



Testimony of Claire Berkowitz, Executive Director, Maine Children's Alliance
LD 798: An Act to Protect Maine Children and Students from Preventable Diseases by Repealing Certain Exemptions from the Laws Governing Immunization Requirements
Joint Standing Committee on Education
March 13, 2019

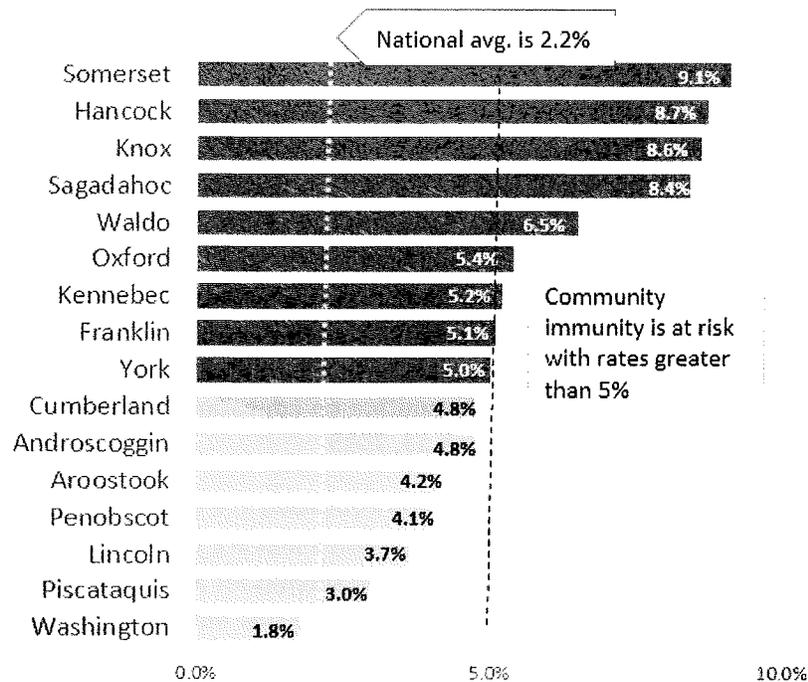
Every child in Maine has the right to receive early care and education in a safe and protected environment, and that includes protection from dangerous communicable diseases that are preventable through immunizations. We must ensure a safe environment in child care settings and schools for all children, including those who cannot receive immunizations and those who are at risk for severe side effects to vaccine-preventable disease. Passage of LD 798 will ensure children are at less risk for contracting these diseases, will experience fewer missed-school days from preventable outbreaks, and will allow child care providers, school administrators and school health officials to protect Maine children from preventable disease.

Community immunity is a critical part of preventing the initiation and spread of disease. This is created in schools when children are immunized at high enough levels to prevent the spread of disease, also known as herd immunity. The breakdown of herd immunity can happen even when a majority of people vaccinate, if only a few opt out within the same community. High community immunity rates are especially critical to protect children who cannot receive vaccinations, such as those who are medically immunosuppressed.

Low vaccination rates put Maine children at risk for diseases that are entirely preventable. Maine is one of only 17 states where parents of school-aged children can request an exemption from school-required immunizations based on religious and philosophical beliefs. ~~All other~~ states allow only for a medical exemption. *Three*

Maine has the 7th highest non-medical vaccine exemption rate for kindergarteners in the country, at 5%, or double the national average.¹ Today, kindergarteners in nine counties are at increased risk of measles, pertussis, or polio outbreaks, due to low immunization rates (see chart below). This is also true for 7th graders. And Maine now has the country's highest rate of pertussis, or whooping cough, a vaccine-preventable disease.² Diseases we thought were under control are making a comeback because of reduced rates of vaccination.

**Nine Maine counties have
Kindergarten Immunization Exemption Rates above 5%**



Source: Center for Disease Control and Prevention, Maine Department of Health and Human Services School Immunization Report 2016-2017

There is scientific consensus on the safety and efficacy of immunizations that prevent the spread of health- and sometimes life-threatening diseases. The American Academy of Pediatrics views non-medical exemptions as inappropriate for individual, public health, and ethical reasons, and strongly advocates for their elimination. And according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, state and local vaccination requirements for child care and school entry are important tools for maintaining high vaccination rates. In fact, evidence from other states shows that immunization requirements for school entry have been pivotal in achieving high immunization coverage rates and ensuring community immunity against infectious disease outbreaks.²

Schools and child care settings must be a safe place to grow, learn and play for all children. All kids should have the right to attend school or child care without the heightened risk of vaccine-preventable disease, especially those who may be immune-compromised; their right to care and education should not be compromised by a parent who chooses not to vaccinate their child for philosophical or religious beliefs.

Pediatricians and other trusted medical professionals, alongside the vast majority of the medical community, agree that vaccines are safe and necessary to prevent outbreaks of preventable and life-threatening diseases like measles and polio. It is our collective, communal responsibility now to ensure Maine’s children have the best chance at protection against these diseases, by eliminating any exemption from immunization except for those that are medically necessary. We urge the committee to support the right of Maine’s children to a safe and healthy learning environment by passing LD 798. Thank you.

1. Mellerson JL, Maxwell CB, Knighton CL, Kriss JL, Seither R, Black CL. Vaccination Coverage for Selected Vaccines and Exemption Rates Among Children in Kindergarten — United States, 2017–18 School Year. *MMWR Morb Mortal Wkly Rep* 2018;67:1115–1122. <http://dx.doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm6740a3>

2. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Surveillance and Reporting, 2018 Provisional Surveillance Report, <https://www.cdc.gov/pertussis/downloads/pertuss-surv-report-2018-508.pdf>

3. Gorski D. California SB 277: New evidence that restricting nonmedical exemptions to school vaccine requirements works. April 16, 2017. <https://sciencebasedmedicine.org/california-sb-277-new-evidence-that-restricting-nonmedical-exemptions-to-school-vaccine-requirements-works/>