

To: Chair Thayn and members of the Senate Education Committee

Date: February 16, 2021

Re: Testimony to Oppose Bill H 67

My name is Kathy Dawes and I am a retired teacher and a resident of Idaho for over 40 years.

In a letter to Governor Little in April, Speaker of the House Scott Bedke wrote this regarding the governor's response to COVID, "A statewide, one-size-fits-all approach, in my judgment, is ill-advised. Rather, allowing public health districts the discretion to modify response policies regionally and locally would best begin the transition back to our pre-COVID-19 economy." In this statement, Speaker Bedke recognized the important role of our public health districts, one of which is to collect data which allows them to determine the level of transmission of a communicable infectious agent. With that data, they are then able to determine categories based on risks, and then provide recommended levels of operations of schools assigned to each category.

Even though local school district boards are the ones who have been currently making the decision to close schools, public health boards are still allowed, by law, to close schools if they feel it is absolutely necessary. They are the ones with the data and evidence to back up their decision to issue such orders. Bill H67 takes away all authority from the health districts, which is unnecessary and dangerous.

Each district's health board is made of members appointed by county commissioners, which ensures a direct line of accountability to the voters who elected those commissioners. One board member must be a licensed physician, and "all members shall be chosen with due regard to their knowledge and interest in public health and in promoting the health of the citizens of the state and the public health district." The sole purpose and goal of the health district is to promote public health. Three of our seven health district boards are even nationally accredited. School boards, on the other hand, are made up of citizens who do not necessarily have knowledge about public health issues, and who may or may not be open to consider health district recommendations.

I am especially concerned about the last page of the bill that states a school board decision "to remain open or to reopen, or to require or not require measures in schools or during school programs or activities to prevent the spread of contagious or infectious disease, shall not constitute a violation of any order issued by the department of health and welfare...a district board of health...or a city...." This bill is allowing school boards to ignore city ordinances, which I find very contradictory and disturbing. School boards should not have authority over local governments.

Finally, I do not understand why you feel so strongly about limiting the authority of public health experts in making decisions that protect our public health. No one could have predicted the extent of the COVID-19 pandemic, and no one knows what future health emergencies might occur. Why does the legislature want to strip our health districts from absolutely all authority to make decisions for our schools regarding health emergencies that we can't even imagine might happen in the future.

Please vote "No" on this bill.