

Savannah Mirisola-Sullivan
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Good afternoon Senator Tipping, Representative Roeder, and Honorable Members of the Labor Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to address the committee. My name is Savannah Mirisola-Sullivan, and I teach fourth grade at Amanda C. Rowe Elementary in Portland, ME, where I also live. I am here today in support of LD 575, and in opposition of LD 406, LD 539, LD 952, LD 1169, LD 1221, LD 1249, LD 1273, LD 1307, LD 1333, and LD 1400. I'll focus my testimony on my opposition to LD 1400, An Act to Exempt Certain Public School Districts and Their Employees from the Paid Family and Medical Leave Benefits Program and LD 1712, An Act to Balance Support of Businesses and of Employees.

I've worked in public schools for eighteen years, and have been a classroom teacher for the past ten. I am incredibly proud of the work I have done in service of my community. When I talk about my career, I continue to find it difficult to describe the impact that the global pandemic had on teaching. On a personal level, remote teaching exacerbated my chronic illness, and this past fall I made the difficult decision to take a medical leave of absence to care for myself. When I met with HR, I was given the choice to take an unpaid leave through federal FMLA, or to use my sick days which I had banked over my eight years working in Portland. While I felt lucky to have the option to step away from the classroom without giving up my job, a safety that many workers don't currently have, neither of these choices felt supportive in the long term. Financially, I couldn't afford to lose my income, but physically, I couldn't afford to continue to teach. I decided to use my sick days, which were painstakingly collected in spite of colds, flus, sciatica flare ups, asthma, doctors appointments, migraines, mental health challenges, family illnesses, and the death of my father. Storing sick days like this, ignoring the needs of my body and my family, is exactly what pushed me to the point of needing a leave of absence. Not only would the existence of Paid Family and Medical Leave have offered me a better financial option, simply knowing that it was available may have kept me from needing a leave, as I would have been able to listen to my body and take my sick days in the short term.

I know and love countless other teachers who have had to do the same mental gymnastics to make the impossible decision between their financial and physical health. That is why there is such strong support for PFML from teachers, who can see the long term benefits of this program both for our schools and our broader communities. LD 1400, which exempts school employees from the Paid Family and Medical Leaves Benefits Program, creates more inequity for teachers by leaving the decisions up to individual districts and schools without clear criteria for what an equivalent plan should look like. Ultimately, it reinforces the narrative that teachers, working in a historically gendered profession, should not be afforded the same benefits because caretaking is not work. We *must* care for our caretakers.

Maine is experiencing a teacher shortage like we have never seen before. This makes the work even more impossible for those still in the classroom. Teachers are leaving work they love en masse, a clear smoke signal for the longevity of the profession. Now is the time to put our resources and support behind teachers to increase retention and sustainability, and Paid Family and Medical Leave is a perfect opportunity to do just that. Paid leave keeps people employed, and helps retain employees. We cannot let PFML leave teachers, or anyone, behind.

Thank you for the opportunity to share my story with the Committee. I urge you to vote "Ought not to pass" on LD 575, and in opposition of LD 406, LD 539, LD 952, LD 1169, LD 1221, LD 1249, LD 1273, LD 1307, LD 1333, and LD 1400 in support of our teachers, all caretakers, and the health of our communities. Thank you.