

TESTIMONY OF CHRISTOPHER STRECKER
**LD 1348, An Act to Increase the Limit on Damages Under the Maine Tort Claims Act
for Negligence Involving School Field Trips**

April 7, 2025
Judiciary Committee

Senator Carney, Representative Kuhn, and Honorable Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Judiciary I am Christopher Strecker. I urge to you vote LD 1348 Ought to Pass.

My family's tragic experience shows why this bill should be passed. In September 2021, Lakes Region High School organized and ran a Senior-student annual hike up Baldface Mountain, a "4000-footer" in the White Mountains. It's also known as one of "the terrible 25" harshest White Mountains to climb. The school promised safety. The school promised relationship building. The school promised that if any student needed to turn back that they could.

My late son, Michael Strecker, followed instructions, attended prep meetings, and on September 12, 2021, started on the hike. Within about 90 minutes, he began having problems and exhibiting all the classic signs of exertional heatstroke. Soon after, he asked to stop and turn back. He was told to keep going. His heatstroke symptoms increased. For the next 7 hours, one teacher ridiculed, cajoled, and forced him to march up Baldface Mountain. His teacher even yelled at him in front of other students, "to get the F ___ up" the mountain. Later, students came forward as witnesses and told of the horror that they witnessed, caused 100% by a teacher, and enabled by other teachers serving as field trip leaders that day.

During the hike, the school told Michael and the students, "you may hate me now, but you'll be glad later that I pushed you." It seemed that the hike was more about the school making it feel good about itself rather than the students.

Michael's symptoms got so bad, he started to not be able to communicate coherently, and eventually not at all. At this point, he could not even help himself, and the school failed to call for help. Afterward, other hikers who saw the Lakes Region group came forward and told us there was a dire situation unfolding and the school did nothing about it.

After it was too late, Michael died on the mountain of exertional heatstroke. By the time he was taken off the mountain, it was well after dark.

Michael's death was easily preventable. We worked with numerous experts who explained that this was basic heatstroke in a young person, with well over 6 hours to intervene and prevent Michael's death.

I was never informed about any of the problems on the mountain until after it all unfolded. Nobody communicated with us or EMS so anything could be done, even though communication technology has been easily accessible for over a decade that would have allowed that.

This bill would allow legal claims to be brought for those seriously injured or killed when school field trips are negligently planned and run. Currently those victims are shut out. Our family was shut out because of the Maine Tort Claims Act. Afterwards, we tried to bring a claim. The school even admitted negligence. But they hid behind the curtain of the MTCA that says to every student and every family in Maine, **“Schools have immunity from all civil claims.”**

LD 1348 promotes safety and accountability for Schools that run field trips. My son’s preventable death should serve as a lesson to all schools about following basic safety standards that match the bodily injury risks of field trips. Whether it's swimming safety, or basic outdoor first aid, schools need to follow well-established safety protocols. When they don’t, they can kill a student. That is what happened to Michael.

When a school kills or seriously injures a child needlessly through preventable acts, the family should be able to seek civil damages. Not only will this bill restore more fairness in these situations, it creates a financial incentive for doing so. Where there is no financial accountability, there is no real safety. Where there is financial accountability, there will be safety.

Thank you very much. I urge you to vote LD 1438 Ought To Pass. Thank you.