

Greetings, esteemed members of the Labor Committee.

My name is Jaye Rich (she/her), I'm a member of the Auburn school committee, treasurer of Maine Education Association, and a proud Multilingual Teacher at McMahon Elementary in Lewiston, Maine. In 2023, I joined many others in collecting signatures to put Paid Family and Medical Leave on the ballot. Recognizing the need for such a law in our state, Maine voters spoke clearly in favor of the initiative. I am here today in strong opposition to any LD attempting to change, repeal or undermine Maine's PFML, but I'll speak specifically to LD 1400, An Act to Exempt Certain Public School Districts and Their Employees from the Paid Family and Medical Leave Benefits Program.

I've seen firsthand how critical Paid Family and Medical Leave can be— and the harm caused when it's denied. Throughout my ten years as an educator, I've watched friends and colleagues take unpaid time off to perform one of the most important roles a person can take on: being a caregiver.

One colleague of mine was the primary caregiver for her brother in the final months of his life. She took on everything— preparing his will, coordinating hospice care, cleaning out his living space, and organizing his funeral. Doing all that while trying to continue teaching was overwhelming and unsustainable. She took unpaid leave under FMLA, but that left her with depleted leave time and increased financial stress during an already heartbreaking time. Her experience is one of many that shows why a **paid** program is essential.

In the past, I found myself hoarding my sick days, knowing I would need them someday to start a family. This meant I often went to work when I should really have stayed at home. This type of behavior leads to more stress, a greater risk of burnout, and potentially spreading illness in the workplace. And if I were to need to take FMLA, all of my accrued sick leave would be wiped out, leaving me with nothing if I or a loved one needed care later. This isn't just unsustainable; it's unfair. When Paid Family and Medical Leave (PFML) was approved by voters, it lifted a significant burden off my shoulders and made me feel valued as a public sector employee. Taking that away would be a step backward.

LD 1400 claims to offer an "exemption" for school districts that provide "substantially equivalent" benefits, but who decides what qualifies as equivalent? There is no clear enforcement mechanism or guarantee that these district-level alternatives will offer the same protections as a statewide program. This opens the door to inconsistency and inequity. Educators in one district could have strong paid leave protections, while those in another could be left with far less. Public school educators across Maine deserve equitable treatment, no matter their zip code.

Additionally, LD 1400 ties these exemptions to existing or future collective bargaining agreements. But what about new hires? Or staff who are not part of a CBA? There's no guarantee they'll be covered at all. This risks leaving out some of our most vulnerable school employees.

The statewide Paid Family Medical Leave program was designed to create fairness, accountability, and peace of mind. LD 1400 undermines that effort. It sends the message that educators' health, families, and livelihoods are optional.

I appreciate your time and attention, and I urge you to vote "Ought Not to Pass" on LD 1400. Maine educators, and the students and families we serve, deserve better.

Thank you.