

4/7/2025

RE: LD 174, An Act to Restore Religious Exemptions to Immunization Requirements; LD 727, An Act to Repeal Certain Immunization Requirements for Schools

Senator Rafferty, Representative Murphy and Esteemed Members of Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs:

My name is Sarah Staffiere, I'm from Waterville, Maine and am here to testify in opposition to both LD 174 & 727.

In 2017, my then three year old son Gabe nearly died from a newly diagnosed chronic medical condition. After returning home from the hospital with a stark new reality, we were attempting to return to our lives as normally as possible and send him back to preschool. When Gabe's doctors communicated how essential vaccination would be for his close contacts--many vaccines don't work for him due to his condition--I approached his preschool about whether his classmates were vaccinated. Some were not but I was told that the law protected those families' religious and philosophical beliefs to not vaccinate. Unaware, I read the law myself. It was clear that at that time, in 2017, personal preference was placed ahead of the legitimate health dangers to children like Gabe, who rely on herd immunity to stay safe. It was a crushing blow to us. Where was the protection for the truly vulnerable? Based on this experience, in the years that followed, I personally worked hard to support the passage of Public Law 154, which sensibly limits vaccine exemptions to those with medical need.

Since PL 154 was enacted, Maine vaccination rates have solidly demonstrated what a huge success this law has been. Before the new law, Gabe's elementary school had kindergarten immunization rates at an average of 92%, well below the 95% goal for herd immunity. Now, they are all at 99%. Gabe is now 11 and one of his biggest risks is contracting bacterial meningitis. He will be entering middle school this fall where age-based risk for this infection significantly increases. But schools are much safer for him now: Across Maine the 7th grade immunization rate for meningitis has gone from 89% to nearly 97%. In 12th grade, it went from 82% to nearly 96%. All these numbers speak for themselves on how effective this law has been to safeguard public health in all Maine schools. Personally, I cannot adequately express how much this means to families like mine other than to say we are forever grateful to all those that supported the passage of PL 154 and continue to protect it.

Providing a loophole of religious exemptions under LD 174 or worse removing requirements altogether under LD 727, would undermine herd immunity and place communities at risk. The choice to forgo vaccination does not just affect the individual or family making the decision as I've demonstrated with our story- it endangers others, particularly in school settings where children are in close contact. Schools should be safe environments where all students are protected from preventable diseases, and allowing religious exemptions or removing vaccination requirements both severely compromise this fundamental goal.

Please continue to protect Maine's children, particularly our most vulnerable--including children like Gabe--by voting down LD 174 and 727.

Sincerely,
Sarah Staffiere