



Wheeling-Ohio County Health Department

WHEELING-OHIO COUNTY BOARD OF HEALTH POSITION WEST VIRGINIA SCHOOL IMMUNIZATION REQUIREMENTS

The Wheeling-Ohio County Board of Health supports West Virginia's current school immunization requirements. These requirements are very effective at keeping immunization rates high, preventing disease outbreaks and keeping students healthy and in school.

Allowing nonmedical exemptions (personal belief/religious) to school immunization requirements or removing the medical exemption review process would only result in increasing the number of exemptions taken, reduce immunization rates, and provide an opportunity for vaccine-preventable disease outbreaks to occur in our schools and communities.

West Virginia's school immunization requirements have enabled West Virginia to obtain some of the highest Kindergarten immunization rates in the nation, which keeps outbreaks of vaccine-preventable diseases at bay.

West Virginia's school immunization requirements help to ensure that this gap is narrowed when children enter school. Overall, vaccination rates at kindergarten entry reach about 93-97% each year, depending on vaccine type. This brings West Virginia's kindergarten immunization rates up to among the best in the nation, preventing outbreaks of vaccine-preventable diseases in our school and communities. As a result, West Virginia has low incidence rates of many vaccine-preventable diseases.

Vaccines have been one of the most effective public health safety measures. They are responsible for drastically reducing and, in some cases, eradicating dangerous infectious diseases. It's been found that vaccination of each U.S. birth cohort with the current childhood immunization schedule prevents approximately 42,000 deaths and 20 million cases of disease in the United States. Yet, in addition to saving lives and improving the quality of life, immunizations provide significant economic benefits. According to an extensive cost-benefit analysis by the CDC, every dollar spent on vaccination saves over \$5 in direct costs and approximately \$11 in additional costs to society.

History has shown us that when immunization rates are high and vaccine-preventable diseases are no longer common, people begin to forget about the dangers of these diseases and some start to question the necessity of vaccination. When this occurs, immunization rates drop, jeopardizing our hard earned community immunity and allowing diseases that were once prevented to return. Recent outbreaks of diseases, such as measles and pertussis, in other states are due to decreases in immunization rates resulting in pockets of unimmunized individuals. Immunization rates must stay high in order to maintain community immunity and prevent vaccine-preventable diseases.

One major factor that has resulted in the reduction of immunization rates in other states are personal belief exemptions to school immunization requirements. Some states allow personal belief exemptions so that parents can opt out of vaccinating their children due to their personal

beliefs. Others use these exemptions out of convenience – when it takes less time and effort to obtain an exemption than to get their child vaccinated. States that allow personal belief exemptions are seeing significant increases in the number of students who forgo important immunizations. Increasing numbers of unimmunized students jeopardize community immunity and put children, teachers, school staff and their community at risk for diseases which are easily and safely preventable. This places children who cannot be vaccinated due to a medical condition at risk for contracting a vaccine-preventable disease from an unvaccinated classmate. This is also how diseases regain their foothold and spread across the country. As a result, many states that have weakened their immunization requirements by allowing personal belief exemptions have experienced outbreaks of vaccine-preventable diseases. Furthermore, adding personal belief exemptions is very costly: a recent study found that adding a personal belief exemption would cost a state 50% more dollars annually related to pertussis (whooping cough) disease for infants, children, and adolescents. A review of sixteen measles outbreaks in the United States in 2011 found that, overall, the total economic burden on local and state public health institutions that dealt with measles outbreaks ranged from an estimated \$2.7 million to \$5.3 million.

Medical exemptions to school immunization requirements are permitted in WV for children who have a contraindication to vaccination due to an underlying medical condition, such as an allergy to a vaccine component or an immune deficiency such as can occur when a child is being treated for cancer or suffers from an immune system disorder. To obtain a medical exemption in WV, a student's physician must send a written request for a medical exemption to the Local Health Officer, who approves or denies the request. A parent can appeal a denied request through the Bureau for Public Health Commissioner's Office.

The current medical exemption review process is designed to prevent the use of medical exemptions for nonmedical reasons, which not only impacts that particular child, since he or she would be without protective immunizations, but also affects children who truly need medical exemptions. In order to keep these children healthy, immunization rates in the community around them must remain high. Medical exemptions given to those who don't have a valid reason against vaccination are no different than personal belief exemptions; it degrades community immunity and puts all children at risk.

When it comes to protecting our students from disease, West Virginia is leading the nation with our strong school immunization requirements. Our immunization rates are high among school students and subsequently keep outbreaks of vaccine-preventable diseases out of our schools. We are proud of this and want to see this continue. The best way to do this is to preserve our state policy pertaining to school immunization requirements the way it currently is... without allowing personal belief exemptions or removing the medical exemption review process.

***Approved & Adopted by the Board of Health
January 20, 2015***

Michael Caruso
Gloria Delbrugge
John Holloway, M.D.

Wilkes E. Kinney
Tom Tuttle
Cheryl Wonderly, Esq.
William C. Mercer, M.D., Health Officer, Ohio County

**Wheeling-Ohio County
Health Department**



Public Health
Prevent. Promote. Protect.