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Testimony against LD 51, 'An Act to Restore Religious and Philosophical Exemptions to Immunization Requirements'

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan, and distinguished members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee, my name is Gabriela DeOliveira, MD and I am a resident physician living in South Portland, Maine and training in pediatrics. I am a member of the Maine Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics. I am submitting testimony against LD 51, 'An Act to Restore Religious and Philosophical Exemptions to Immunization Requirements' and its sister bills, LD 1098 and LD 1209, because I believe that every child in Maine deserves to live in a community where they are safe – especially from preventable diseases that may have horrifying consequences, such as irreversible disability or even death.

I am honored to be a member of a profession dedicated to the health and well-being of children. All children are born with the potential for happy and fulfilling lives, and as pediatricians, we have the unique privilege of watching many children grow and thrive. It is unthinkable that a child should suffer or have their life cut short by a disease that we have the power to prevent. As we have unfortunately learned in the past several years, transmissible illnesses can have many effects beyond those directly caused by the illness itself – including cutting off access to education for many children. This may be because there are so many sick educators that classes cannot be held, or because a child has a medical condition that prevents them from receiving vaccines. Those families must then choose between their child's education and the risk of their child catching a serious and potentially deadly illness.

I recently cared for a child who was admitted to the hospital with a pneumococcal blood infection requiring several weeks of IV antibiotics – forcing him to be apart from his family and out of school while receiving treatment in the hospital. Pneumococcal infections are one of many serious illnesses that we have a vaccine to protect against, and this vaccine is part of the routine series of vaccines we give to children. While this child was in the hospital, we found that he had developed an immunodeficiency that prevents him from creating antibodies in response to vaccines, and this was likely the reason why he developed this serious infection. Because of his immunodeficiency, this child will never be able to create an immune defense against bacteria and viruses and is at risk of developing life-threatening infections. He now relies on others in his community to be vaccinated so that he can attend school and participate in activities without the constant fear that he will become dangerously ill.

You have the power to protect the health and access to education for this child and all the children in Maine. When these bills come before you, I ask that you vote for the children of Maine by voting against LD 51.

Thank you for your time and care of our community.