

3 April 2023

Testimony in opposition to LD #51: An Act to Restore Religious and Philosophical Exemptions to Immunization Requirements; and its related bills, LD #1098 and LD #1209

Good morning Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan and members of the Joint Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs. My name is Allison Long and I live in Buckfield, Maine. I am a mother of children who attend public school, a Christian, a former public educator, and a public health advocate. I am speaking today in strong opposition to LD #51 and related bills #1098 and #1209.

Prior to Public Law 154, Maine's childhood vaccination rates were in scary shape. At that time, only three US states had more students opting out of vaccines for non-medical reasons than we did here in Maine. We were at risk for outbreaks of very preventable diseases, and that was even before COVID and the perilous wave of misinformation and anti-vaccine propaganda that flourished in its wake.

Maine's dangerous levels of unvaccinated schoolchildren was starkly reflected in my own small Western Maine community. According to the Maine CDC, in the 2020-2021 school year, 11.1% of the kindergarteners at my children's school were granted exemptions from their vaccinations. All of those were religious and philosophical exemptions. In 2021-2022, however, after the law was passed, only 2.7% of our kindergarteners were unvaccinated. Statewide, exemptions decreased from 6.2% in 2018 to 1.8% in 2021. Maine children are safer because of this legislation: Please do not put them in danger once again.

Few issues in our state have been as decisively decided as this one. Maine has held the public hearings, debated on the floor of both chambers, considered amendments, created the important new law. . .then collected the signatures, put up the signs, held radio and television debates, and taken a statewide referendum vote. After all of this, more than 72% of voters, including a wide majority in every county, chose to protect Maine's children. And despite what the opposition will claim, this wasn't just Democratic primary voters: Almost 20% of No on 1 voters came out only to uphold our common-sense vaccine law.

Please do not allow the loud, incessant, science-denying voices of the very few eclipse those of the overwhelming majority of Mainers. Support science, reason, and the due process this issue has already been exhaustively afforded. Vote to protect the health of our kids and communities, as an overwhelming majority of Mainers has done on this very issue.

Allison Long
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