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Dear Members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee:

I am writing in full support of LD 55 - An Act To Protect Minority Religious Groups by Eliminating the Prior Approval Requirement for a School Absence for a Recognized Religious Holiday. As the parent of children from a minority religious group, I had to personally negotiate this issue annually with their RSU, though I had the good fortune of a sympathetic administrator who did his best to accommodate our family. Nonetheless, my often children suffered unnecessary consequences of the lack of a clear policy. It is an undue and inequitable burden on families who are not part of the majority religion to annually undertake the education of administrators, staff, teachers, coaches, and others in the school system about when and why your child will be absent and to have to ask (and not be guaranteed) that exemptions will be granted for missing class, sports, or other extra-curricular events. And that is the least of it. Confronting and processing provincial and discriminatory comments from those employed by the school systems regarding this exemption was frustrating and even harmful to my children.

While deeply personal, this issue also matters on a much larger stage. To this end, I led the effort at the University of Maine to adopt the following policy on the observance of religious holidays and events, which is now required language on all syllabi.

"Observance of Religious Holidays/Events: The University of Maine recognizes that when students are observing significant religious holidays, some may be unable to attend classes or labs, study, take tests, or work on other assignments. If they provide adequate notice (at least one week and longer if at all possible), these students are allowed to make up course requirements as long as this effort does not create an unreasonable burden upon the instructor, department or University. At the discretion of the instructor, such coursework could be due before or after the examination or assignment. No adverse or prejudicial effects shall result to a student's grade for the examination, study, or course requirement on the day of religious observance. The student shall not be marked absent from the class due to observing a significant religious holiday. In the case of an internship or clinical, students should refer to the applicable policy in place by the employer or site."