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## **Marsh, Gozal, Boyd: Immunization bill disastrous for WV (Opinion)**

By Clay Marsh, David Gozal and Linda Boyd

Feb 29, 2024

Our Legislature has long protected West Virginia's children by maintaining strong immunization policies. As a result, West Virginia's school-aged children have one of the highest routine immunization rates and very low rates of vaccine-preventable diseases, such as measles, mumps, polio, tetanus and whooping cough.

West Virginia is one of five states that allows only medical exemptions from school immunization requirements. Many of these other states have used West Virginia's immunization requirements as a model to strengthen their immunization requirements after those states experienced measles outbreaks.

At this time, there is a measles outbreak in Pennsylvania, with additional cases in Delaware and New Jersey, but not a single case of measles has been reported in West Virginia.

In 2019, 31 states had measles cases, the highest number of cases diagnosed in our country since 1994. In the fall and winter of 2022, a measles outbreak in Ohio among unvaccinated children resulted in 85 confirmed cases with 36 of those cases requiring hospitalization. During these measles outbreaks, West Virginia did not have a single case.

Since 2017, West Virginia's kindergarten immunization rates have been at or above 95%, consistently exceeding the national averages and protecting our children, families, schools and communities from dangerous, yet preventable diseases, that are now frequently occurring in areas where immunization laws are not as strong.

Most of us have little to no memory of the afflictions associated with once-debilitating diseases such as polio, tetanus, measles and mumps. This is because of high vaccination rates that have prevented these diseases from occurring in our communities.

To safeguard our population at most risk, including those with a weakened immune system or those too young to be vaccinated, a large portion of the

state's population needs to be protected by immunizations. Having a highly vaccinated population protects not only the children who receive vaccines, it also helps prevent the diseases from spreading to infants who are too young to be vaccinated, children who cannot be vaccinated due to certain medical conditions, and other students and their family members who may be at risk of severe illness if exposed to vaccine-preventable infections.

West Virginia's effective immunization policies should be kept strong by not allowing non-medical exemptions, by not removing vaccines from the policies, by not removing the medical exemption review process, or by not weakening West Virginia's effective immunization policies in any way. West Virginia school immunization requirements are keeping these diseases out of our communities and schools.

Evidence-based medicine should be the basis for public health policy. In the case of immunizations, the evidence and data indicate that keeping our vulnerable populations healthy depends on

maintaining school and child care immunization policies that allow exemptions only for medical reasons.

We encourage you to contact your state representative and encourage them to preserve our state's strong immunization policies, a decision that will help keep vaccine-preventable diseases out of our communities and schools and protect our children and the most vulnerable among us.

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