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Testimony of Rep. Bruce White presenting
LD 993, An Act to Prevent the Spread of Infectious Disease in Schools
Before the Joint Standing Committee on Labor and Housing

Good afternoon Senator Hickman, Representative Sylvester and esteemed members of the Labor and Housing Committee. My name is Bruce White and I represent part of Waterville in the House of Representatives. I am here today to present **LD 993, An Act to Prevent the Spread of Infectious Disease in Schools**.

I sponsored this bill after hearing of concerns from organizations representing working people about the lack of paid time off to cover quarantines, and to help workers cover periods while infected with COVID or if they had symptoms of COVID. Many workers did the right thing – when they were sick, they stayed home, just as the Maine CDC and others implored all of us to do. Preventing the spread of this disease required all of us to be diligent to protect the health of our communities.

The bill was originally referred to the Education Committee and they conducted a brief public hearing on Friday April 2nd. At that hearing, I asked them to send this bill to this Committee because the overall scope of the bill seemed more relevant to the work of this Committee. When that hearing was conducted, we were still learning the details of the American Rescue Plan and the paid leave provisions contained in it. The American Rescue Plan included a provision that provides tax credits for employers, both public and private, if those employers provide paid leave to employees for quarantines, or if they have COVID or COVID symptoms. From talking with others, it appears the leave coupled with the rapid vaccine deployment in Maine will likely make this less of a concern for workers.

However, something still concerns me. After working on this bill for many months, it has come to my attention that many educators, particularly hourly school employees, were forced to use their own sick leave, even if they were forced to quarantine due to a school-based exposure to COVID. I understand this is especially an issue for ed techs and bus drivers who may not have the option of working remotely. I learned some hourly employees even had to go out without pay.

I would like to suggest we replace the language of the bill with a simple amendment. I hope the Committee will consider reimbursing any school employee their sick leave they may have been forced to use to cover a quarantine, or if they had COVID or COVID symptoms. At the very least, I hope we could consider reimbursing any school employee their sick leave if they had to quarantine due to a **school-based** exposure. I have learned some who needed to quarantine due to exposure at school, while working, were required to use their sick pay while they were quarantined. I hope we can all agree to reimburse any school employee any sick days they were required to use because they had COVID or COVID symptoms. I would suggest the Committee consider reimbursing up to 15 days.

Some of the educators who were required to quarantine, sometimes multiple times, may now find they have few if any sick days left. It would be unfortunate for any person who falls ill during the next school year to be facing few or no sick days at all.

Our educators have done so much to keep our schools open and safe. I hope the Committee will consider this modest proposal to provide back to the school employees who have given so much this school year.

If you have any questions I will do my best to answer them but I expect there will others after me with testimony who can better explain. Thank you for your time.