

Esteemed Representatives and Committee:

My name is Shelley Hooper. I work for MSAD75 at Williams-Cone Elementary School in Topsham as a certified Behavioral Health Professional, in classroom support. I am a resident of Bowdoinham. I am here today to testify in opposition of LD1400, "An Act to Exempt Certain Public School Districts and their Employees from the Paid Family Medical Leave Benefits Program (Rep. Nathan Carlow, Buxton).

I can confirm firsthand that our district has received payroll deductions to help fund this program. A 0.5 deduction comes out of each of my paychecks, and 0.5 is paid by the district. I am unlikely to ever use PFML for myself, as I am unmarried with no children. Why would I be here to oppose being exempted?

I know firsthand that the other types of leave are not able to be used in the same way as PFML. There is a sick bank program in my district but may only be used in very specific circumstances. Typical pregnancy and recovery times are not considered illnesses or disabilities. The idea that sick leave can replace PFML is patently false. This is why PFML was created in the first place.

Our recently approved contract does provide a small number of personal leave hours. It is not a cumulative resource and is already limited in its scope of use as well. For example, I am unable to use my PTO unless school is not in session, such as the mandatory unpaid week occurring now. I am able to use my PTO while we are meeting now but would be unable to take PTO to testify if this hearing were happening during my regularly scheduled hours. Any exceptions to this require superintendent approval, which is also contingent on the availability of an appropriate substitute staff member AND the approval of the principal. In other words, PTO comes with strings. It is also very finite: I have enough coverage for ten days and already used mine in otherwise unpaid weeks, as I live paycheck to paycheck like most of my coworkers.

One such coworker just lost her mother unexpectedly. She had no choice but to use her three days of PTO to fly out to the Midwest, see her mother in her final days, settle her affairs, and return. She needed two weeks. She is still trying to get her compensation, since even with PFML there are specific requirements that must be met to see that money. At this time, she does not know when or if she will be paid. Who among us can go without two weeks worth of compensation indefinitely? Certainly not I.

I urge you to consider how much educators need consistent income to remain in this profession. I remind you all of how long it took to get PFML, and that we educators are paying in to support this program regardless of our personal circumstances. The needs of the many outweigh the needs of .5% of my money. I hope my testimony has clarified that educators need PFML, to meet needs NOT covered elsewhere. We know it is a hard ask for school districts to continue to pay their share while we pay our fair share, but it is why we needed this law in the first place. I implore you to vote no to this proposal and protect the livelihoods of school employees. Thank you.