

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan, and esteemed members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee:

Nearly nine years ago, my wife and I drove to Maine, from our home in Central Virginia, to enjoy an outdoor recreation-oriented family vacation. Though the journey—with a two-year-old, five-year-old, and elderly Golden Retriever in tow—felt tedious at times, it certainly was worthwhile. Following two glorious weeks of adventure, mostly hiking and swimming, we found ourselves hungry for more of "the way life should be." Apart from the significant benefit of having lots of open space in which to exercise and explore, foremost among our concerns about relocation was the quality of upbringing it would afford our two kids.

In light of life-altering personal experiences with vaccination, the first variable about which I inquired was equal access to educational opportunities. Suffice it to say, we have come to appreciate that no medical intervention should be a one-size-fits-all proposition; to quote the first principle under Article 6 - Consent from the *Universal Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights* adopted by UNESCO's General Conference on October 19, 2005:

Any preventive, diagnostic and therapeutic medical intervention is only to be carried out with the prior, free and informed consent of the person concerned, based on adequate information. The consent should, where appropriate, be express and may be withdrawn by the person concerned at any time and for any reason without disadvantage or prejudice.

In late 2014, I was heartened to learn that Maine law allowed for both religious and philosophical exemptions from school vaccination requirements; in early 2015, just prior to our move to Falmouth, I reconfirmed this policy. Soon after we got settled, I was fortunate enough to enroll my son at a private school where teachers nurtured his talents and he thrived for several academic years; during a portion of this period, my daughter attended a similarly first-rate preschool program. Nearly three years ago, our children made the transition to public school, where each adjusted well, both academically and socially. My wife and I were especially pleased to see them bond and form close friendships with classmates. So, naturally, we were disappointed by the successful initiative to remove personal belief exemptions.

As written, Public Law, Ch. 154 is both coercive and punitive. Not only does it exclude children like ours from any classroom, including those in private schools, it eliminates their access even to *virtual* public charter schools. Between late June 2019 and September 13, 2019, a group of volunteers, most of whom were parents and grandparents of children affected by the new law, engaged in [a signature-gathering campaign](#) to put this issue to voters; in hindsight, our initiative was doomed from the start. *Soon after we hand-delivered petition sheets, with over 93,000 signatures, to Secretary of State Matt Dunlap, his office advised our leadership team that the campaign was successful and that our referendum question likely would appear on the Maine State Primary Ballot in June 2020. Instead, perhaps after consultation with Governor Janet Mills, he decided to assign said question to a March 2020 special election — when only the Democratic Party held its presidential primary and no Republican candidates appeared on the*

ballot; aside from Republicans for whom health freedom was a priority, there was no incentive for non-Democrats to show up at the polls. My understanding is that successful citizen initiatives (i.e., referendum questions) are required to appear on a statewide ballot; our campaign contends that this March 2020 special election did not qualify as such. Naturally, the turnout consisted mostly of registered Democrats since the Maine Democratic Party pushed LD 798 and backed the No on 1 position. Our opponents also received \$500,000 from two Big Pharma corporations and blanketed the airwaves with deceitful ads.

LD 51, LD 1098, and LD 1209 are sensible bills that seek to redress a legitimate grievance shared by thousands of Maine students and their families: either LD 51 or LD 1098 would restore religious and philosophical exemptions, while LD 1209 would permit exemptions in educational settings that do not receive public funds. If Maine lawmakers are unable to deliver on at least one of these three bills, the families of those impacted will feel compelled to homeschool, on a full-time basis, with just one conventional alternative: virtual private schools. As occurred three years ago, more Maine residents will find paths to move to states where those who set public policy understand health choice is a basic human right. By federal law, every child should have access to a free and appropriate public education; your support for LD 51, LD 1098, and/or LD 1209 is both reasonable and warranted.