

Texas eyes immunizations as more kids file exemptions

December 7 2016, by Will Weissert

Texas could be the epicenter for the nation's next major fight over stricter requirements for immunizations as rates of schoolchildren who refuse shots for non-medical reasons climb in America's second-largest state.

The number of Texas kindergarten through 12th grade students who reported filing conscientious exemptions for at least one immunization last school year increased 19-fold since 2003—though that is still less than 1 percent of enrolled students, according to the Immunization Partnership, a pro-vaccination Texas nonprofit. Texas requires parents to approve immunizations, rather than mandating shots and having families opt out if they object to them.

Some Texas state lawmakers said Wednesday they want to create a system where students who oppose immunizations would have to opt out of otherwise standard immunizations—and could only do so after watching a video on the medical effectiveness of vaccines.

The most common immunizations protect against measles, mumps, and rubella, or German measles, as well as diphtheria, tetanus, whooping cough, polio and hepatitis A and B.

Texas and 17 other states allow philosophical exemptions to vaccines. California used to let students forgo vaccinations for similar reasons—only to approve some of the country's strictest vaccine requirements last year. That law eliminated religious and personal beliefs

as reasons for opting out of mandatory immunizations.

The small group of Texas lawmakers that wants to make changes isn't planning to go that far when the GOP-controlled Legislature heads back into session Jan. 10.

"The fact is that people have a choice to not immunize, but we need the herd effect," Rep. Donna Howard, an Austin Democrat who has filed an immunization "opt-in" bill, told reporters Wednesday. "We need a significant number to be immunized to not only protect themselves but to protect the larger community."

Past efforts to improve immunization rates in Texas mostly have been stymied by opposition from conservative legislators who are immunizations skeptics, as well as a political group called Texans for Vaccine Choice. They point to discredited studies linking immunizations to health problems including autism.

Texans for Vaccine Choice didn't respond to requests for comment Wednesday.

Preparations for a legislative clash come amid a mumps outbreak south of Fort Worth, where immunization refusal rates in school districts are higher than the state average.

Neighboring Arkansas has reported nearly 1,900 confirmed or suspected cases of mumps this year, though many of those involved children who got vaccines. That outbreak has nonetheless centered in an area where opt-out rates exceed those in other parts of Arkansas, according to that state's Department of Health. Like Texas, Arkansas allows parents to claim medical, religious or philosophical exemptions from school vaccination requirements.

In Texas, nearly 45,000 kindergarten through 12th grade students reported filing conscientious exemptions to vaccinations last school year, which represents 0.84 percent of the number of students reported enrolled by schools in an annual survey, according to the Texas Department of State Health Services. But as recently as the 2008 academic year, only about 12,600 public school students reported filing conscientious exemptions to immunizations, or 0.28 percent of that year's reported enrollment total.

State Rep. Sarah Davis, a suburban Houston Republican who is sponsoring a proposal to mandate an online class for Texans who get non-medical exemptions to school [immunizations](#), said that "for some reason, there's a growing movement afoot to question the science and effectiveness of vaccines."

"Discredited research offered by discredited sources has nonetheless gained traction," Davis said Wednesday. "It has created doubts in parents and uncertainty among the public. We're here because it's time to fight back."

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