore religious and philosophical exemptions to immunization requirements. My husband and I are proud Mainers and homeowners in Steuben. We are currently homeschooling our four young children (10, 8, 7 & 6), two of which have Autism. We are asking you to please restore our right to exemptions, as we are being unfairly discriminated by our beliefs. It seems like our schools are teaching a curriculum based on equity, fairness and diversity, all while telling a certain group of children that they are not allowed an education. When we lost those rights a few years ago, I was hopeful because my two boys with Autism had IEP's in place and they would be protected, but we lost those IEP's because of Covid policies. My two boys could not wear masks because of sensory issues and the inability to communicate and have face to face interactions with peers and teachers. They were only given online options, which if you know anything about Autism, isn't a realistic expectation for them to receive an education. We were forced to pull them out of school, so that we could give them an education that they deserve. Now that they have lost their IEP's, our children with severe Autism, children with the greatest needs no longer have a right to an education in the eyes of our state. So much for THE LAND OF THE FREE. Our two other children yearn for social connections with their peers and a chance to join a sports team. Living rurally makes it hard for families like ours to make those connections in the homeschool setting. While we are successfully homeschooling and making amazing strides in teaching our children and bonding as a family, we feel that this type of discrimination has no place in our great state of Maine. We are urging you to please reconsider restoring the exemptions and making Maine, "The Way Life Should Be", once again. Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Jessica Ashley