



AMERICAN ATHEISTS

February 15, 2021

The Honorable Sen. Mary Daugherty Abrams
The Honorable Rep. Jonathan Steinberg
Co-Chairs, Joint Committee on Public Health
Legislative Office Building, Room 3000
Hartford, Connecticut 06106

Re: Support SB 568, A Bill to Protect the Public Health by Ensuring Adequate and Appropriate Immunizations of Children

Dear Chairperson Abrams, Chairperson Steinberg, and Members of the Joint Committee on Public Health:

American Atheists, on behalf of its nearly 600 constituents in Connecticut, thanks you for considering SB 568, an important bill that would protect the young people in Connecticut from preventable diseases by repealing loopholes to school vaccination requirements. Vaccination is a vital public health issue, and we support vaccination requirements based on public health and medical best practices for the benefit of all children. Therefore, we urge you to swiftly pass this life-saving legislation.

American Atheists is a national civil rights organization that works to achieve religious equality for all Americans by protecting what Thomas Jefferson called the “wall of separation” between government and religion created by the First Amendment. We strive to create an environment where atheism and atheists are accepted as members of our nation’s communities and where casual bigotry against our community is seen as abhorrent and unacceptable. We promote understanding of atheists through education, outreach, and community-building and work to end the stigma associated with being an atheist in America. As advocates for the health, safety, and well-being of all Americans, American Atheists objects to efforts to subordinate medical care to the religious beliefs of providers and institutions.

SB 568 updates Connecticut’s law pertaining to vaccinations that students must receive before attending public school. Current Connecticut law allows a parent to opt their child out of the vaccination requirement if “such immunization would be contrary to the religious beliefs of such child or the parents or guardian of such child.”¹ This bill would remove the existing loopholes which allow parents to summarily waive the vaccination requirements for K-12 schools and colleges. However, the bill would still allow for an exemption to the vaccination

¹ Conn. Gen. State. Sec. 10-204a(a)(3).

requirements in cases where “such immunization is medically contraindicated because of the physical condition of such child.”²

Non-essential exemptions to immunization requirements endanger all children in order to accommodate the religious or philosophical beliefs of a few. Such exemptions are unacceptable from both a public health and moral perspective. Successful population immunity to disease depends upon a significant level of vaccination, as high as 95% for some diseases.³ Because some people are unable to receive vaccination for medical reasons, it is inappropriate and dangerous to allow for arbitrary compliance by the rest of the population. This is the reason that every state has laws requiring immunization to attend public school.

The current loophole in Connecticut’s vaccination requirements put children at significant risk for contracting debilitating and potentially deadly infectious diseases. Children exempt from immunization requirements are more than 35 times more likely to contract measles⁴ and nearly 6 times more likely to contract pertussis (whooping cough),⁵ compared to immunized children. According to the CDC, the opt-out rate for vaccination for the Connecticut 2018-2019 school year was 2.7%, which is a 0.4% increase since the 2017-2018 school year.⁶ As the number of unvaccinated children rise because of these religious exemptions, the health and safety of countless Connecticut children are at risk. This bill will help to resolve this situation and benefit public health.

History illustrates that outbreaks often occur in communities that are unsupportive of vaccination. For example, measles is a vaccine-preventable disease that has plagued multiple religious communities known to be either hesitant to vaccinate or completely against vaccination.⁷ However, lawmakers have a responsibility to protect all youth, regardless of their religion or lack thereof. No young person should be subject to harm or illness based on the religious beliefs of their caretakers or their classmates.

² Conn. Gen. State. Sec. 10-204a(a)(2).

³ Salathe, Marcel. (Feb. 3, 2015). *Why a few unvaccinated children are an even bigger threat than you think*. Washington Post. Available at https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2015/02/03/why-a-few-unvaccinated-children-are-an-even-bigger-threat-than-you-think/?utm_term=.69e466010275.

⁴ Salmon DA, Haber M, Gangarosa EJ, Phillips L, Smith NJ, Chen RT. (1999). *Health consequences of religious and philosophical exemptions from immunization laws: individual and societal risk of measles*. JAMA. 1999;282:47-53.

⁵ Feikin DR, Lezotte DC, Hamman RF, Salmon DA, Chen RT, and Hoffman RE. (2007). *Individual and Community Risks of Measles and Pertussis Associated With Personal Exemptions to Immunization*. JAMA 2007;284:3145-3150.

⁶ Seither R, Loretan C, Driver K, Mellerson JL, Knighton CL, Black CL. (2019). *Vaccination Coverage for Selected Vaccines and Exemption Rates Among Children in Kindergarten — United States, 2019–19 School Year*. MMWR Morb Mortal Wkly Rep 2019;68(41):905–912. DOI: <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/68/wr/mm6841e1.htm>.

⁷ See, e.g., Genes, N. (June 20, 2006). *Measles in Boston: Collision of Church and State, Science and Journalism*. Medgadget. Available at http://medgadget.com/2006/06/measles_in_bost.html; WebMD. (August 1, 2006). *Vaccination Fear Causes Measles Spate*. CBS News. Available at http://www.cbsnews.com/2100-500368_162-1857987.html.

Finally, we note that the nonmedical exemptions in Connecticut's vaccination law are not required by the US Constitution. A number of states, including California, Maine, Mississippi, New York, and West Virginia do not allow for these types of nonmedical exemptions. As the US Supreme Court has made clear, "The right to practice religion freely does not include liberty to expose the community or child to communicable disease, or the latter to ill health or death.... Parents may be free to become martyrs themselves. But it does not follow they are free, in identical circumstances, to make martyrs of their children before they reached the age of full and legal discretion when they can make that choice for themselves."⁸

Thank you for considering this vital, life-saving bill. We strongly urge you to pass SB 568 to protect Connecticut's children. If you should have any questions regarding American Atheists' support for this legislation, please contact me at 908.276.7300 x309 or by email at agill@atheists.org.

Very truly yours,



Alison Gill, Esq.
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cc: All Members of the Connecticut Joint Committee on Public Health

⁸ *Prince v. Massachusetts*, 321 U.S. 158 (1944).