



TESTIMONY BEFORE THE PUBLIC HEALTH COMMITTEE OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY

Amy Dowell, Connecticut State Director of Education Reform Now CT

February 19, 2020

Re: **H.B. No. 5044, An Act Concerning Immunizations**

Co-Chairs Abrams and Steinberg, Vice-Chairs Anwar, Lesser, and Young, Ranking Members Petit and Somers, and Members of the Public Health Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide written testimony in support of HB 5044.

All of us want Connecticut schools to be trusted spaces in which students can learn and grow. Because a safe and healthy classroom is a precondition of learning, parents expect that when they drop off their children at a public school, their kids will be protected from preventable disease—especially at such a vulnerable stage in their lives. However, the most recent 2018-19 school-level data show a shocking 134 Connecticut schools that fall below federal guidelines for establishing herd immunity—and in 2019, Connecticut was one of a handful of states to see incidences of measles. When we don't vaccinate enough of our population, we expose our children—and especially children who cannot be vaccinated for medical reasons—to communicable diseases and dangerous illnesses, such as measles.

Currently, Connecticut parents have two methods by which to exempt their children from vaccination: (1) for medical conditions that are contraindicated; and (2) through claims of religious exemption. (The latter approach simply requires parents to check a box that says immunizations are contrary to the family's beliefs.) Data show that since 2012, as vaccination levels for kindergarteners have dropped, religious exemptions have also increased at the same rate. In other words, there's a clear correlation between religious exemptions and reduced vaccination levels, and these numbers also coincide with the new measles outbreaks in our state.

We support this bill, and are grateful to the legislators who have drafted it, for taking a deliberative and conscientious approach to balance important personal freedoms in parallel with the needs and safety of the greater community. The health and safety of our children requires our elected officials to take action. Like speed limits and bans on smoking in public places, legislators should use their authority to pass legislation to shield the general public from harm. In this case, the consensus of the medical community is clear that our students are safer and healthier when they are vaccinated, and the needs of children therefore have to outweigh other priorities.

It's also noteworthy that the vast majority of Connecticut families agree with and trust the medical community on the issue of immunizations. [Our recent poll of Democratic primary voters](#) reveals that 77% of them believe the religious exemption to vaccination requirements should be eliminated. And across party lines, 95% of all Connecticut parents already comply with vaccination guidelines.

Connecticut families have a right to know that when their children attend our schools—especially our public ones—they are safe from the spread of dangerous and preventable diseases. They trust that you, the legislature, will protect Connecticut's youngest citizens, and so do I.