

Northe Saunders
Maine Families for Vaccines
LD 51

Testimony in opposition to LD 51, LD 1098, LD 1209, LD 1288, LD 1148, LD 869

April 3rd, 2023

Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan, and Honorable Members of the Joint Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs:

My name is Northe Saunders. I'm a leader of Maine Families for Vaccines, the organization that supported the passage of LD 798 in 2019 to remove non-medical exemptions to vaccines required for school entry. We also successfully stopped the People's Veto referendum to overturn that legislation in 2020. That referendum, in which every registered Maine voter had the opportunity to cast a ballot, was one of the most lopsided in our State's history, with 72.8% of Maine voters opposed to overturning this legislation.

I help organize Maine Families for Vaccines for one reason. I have a young family with three children aged 7, 6, and 3. When I first testified in support of LD 798, I had to wait until past midnight for my turn. I spent countless hours in this same room and building, waiting to ensure that this committee knew how much I care about keeping my children and community safe from vaccine-preventable diseases.

When LD 798 passed, my daughter Katharine, who was three then, celebrated on the stairs inside the Statehouse. Our three-year-old knew then that vaccines are safe and effective. When she started Kindergarten this past fall at Longfellow Elementary in Portland, I felt proud of the work that I have done with Maine Families for Vaccines. I had seen the data. I knew the vaccine exemption rate had dropped precipitously, from a high of 6.2% in 2018 to just 1.8% in 2021. The proof was in the science. Our schools were safer from preventable diseases. Parents had to worry less about an outbreak of measles, whooping cough, or chicken pox shutting down their kid's school. Parents have to miss work when kids are out of school. The knock-on effect of a vaccine-preventable disease outbreak can cost hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of dollars. Not only do our kids get sick, our economy also suffers.

Let's not turn the page back. The legislature has already debated this issue. The voters have spoken. Our work here in Maine has inspired other states like New York and Connecticut to pass similar legislation. Maine Families for Vaccines, and our work in 2019, has inspired other states to start their own State Families for Vaccines organizations.

I hope the maxim rings true: As Maine goes, so goes the nation. Our state is a leader in public health on many fronts. All of the vaccine bills under consideration today would increase risk and put our communities in danger. Let's not go backward.

On behalf of Maine Families for Vaccines, our thousands of supporters all across the state, and the voters who overwhelmingly voted to support LD798, I ask for your opposition to all of the vaccine bills being heard today.

Thank you for your consideration and time.

Northe Saunders
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Maine Families for Vaccines