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## Testimony in OPPOSITION of LD 51, "An Act to Restore Religious and Philosophical Exemptions to Immunization Requirements"

Good day, Senator Rafferty and Representative Brennan, and honorable members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs. My name is Genevieve Whiting, MD. I am a resident of Cape Elizabeth, a pediatrician in Westbrook, secretary of the Maine chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics, a mother and an advocate for the health and wellbeing of the children of Maine.

Four years ago, we debated LD 798/PL154, the bill that LD 51 seeks to overturn. I came in support four years ago because of my passion despite personal risk. I was at risk because I was pregnant and entering a room with so many individuals whose personal objections to vaccines and subsequent choices put me and my future child at risk.

When the Maine legislature passed LD 798 in 2019, I felt tremendous hope. That hope was buoyed when 73% of Maine voters voted to uphold the law at referendum. That law has worked and non-medical opt-outs have decreased from 6.2% to 1.6% of school aged children. And yet we are back here today, not because the science supporting the safety and efficacy of vaccines has changed or because children are no longer at risk. We are back because proponents wish to continue this debate. So I am back to share a few of the reasons that I oppose LD 51.

At the most fundamental level, I believe that Maine children deserve to be safe in their schools. There are unprecedented threats to our school children, and they feel it. Threats that are driving a mental health crisis. As adults it is our duty to protect our children, all children, when and how we can. Vaccines protect our children. Vaccines protect children from preventable encephalitis, from measles or chickenpox, which can lead to brain damage and death. Vaccines protect children from paralysis and death due to polio. Vaccines also prevent milder variants of these dangerous diseases thereby reducing the need for children to be absent from school, isolated physically and socially. What greater gift can we give our children than the prevention of disease and isolation? But not all children can be vaccinated, themselves.

Seven years ago, I began caring for a newborn baby boy. By his 4-month visit, it was clear, something was wrong. His medical journey started that day and culminated in a bone marrow transplant. He is a resilient and wonderful child, but he is medically vulnerable. Post-transplant, he could not immediately receive vaccinations. His mother and I discussed the risks and benefits of being around other children. She and he needed to rely on the children around him to be vaccinated to confer protection for him. If she could not rely on the vaccinations of other children, it would be safer for him to remain home despite the social isolation during these critical stages of his social development. Our risk-benefit conversation shifted with the passage of the 2019 law. If this law is repealed, children like him will be forced to reconsider whether school is safe for them. These children deserve to be able to attend school free from preventable disease.

We have a duty to the children of Maine, to our neighbors and friends, to do what we can. Today, what we can do is vote 'ought not to pass' on LD 51, LD1098 and LD 1209.