

**Testimony for Public Hearing**

**JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND CULTURAL AFFAIRS**

**March 13, 2019**

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In support of (L.D. 798) "An Act to Protect Maine Children and Students from Preventable Diseases by Repealing Certain Exemptions from the Laws Governing Immunization Requirements"

Good afternoon Education and Cultural Affairs Committee. My name is Pat Endsley and am a Nationally Board Certified School Nurse at Wells High School as well as the current President of the Maine Association of School Nurses (MASN).

It is the position of the National Association of School Nurses (NASN) that "immunizations are essential to primary prevention of disease from infancy through adulthood. Promotion of immunizations by the registered professional school nurse is central to the public health focus of school nursing practice" (American Nurses Association [ANA] & NASN, 2011). NASN and MASN support the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP) vaccine recommendations that are adopted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). After careful consultation with school nurse and education leaders in states that have removed religious and philosophical exemptions, MASN believes that this evidence-based practice is in the best interest of Maine students. According to the CDC (2011), the impact of vaccines in reducing and eliminating vaccine-preventable diseases has been "one of the 10 great public health achievements in the United States". The CDC (2014) estimates that vaccination of children born between 1994 and 2013 will prevent 322 million illnesses, help avoid 732,000 deaths, and

save nearly \$1.4 trillion in total societal costs (NASN 2015). Despite the medical and public health advances brought forth through vaccination programs, the immunization rates in some Maine schools are alarmingly low due to the philosophical and religious exemptions that are currently allowed.

The problem will not be solved without clearly defined medical exemption guidance that supports health care providers yet maintains their practice autonomy. In addition to the primary care provider, school nurses are often sought out by parents for immunization advice. We educate students, families, and school staff about the critical role vaccines play in preventing disease, allowing students and staff to remain healthy and in school. According to NASN (2015) school nurses need strong vaccine recommendations and medical exemption guidelines to provide families and staff information about; vaccine-preventable diseases, vaccine myths, vaccine safety, and recommended vaccine schedules. School nurses also help parents by discussing vaccine hesitancy and support decisions using the most current scholarly evidence not influenced non-scientific media reports (NASN, 2015). It is necessary that school nurses and primary care providers alike rely on the latest evidence provided by agencies such as Maine CDC, and the Maine Department of Health and Human Services for the most evidence-based information to guide parent/guardian decisions.

MASN is in favor of eliminating the philosophical and religious exemptions, but agree that legitimate medical exemptions are necessary. As a school nurse for almost 17 years, I have seen appropriate use, as well as misuse, of the philosophical exemption, and suspect this may become the case with medical exemption if Maine does not have a strong immunization law. MASN certainly does not wish to interfere with the provider/patient relationship, nor do we want

to limit provider autonomy. True medical exemptions are in fact very rare, but must be available to parents and primary care providers guided by best practices set forth by the ACIP.

According to the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP): “Because only a very small proportion of children have medical conditions prohibiting specific immunizations, medically indicated exemptions when granted appropriately, typically do not compromise community immunity. It is this specific group of children that depend on community immunity for protection”. This must be balanced with robust, evidence-based guidelines for medical exemption to promote vaccine compliance and discourage true abuses of medical exemption such as "health provider shopping".

There are also times when school boards and municipalities may have a legitimate need for more stringent vaccination policies per the advice of the Maine CDC. Maine is becoming a more diverse state every day and the health care needs of individual municipalities and districts may vary. Reasons may include, but are not limited to:

- A high immigrant or refugee student population, not fully immunized.
- A high incidence of non- mandated vaccine-preventable illnesses such as Hepatitis A or Hepatitis B in the community.

I ask you to please consider these reasons, as well as the possibility that a strong vaccination law supports health care providers in their practice by reducing some pressure from those who wish to misuse the medical exemption. Thank you for listening to the concerns of the Maine Association of School Nurses as we strive to keep our students healthy and in the classroom as well as support parents making the best healthcare decisions for their children.

National Association of School Nurses. (2015). *Immunizations* (Position Statement).  
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