

A proposal in Harrisburg to require parents who opt out of vaccinating their children to first speak with a medical care provider received support Friday from Berks County health care institutions.

The state Senate bill would amend Pennsylvania's Public School Code to make the vaccine opt-out process uniform statewide. Families would either have to turn in proof that a student is up to date on vaccinations or submit an opt-out form developed by the state Department of Health.

Students who fail to do either would not be allowed in school past a certain date until they complied.

Parents still could object to vaccines for medical reasons, religious belief, or moral or ethical convictions, but they would need the form signed by a person authorized to administer immunizations who provided them scientifically accepted information about the benefits and risks of vaccinations.

Currently, those forms vary by school district and do not require a discussion with a medical professional, said state Sen. Judy Schwank, a Ruscombmanor Township Democrat who is among the bill's seven sponsors.

The vaccinations required would not change, and include polio, measles, mumps, rubella, hepatitis B, tetanus and diphtheria, among others.

"My hope is it will encourage parents who are considering opting out to reconsider for the benefit of all children," Schwank said during a media event at Reading Hospital.

Schwank believes the decision to vaccinate should be left to parents, but she wants them to have accurate information from the health department about the pros and cons before they decide.

Schwank said she's heard objections from a number of individuals who don't want their children vaccinated, often because they don't trust pharmaceutical companies. Those parents want and deserve credible information, and the new law would help them get it, Schwank said.

"It does not revoke the parents' right to seek an exemption," she said. "But this is the minimum information the state should require them to have."

Otherwise there is increased risk not just for their children, but for other children and adults, she said.

The bill is with the Senate Education Committee for review.

In the state House, Rep. Dan Frankel, a Pittsburgh Democrat, has said he plans to introduce a bill that would require parents seeking exemptions to get an annual medical consultation to better understand the threats to children of communicable diseases.

### **'Highly effective'**

Speaking in favor of the Senate bill was Dr. Debra Powell, chief of the section of infectious disease at Reading Hospital, who said it would help keep the community as safe as possible.

"Vaccines are highly effective and have minimal side effects," she said. "And they do prevent life-threatening and potentially crippling diseases and death. And there is no evidence to link vaccination and autism."

Powell talked about the importance of herd immunity, which occurs when a high percentage of the population is immunized. That dynamic protects those who can't receive the vaccinations, such as the very young and those who are highly allergic to vaccines, along with those who have suppressed immune systems. The reduction in herd immunity is why cases of long-dormant diseases such as measles and mumps are now occurring, including in Pennsylvania, she said. "Vaccines are one of our most important achievements of the last century," she said. "We've come a long way. And I'd hate to see us step back and have a lot of these prior diseases recur."

Requiring parents to speak with their health care providers would help them understand what's at stake, she said. "It will allow that patient-physician collaboration, which I think is highly important," she said.

New Vaccine Bill (continued . . . )

Dr. Georgina Aristotelous, infectious diseases medical director for Penn State Health St. Joseph, said that at the downtown campus where she works there are many children of immunization age, and she likes that the bill will encourage their parents to come to her with questions.

There are risks to vaccinations, but that's true of everything, she said. Even eating healthy food like lettuce brings the possibility of food contamination, she said, but that doesn't mean people should bypass it.

### **'Diseases aren't gone'**

Dr. Mary Stock Kelster, president of the Pennsylvania Academy of Family Physicians, said her organization supports the bill and believes in vaccinating as many children as possible. "These diseases aren't gone," she said. "They're just hiding."

Vaccines are among the safest of all preventive health measures, and those who opt out of them for their children are ignoring solid, scientific information and getting kids sick, said Dr. Eve Kimball, a recently retired pediatrician from West Reading and board member of the Pennsylvania chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics. They are safe tools, she said, and religions across the world have accepted their safety and effectiveness and do not prohibit their use.

Carol Ferguson, a polio survivor and citizen-advocate for vaccinations from Bucks County, said she knows that no parents want to harm their children, so the requirement that they receive the best information should help them. "We don't want any child to suffer the pain and disability of a vaccine-preventable disease," she said.

Also speaking was Tara Kutzer, a member of Schwank's staff and mother to two daughters, 7-year-old Zoey and 15-month-old Avery. While both girls are up do date on their immunizations, Avery just received her first measles vaccination. She isn't fully protected until she receives her second vaccination, which cannot occur before she's 18 months old, making her vulnerable if she's around others with the disease.

"I believe I have the right to take my children anywhere and not have to worry about exposing them to any illnesses," she said. "I would never want to see my children suffer because of being exposed to an illness that could have been prevented."

"I hope this legislation makes a difference," she said, "and helps to protect children like mine."

Contact Mike Urban: 610-371-5023 or [murban@readingeagle.com](mailto:murban@readingeagle.com).

<https://www.readingeagle.com/news/article/berks-lawmaker-sponsors-new-vaccine-bill>

## **READING EAGLE** Editorial Follow Up – 5/21/2019

### **Editorial: Parents Must Hear Truth About Vaccines**

Given the rise in communicable diseases, this is well-timed and essential to public health.

TUESDAY MAY 21, 2019

#### **The Issue:**

State Sen. Judy Schwank calls for changing the school code on immunizations.

#### **Our Opinion:**

Given the rise in communicable diseases, this is well-timed and essential to public health.

It's almost as if the communicable diseases are taunting us: "We're down but not out. Keep pushing anti-vaccination propaganda, and we could really make a comeback." With 880 confirmed measles cases so far this year, the most since 958 cases were reported for all of 1994, and 736 cases of mumps, including 300-plus in Pennsylvania, state Sen. Judy Schwank is promoting the idea of requiring parents who wish to opt a child out of required vaccinations to make an informed decision. Schwank's proposal would amend Pennsylvania's Public School Code to make the opt-out process standard statewide.

(continued . . . )

Parents would maintain the right now permitted under state law to decide against vaccinating a child for medical reasons, religious belief, or moral or ethical convictions. Under Schwank's bill, that decision would come with a sensible new requirement: The opt-out would require a form signed by a person authorized to administer immunizations stating that the parent was provided scientifically accepted information about the benefits and risks of vaccinations.

Underlining the importance of the measure was the Pennsylvania Department of Health's declaration this week of an outbreak of hepatitis A in our state. Pennsylvania has seen 171 hepatitis A cases in 36 counties, including between 1 and 10 cases each in Berks, Chester, Lancaster and Montgomery counties, since January 2018.

Hepatitis A is a liver infection, which, according to the World Health Organization, is rarely fatal on its own but can come with debilitating symptoms and lead to acute liver failure, which can kill. While the two-stage hepatitis A vaccine is recommended for children from 12 months to 30 months old, it is not even on Pennsylvania's list of vaccinations required to attend a public school.

The state Department of Health is recommending that people at risk of contracting hepatitis A get vaccinated. The at-risk include people who: have encountered a person who has hepatitis A; use injected illicit drugs; are homeless; and men who have sex with other men.

Those most at risk of mumps and measles are the very young, people with allergies to vaccinations, those with compromised immune systems and, obviously, the unvaccinated.

Pennsylvania's vaccine requirements are meant to protect everyone from a resurgence of diseases such as measles, which was considered eliminated in the U.S. in 2000. The decline in mumps and measles came thanks to herd immunity. When 93% to 95% of a population is immunized, mumps and measles rarely spread, according to WHO.

A point made in support of Schwank's bill at a news conference Friday at Reading Hospital bears repeating. "These diseases aren't gone," said Dr. Mary Stock Keister, president of the Pennsylvania Academy of Family Physicians. "They're just hiding."

And the best way to keep them in the shadows is to vaccinate as many children as possible. With a rise in anti-vaccination sentiment — driven in part by a debunked theory that vaccinations cause autism — the persuasive approach Schwank's bill takes is wise.

"My hope," Schwank said, "is it will encourage parents who are considering opting out to reconsider for the benefit of all children."

Fact should be given a fair chance to counter myth. And, for the sake of public health, the fact that vaccines are effective and low-risk needs to prevail.

<https://www.readingeagle.com/news/article/editorial-parents-must-hear-truth-about-vaccines>

Press Conference Video: May 17<sup>th</sup>:

<http://www.senatorschwank.com/school-vaccinations-sb-626-news-conference-may-17-2019>

## No Child Should Suffer from a Vaccine Preventable Disease.



The Pain and Disability Can Last a Lifetime.  
Please Vaccinate Your Children.

Polio Survivors - Carol Ferguson, Jim Smith and  
Deb Stambaugh (with Sen. Judy Schwank)

