



**Thom Harnett**

52 Marston Rd

Gardiner, ME 04345

[Thom.Harnett@legislature.maine.gov](mailto:Thom.Harnett@legislature.maine.gov)

## HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

2 STATE HOUSE STATION

AUGUSTA, MAINE 04333-0002

(207) 287-1400

TTY: (207) 287-4469

February 8, 2021

*Testimony of Rep. Thom Harnett in support of*  
**LD 55, An Act To Protect Minority Groups by Eliminating the Prior  
Approval Requirement for a School Absence for a Recognized  
Religious Holiday**  
*before the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs*

Good morning, Senator Daughtry, Representative Brennan, and esteemed members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee. My name is Thom Harnett, and I represent the residents of District 83 which includes the Town of Farmingdale and the City of Gardiner. I submit in writing my support for **LD 55, An Act To Protect Minority Groups by Eliminating the Prior Approval Requirement for a School Absence for a Recognized Religious Holiday**. I begin by thanking my colleague, Representative Justin Fecteau for introducing this bill.

The face of Maine is changing, and it has been changing for some time now. That is an exceptionally good thing in my mind. Maine has been welcoming new neighbors from different parts of the world. Many of our new neighbors have fled their homelands due to political strife. They have often been targeted with hatred and violence in their native countries and have arrived here seeking a new and more peaceful life. They bring with them different cultures, different languages, different customs, different foods, and different religions. They enrich us and the state of Maine. They are the *American Dream*.

They also bring us their children and entrust us with their education. We in turn welcome them into our public schools and educational system as members of our community. We do this knowing they are part of our future and will contribute to our state. However, in those schools they are subject to school calendars that have historically been based on a Judeo-Christian history. Those school calendars do not align with religious and other holidays that are so important to those who practice faith systems whose holidays during school year. These calendars make it difficult for students to celebrate or otherwise observe their religious holidays.

LD 55 can change that by making it easier for all students of all faiths and religious practices to be absent from school for recognized religious holidays without having to secure prior approval from their school administration. This is a simple and easy fix, and one that many school districts in Maine have already adopted. It allows all students to practice their religion without having to communicate their strongly held and deeply personal religious beliefs to their school's

administrators before being absent. LD 55 accomplishes that with little or no disruption to the operation of our public schools.

I urge you to vote *ought to pass* on LD 55 and make all students feel welcome and respected in our public schools. Thank you very much for your time reading this and for your thoughtful consideration. If you need any additional information or have questions for your work session, please let me know.

Representative Thom Harnett  
House District #83

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Gardiner, ME 04345  
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