

American Academy of Pediatrics

DEDICATED TO THE HEALTH OF ALL CHILDREN™



Ohio Chapter

**Testimony of Sean Gallagher, MD**  
**House Bill 49—State Operating Budget**  
*May 16<sup>th</sup>, 2017*

Chairman Hackett, Vice Chair Tavares, and members of the Senate Finance and Medicaid Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today. My name is Sean Gallagher and I am a second year pediatric resident physician at Nationwide Children's Hospital

As a lifelong Ohioan, born and raised in Sandusky, college in Cincinnati, medical school in Toledo, now residency training in Columbus, I am here on behalf of the nearly 3,000 members of the Ohio Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics to discuss an important public health issue with you today—immunizations. The Ohio Chapter is actively working on an amendment to reform the process in which parents opt out of having their child vaccinated and how Ohio schools handle immunization forms.

Despite having two of the top ten children's hospitals in the nation, Ohio ranks 42nd in the country when it comes to kindergartners vaccinated. The Ohio Department of Health spends approximately \$5.8 million per year in GRF funds on vaccines, however deficiencies in Ohio's immunization laws have proven to be the biggest hurdle in getting children vaccinated.

Over the past few years, the Ohio General Assembly has enacted a number of pro-immunization bills that have improved Ohio's immunization rates and helped to ensure children are protected from disease. These bills restored the childcare immunization entry requirement, expanded access to immunizations, and added meningitis to the list of immunizations required for school entry.

Despite these positive steps, we have seen outbreaks of immunization-preventable diseases including measles, mumps, whooping cough, and flu across Ohio in recent years. Not only have these outbreaks caused significant financial costs on Ohio communities and families, but they've caused the deaths of multiple children. Studies have clearly demonstrated that outbreaks like these are linked to increasing instances of parents opting out of immunization requirements. These opt-outs put children at risk and undermine the public health of our state.

In addition, recent news articles have highlighted some of the challenges we face in collecting and utilizing data related to immunization rates and opt outs. The rates reported by the CDC on vaccination in Ohio are, in fact, just estimates - we only have an idea of who's vaccinated and what school districts and communities are at risk. This is because we have no standardized system in place to track vaccination exemptions. During an outbreak, this information is critical to the medical response.

The Ohio Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics has put together a proposal to address these two issues and ensure that Ohio's children are immunized and protected against an outbreak. Many states have taken similar steps and have seen positive results.

The amendment I am discussing today would standardize the process for the handling of school entry immunization forms. Firstly, these forms would need to be signed by a physician or other licensed health care provider. This ensures a parent will receive information from an expert focusing on the actual facts on vaccination. This is vital in an era of pervasive misinformation and pseudoscience readily available on social media and the internet. Michigan adopted a similar requirement and saw a 35% decrease in opt outs in a single year.

Secondly, this proposal will standardize data collection and reporting. This would allow parents of children with cancer, autoimmune diseases, and weak immune systems to know the immunization rate at their child's school as they themselves are unable to vaccinate their kids. Standardization of the process would also allow public health professionals to respond to an outbreak effectively.

I want to stress that the amendment does not eliminate the parent's ability to opt out of immunization requirements. Our goal is to ensure parents make informed decisions about immunization and that our reporting system is consistent across the state.

Public opinion polling consistently shows more than 87% of parents support immunization requirements. We are confident that an amendment will be submitted for your consideration and we hope that you will consider supporting this important child safety and public health proposal. Thank you for your time and I would be happy to answer any questions that you might have.