

March 29, 2023

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

My name is Natasha Cote and I am testifying in support of LD 51. This 2022-2023 school year is the fourth year I have registered my children as a homeschooling family. After LD 798 was passed I didn't feel comfortable keeping my children in a school system where they wouldn't be welcomed in a couple years. We started right off in the fall of 2019 homeschooling as a direct response to the passing of LD 798 which took away our religious and philosophical exemptions for vaccines. LD 798 did not encourage us to get caught up on vaccines. I had already made a firm decision to stop vaccinating my children after my oldest had a direct reaction to vaccines in January of 2014. Our local school system, I believe, has many amazing teachers and I felt comfortable sending my children even though they weren't completely up to date. My boys were both missing just one dtap and one IPV vaccine to be considered fully vaccinated for those series. We filled out the proper exemption paper work for them to attend a very positive friendly school. This was taken away from us after LD 798.

One year ago we found out my oldest son had a brain tumor. He was rushed into brain surgery just one week after finding the mass that was causing severe hydrocephalus. They partially removed the tumor. Then in June he had a second brain surgery to fix recurring hydrocephalus. Two major brain surgeries in three months for an 11 year old. Looking back we now realize that having a brain tumor could be why my son had a more severe reaction to vaccines since his tumor is slow growing and puts a strain on his immune system as all forms of cancer do. But he was not medically exempt to vaccines before finding out as it was not an anaphylactic reaction; if it wasn't for having access to philosophical exemptions he would not have ever been able to attend our local public school or we would have been pushed to further damage his already overloaded system.

He hid his brain tumor extremely well and only when he went to an eye doctor and they saw his optical nerves swollen did he get further examined and found to have a tumor. His primary care doctor never saw anything wrong with Isaac as he passed all neurological exams. I write this because doctors are not a know all group of people and parents are the experts of their children. I knew my son had something going on when he reactions back in 2014, but I wouldn't not have guessed it to be a brain tumor back then. I relied on religious and philosophical exemptions from preschool until 2nd grade. We need to have these exemptions reinstated so moms like myself can make the best decisions for their children.

I have no plans on returning to the public school system. My children are people, but they are also funding for our local school system if they attend since the state allots money for each registered child. Our local school will not get these funds for my children will not be attending public school as long as LD 798 is in effect. LD 798 was a terrible piece of legislation that excluded thousands of students in Maine. I may just have 3 children, but my children are real people who are a part of large group that have been excluded by not having access to religious or philosophical exemptions. Its time to reinstate these exemptions so all children may have access to public school systems. Thank you for your time.

Natasha Cote

Hartford, Maine