

Testimony of Emily T. Keller, MD, MPH in **OPPOSITION** of

LD 51: An Act to Restore Religious and Philosophical Exemptions to Immunization Requirements
LD 1098: An Act to Restore Religious and Philosophical Exemptions Regarding Immunization Requirements
LD 1209: An Act to Reinstate the Religious and Philosophical Vaccine Exemptions for Private Schools and Virtual Public Charter Schools

Good day, Senator Rafferty and Representative Brennan, and honorable members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs. My name is Emily Keller and I am a resident of Norway, Maine. I am here to testify in opposition of LD 51, LD 1098 and LD 1209 as a board-certified pediatrician and preventive medicine physician and as a concerned community member.

This past fall and winter season was one of the worst I have experienced in my healthcare career. The surge of respiratory illnesses that spread like wildfire through daycares and schools brought our state's pediatric healthcare community on the verge of collapse. My colleagues and I saw overwhelming numbers of sick kids in our offices, emergency departments, and hospitals. Our state's pediatric intensive care units were repeatedly full. So much coughing. So much snot. Babies breathing so hard and so fast, until some stopped breathing altogether and needed help to do so. Scared children. Scared families. Scared healthcare team members trying to help. It was a sobering demonstration of how illnesses can unintentionally spread within environments where kids congregate.

The illnesses we saw this winter weren't even the more contagious aerosolized diseases like measles and chickenpox, two of the diseases addressed under Maine's current school vaccine law, which would more easily spread and infect people if given the opportunity. And that is what concerns me about these proposed bills—it is a dangerous opportunity—the opportunity for vaccine preventable diseases to wreak havoc in schools, necessitating school closures and risking the health of children and communities.

The school closures that occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic have had a devastating impact on youth development and on the mental and physical wellbeing of youth and their families. We should strive to safely keep kids in school, and Maine's current childhood vaccine law supports this goal.

The existing childhood vaccine law is overwhelmingly supported by Maine's pediatric providers and the state's medical and public health professional organizations. And the current vaccine law is what the majority of your constituents want. Maine was the first state in the nation to vote on vaccines at the ballot, and in 2020 more than 72% of voters chose to protect public health and the health of the Maine's children by upholding the childhood vaccine law (LD798/PL154).

I urge you to listen to the child health and public health experts on this issue, to uphold the will of Maine's majority, and to vote "ought not to pass" on LD 51, LD 1098 and LD 1209. Please keep Maine's children, schools, and communities safe from deadly diseases for which we have safe and effective vaccines.

Thank you for the opportunity to share my position on these important bills with you.

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