

HB 1320 Testimony
Human Services Committee
January 19, 2021 2:30 p.m.

Good afternoon, Chairman Weisz and members of the Human Services Committee. My name is Kylie Hall, and I am here to testify in opposition to this bill. I have a Master's Degree in Public Health and have worked at the North Dakota State University Center for Immunization Research and Education for the past 5 and 1/2 years. I would like to make clear that my comments today are not on behalf of NDSU. I am also a parent to two young children who are both fully vaccinated.

I feel uniquely qualified to testify on this bill. In 2015 and 2016, I led a study in North Dakota that produced recommendations for how to improve immunization rates. The study engaged nearly 200 immunization stakeholders in North Dakota, including healthcare providers, school administrators and staff, public health staff, legislators, and parents.

If passed, House Bill 1320 would make North Dakota the only state in the country that does not require immunizations for school entry. This is concerning, as school vaccination requirements for school and daycare entry have played a key role in the prevention and control of vaccine-preventable diseases in the United States since 1827. In North Dakota, immunizations were first required for school entry at the start of the 1975-1976 school year. Today, all states have immunization requirements for school children, and school requirements have helped the United States achieve high vaccination rates.

Now, you might be thinking, do school mandates make an impact on immunization rates and rates of vaccine-preventable diseases? The answer is yes. Olshen et al found that school immunization mandates were the main factor leading to higher immunization rates, highlighting the importance of school immunization requirements.

I can also tell you that our study confirmed that school requirements help assure a fully vaccinated population. During our study, we conducted focus groups to learn more about school immunization requirements and enforcement. Time and time again, we heard from schools that the MAJORITY of children are immunized. However, at the start of school, there are many children who still haven't received their vaccine booster doses required for kindergarten or junior high. Some parents didn't know their kids needed extra vaccines for schools. These doses are important to boost immunity and prevent outbreaks. Because schools mandate vaccines, a number of parents bring their kids in to be immunized. We heard from a number of pediatricians during the fall of 2015 that some schools had clearly changed their immunization policies, because they had a ton of children come in to receive vaccine booster doses. These children were partially immunized, but just needed some of those 5-year-old shots or 7th grade shots. The school requirements brought them in to be vaccinated. Without school requirements, how long might their parents have waited to get those vaccines? We will never know, because school mandates help assure that ND students are protected from vaccine-preventable diseases.

Why are schools tasked with enforcing immunization requirements? The enforcement of immunization requirements is a responsibility given to schools across the United States because schools are a point of contact for the majority of children. Even if a child doesn't see a healthcare

provider, nearly all children attend school. As recently as 2015, over 97% of children in North Dakota attended school in-person. No other entity can reasonably enforce immunization requirements while also holding parents accountable. Additionally, schools would be directly impacted by an outbreak of a vaccine-preventable disease. Schools also have a large potential for the spread of diseases among children closely quartered for long periods of time, and in the event of a disease outbreak, learning could be disrupted for long periods of time.

Through our project, we were able to visit with a group of school staff that were impacted by a tuberculosis outbreak in 2012. While tuberculosis is not a disease we regularly vaccinate against in the United States, they were able to see how a case of a vaccine-preventable disease in their schools would be similar to what they experienced. In reliving their experiences with this outbreak, one school administrator said “There’s nothing like an experience like that to get you on board with immunizations.” Another administrator called dealing with the tuberculosis outbreak a nightmare, with another saying the outbreak was so disruptive to the school process that regular learning almost went out the window for those weeks or months. Vaccines prevent situations like this from being commonplace. High immunization rates keep vaccine-preventable diseases from spreading in schools. And in our schools, we have some students who are not able to be vaccinated. As a society, it is our duty to get vaccinated for them. As one administrator in our study said, “I think we are charged with providing a safe environment for our students, and that includes students who are medically fragile or vulnerable. We have an obligation to provide a safe environment for them, so it starts with the doorstep. We have to make sure our kids are healthy and immunized before they can get into our school setting.” Another administrator added, “I do think our priority is to educate kids, and [immunizations] is certainly part of it. And it’s our state law. If we don’t have that feeling in our school that every child is safe, they can’t learn.”

Another reason why school immunization requirements are so important is that in the event of an outbreak, school officials need to know immediately who is and isn’t immunized so they can remove susceptible individuals from the school setting. During an outbreak, many states have determined that it is in the best interest of children who are not immunized if they are removed from school until the threat of the outbreak has passed. As of 2015, 27 states had the authority to exclude unimmunized children during an outbreak. North Dakota is one of them.

In North Dakota, we should be focused on protecting children and implementing policies that will increase childhood immunization rates. We know that immunizations are safe and immunizations are effective. They protect not only the person being vaccinated, but those who cannot be vaccinated. I want to end with a personal story.

In 2019, I was pregnant with my second child. During routine blood work, I found that I no longer was considered “immune” to rubella. Rubella is viral illness that usually causes mild symptoms or even no symptoms in most people. However, it can cause serious problems for unborn babies whose mothers become infected during pregnancy. Rubella was eliminated from the United States in 2004, but there are a handful of cases reported each year in women who have traveled outside of the country. Rubella, like many infectious diseases, is only a plane ride away. As a pregnant mother, I was potentially susceptible to rubella, and I relied on herd immunity to protect me and my unborn child. I relied on school immunization mandates to make

sure kindergartners received their second dose of MMR to boost their immunity to measles, mumps, and rubella.

As you've heard, school immunization mandates help boost immunization rates and assure a vaccinated population, and I hope you can understand that the effects are far-reaching. In 2019, a highly immunized population protected me and my now one-year-old son Graham from rubella.

Please vote no on House Bill 1320. Please keep school and daycare immunization requirements in North Dakota. It benefits all of us.