

Dear members of the House Health Committee, I want to thank you for taking testimony on this very important topic.

My name is Allison Mindel. I live in Worcester, Vermont and am the mother of three children ages 7, 12, and 14.

I'm not a doctor. I'm not a scientist. I'm not the parent of a child with a compromised immune system. I'm just a citizen who believes strongly in the medical effectiveness and the social benefits of vaccines.

I used to be one of those people who found it difficult to speak out on the importance of vaccines. Who worried about losing friends over the issue. Who felt like the only voices I heard speaking out were from those fearful of vaccines. I believed I was out-numbered in my community.

A few things happened along the way, however, that made me realize this wasn't true and gave me the confidence and urgency to speak out.

One of those things was my family's move to Shanghai, China for two years. It did not take long to understand that the vaccine discussion there (among both expats and local Chinese friends) was very different than what I experienced in Vermont in the ten years previous.

It was not driven by a fear of vaccines, it was driven by a very real fear of infectious disease. Hepatitis A & B were/are endemic; measles and polio-type illnesses not uncommon; hand, foot and mouth disease frequently caused closures of entire schools; and several waves of bird flu erupted during our stay.

During the bird flu outbreaks, my children would have their temperature taken at school every morning and any child with an elevated temp was sent home immediately to await new symptoms and hopefully not much else as there were few effective treatments.

The discussion was not about which vaccines to avoid or which were unsafe or unnatural or part of a Big Pharma conspiracy, but rather when is a new one coming out and where can we get it.

We returned from China just over a year ago, and I was relieved to find that the vaccine discussion had shifted here as well.

I shared my stories of living in China with other friends and neighbors and found that they resonated with people and spurred discussion of the risks and benefits of vaccines versus the diseases they prevent.

I learned that you all debated and discussed the philosophical exemption once before while I was gone and many of my friends seemed emboldened by that experience.

I heard people making connections between Vermont community values and shared responsibility for protecting the most vulnerable among us. And how sometimes public health concerns can trump parental choice preferences.

I saw examples of people speaking up and countering misinformation with reason and facts.

But I also saw an increase in vaccine-preventable diseases popping up across the country. And the hard truth that the previous "tightening" of the philosophical exemption in Vermont has not lived up to its promise.

Three years ago during the last debate over the issue of the philosophical exemption, 5.4% of Vermonters were using it to opt out of vaccinating their children. Today that rate has climbed to 6.1%.

According to the Centers for Disease Control, we now have the second highest percentage in the country of families opting out for philosophical reasons.

Many of our schools, according to VT Department of Health data, have failed to meet the threshold of immunization needed to protect the community.

My younger two children attend Doty Memorial School one of the 20 or so public schools in Vermont with MMR vaccination rates below 90% -- the ideal % needed to provide community protection. Other public schools in the immediate area with MMR vaccination rates lower than 90% include Union Elementary in Montpelier, and Rumney Elementary in Middlesex.

There is even a large private school (130+ children) in Central Vermont with an MMR vaccination rate of only 40%.

While these numbers are troublesome and make all of us increasingly vulnerable to the spread of vaccine-preventable vaccines, it is heartening to learn that the majority of Vermonters support full immunization.

In February, the national non-profit group Every Child By Two commissioned a poll specific to Vermont.

The results:

- 68% of the respondents DO NOT believe that parents should be able to opt out of vaccinating their children for philosophical reasons.
- 73% said they support a medical exemption only.
- 62% of respondents think children, whose parents opted not to vaccinate them, should not be allowed to attend public schools and licensed daycares.

How do we increase the number of Vermont children protected from vaccine-preventable disease? Two ways. Removal of the philosophical exemption. And a commitment by parents across the state to say out loud that vaccines work, and I vaccinate my children.

My conversations with families and the results of polls have proved to me that we are a mighty and growing force.

We are Vermonters who understand that the science is clear and overwhelming. Vaccines are safe. Vaccines are effective. And we are weary of the recycling of debunked stories to the contrary.

We are Vermonters who are often hesitant to discuss this issue out loud for fear of offending their friends and neighbors in our small communities – and need to be reminded that more likely than not our neighbors agree with us and are waiting for us to speak out.

We are Vermonters who believe that protecting our children, our neighbors' children, all of Vermont's children, from vaccine-preventable disease is a shared responsibility, a Vermont value, and not something you "opt out of".

Vermont has a proud history of doing the right thing even if it's hard or unpopular. This issue at its core is neither hard nor unpopular. It has the unique quality of being supported by overwhelming scientific evidence, embraced by an increasingly vocal majority of Vermonters, **and** most importantly, is simply the right thing to do.

I encourage you to support removal of the philosophical exemption in this session.