

Regarding LD 51: An Act to Restore Religious and Philosophical Exemptions

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

In June of 2021 my Ukrainian son, who was thriving as an English learner at Gardiner Area High School, finished his junior year. Three months later he was barred from returning to school by the law that removed religious and philosophical exemptions for required vaccines. He completed his senior year at home. Upon graduation, he got a job at a local restaurant where he works alongside his coworkers and intermingles with the public all day, every day.

Did this law “protect” the world from my son? No. It just kept him from enjoying his last year of high school with his friends, and from his legal right to a public education, including ELL services.

In the spring of 2021, while watching my freshman daughter win the 1600 meter event at a high school track meet, I overheard other parents exclaiming over her ability. One of those comments has stayed with me: “Wow! Imagine what she’ll be able to do when she’s a senior!”

Forgive me if I sound like I’m bragging, but if you’re a parent you know that there’s nothing like the pride and joy you feel in watching your child excel in something they love to do.

My daughter has been barred from participating in track for the past two seasons. She’s been robbed of the joy of competing, and from the hope of future college athletic scholarships.

In the meantime, she has worked summer jobs at a local ice cream shop, serving thousands of individuals each season, volunteered at a church Vacation Bible School and as a counselor at a summer camp each year where she leads hundreds of children through games and activities, she’s competed on a club volleyball team, and we’ve joined a homeschool co-op, where she’s made many new friends.

Did this law “protect” the world from my daughter? No, it’s just kept her from competing in her favorite sport and eliminated potential opportunities for her. Incidentally, this coming school year will be her senior year. Will we get to see what she can do on the track? I guess that depends on the outcome of this bill.

I have ten children, some biological, some who were adopted. I don’t have time to include each one in my testimony, but they’ve all been impacted negatively by LD798. We are *all* impacted negatively by living in a state where discrimination is legalized.

Children have been barred from government education. In a time when we desperately need healthcare workers, thousands have been let go from their jobs. We are the oldest state in the nation- at 43 years old, I am still 2 years younger than Maine's median age of 45- and yet, we are actively pushing families with children out of the state. Many have already left.

LD798 was passed against huge public outcry. It is a failure, both in its effect, as well as against the people of Maine. It’s time to admit it, and to undo it. I appeal to Maine’s legislators to restore the religious and philosophical exemptions to Maine’s vaccination law.

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