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Should Hawai'i Families Be Allowed To Opt Out Of School Vaccines?

Roughly 1 in 5 students in Hawai'i are seeking religious exclusions into at least one Doctors say that's a growing health threat, but efforts to toughen the law are drawing intense criticism from parent groups.

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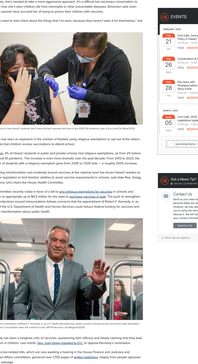


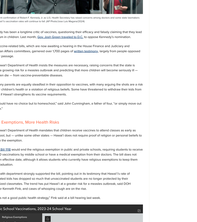
Roughly one in five Hawaii students don't have all their required vaccines in the 2019-20 academic year. (Cory Lum/Civil Beat/2015)

Hawai'i has seen an expansion in the number of families using religious exemptions to opt out of the state's mandate that children receive vaccinations to attend school.

Last year, 20 Hawai'i students in pre-k and private schools had religious exemptions, up from 15 before the Covid-19 pandemic. The increase in vaccine refusals over the past decade. From 2010 to 2021, the number of students with a religious exemption grew from 2,016 to 7,924 — a roughly 250% increase.

Escalating misinformation and contempt around vaccines at the national level has driven Hawai'i leaders to propose legislation to limit families' ability to exercise their vaccination rights. Last year, Rep. Gregg Takayama, who chairs the House Health Committee.

The committee recently voted in favor of a bill to eliminate religious exemptions for vaccines in schools and another to appropriate up to $4.5 million for the state to purchase vaccines in bulk. The push to strengthen vaccine requirements comes as Hawai'i's immunization rates have been dropping for years. Last year, a house of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services could reduce federal funding for vaccines and spread misinformation about public health.



The recent commitment of Michael F. Bennett, a 2L at UC Hastings Berkeley has raised concerns among doctors and some state legislators. He's based in Honolulu and will be working for Jeff Sessions' campaign for Alabama's US Senate.

Normally has been a longtime critic of vaccines, questioning their efficacy and falsely claiming that they lead to autism in children. Last month, Sen. Josh Green (D-Kona), who is a family medicine doctor.

The vaccine-related bills, which are now awaiting a hearing in the House Finance and Judiciary committees, garnered over 1,000 pages of written testimony, largely from people opposed to that passage.

The Hawai'i Department of Health insists the measures are necessary, raising concerns that the state is falling behind, not the 4 measles outbreak and predicting that more children will be hospitalized and even die — from vaccine-preventable diseases.

But many parents are equally steadfast in their opposition to vaccines, with many arguing the shots are a risk to their children's health or a violation of religious beliefs. Some have threatened to withdraw their kids from school if Hawai'i strengthens its vaccine requirements.

"We would have no choice but to homeschool," said John Cunningham, a father of four, "or simply move out of state."

More Exemptions, More Health Risks

The Hawai'i Department of Health maintains that children receive vaccines to attend classes as early as 6 months old, with a few other dates. — Hawai'i does not require proof of religion or personal beliefs to access the exemption.

House Bill 2700 would end the religious exemption in public and private schools, requiring students to receive over 20 vaccinations by middle school or have a medical exemption from doctors. The bill does not have an effective date, although it allows students who currently have religious exemptions to keep them until graduation.

The health department strongly supported the bill, pointing out in its testimony that Hawai'i's rate of vaccinated kids has dropped so much that unvaccinated students are no longer protected by their immunized classmates. The trend has put Hawai'i at greater risk for a measles outbreak, said DOH officials, which can be fatal and spread quickly and widely.

"Luck is not a good public health strategy," the state's top health official said at a hearing last week.

Roughly 1 in 5 Hawai'i students don't have all the vaccinations required by the health department. In addition to a growing number of students with religious exemptions, roughly 7% of the state's kids don't have immunizations or are immunization records at all last year.

The rates of unvaccinated students were as high as 10% in some public schools last year.

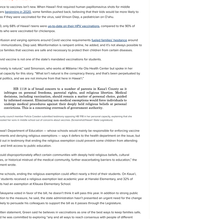
"Luck is not a good public health strategy."

Director Kenneth Fink, Hawai'i Department of Health

As the House Health Committee discussed HB 700 last week, nearly two dozen parents, children and doctors crowded inside the hearing room to testify.

For more than an hour, parents shouted statements to oppose the measure, arguing that removing the religious exemption would take away their children's chances of attending school in Hawai'i. Others urged the committee to ignore the testimony of the health department's top official.

"You can listen to Kenneth when colds with their stories, but we have stories too, of watching people die from measles," said Dr. Kathleen Ruff, a family medicine doctor who testified against the bill. "Is now every people's religious rights to not going to fly in Hawai'i?"



Jessica Morrison and her granddaughter Kamalani, a student at Mililani Mauka High School, testified against the bill. (Courtesy: Jessica Morrison)

Jessica Morrison, a parent of three in Kailua, said the bill unfairly requires families to weigh their religious beliefs against their children's education. While Mililani's oldest son receives a religious exemption to attend Mililani Technology Academy, a hybrid-online school, he has been bullied by classmates and teachers, testified.

If House Bill 700 passes, Mililani's sixth-grader and youngest daughters would never be able to a traditional school in Hawai'i.

"My family should have to choose between their faith and an education," Morrison said. "We have the right to both of them."

'The Anxiety Is Natural'

Resistance to vaccines isn't new. When Hawai'i first required human papillomavirus shots for middle schoolers beginning in 2020, some families pushed back, believing that their kids would be more likely to have sex if they were vaccinated for the virus, said Vinson Chang, a pediatrician on O'ahu.

In 2019, only 38% of Hawai'i teens were up-to-date on the vaccination, compared to the 80% of students who were vaccinated for chickenpox.

But outbreaks and varying opinions about vaccine requirements fueling families' hesitancy around routine immunizations, Chang said. Misinformation is rampant online, he added, and it's not always possible to convince families that vaccines are safe and necessary to protect their children from certain diseases.

The Covid vaccine is not one of the state's mandated vaccinations for students.

"The anxiety is natural," said Dominic Sims, who serves as Mililani High School's Covid-19 Response Coordinator. "Anytime you do something that's new, it's scary. What isn't natural is the conspiracy theory, and that's been perpetuated by national politics, and we are not immune from that here in Hawai'i."

> HB 1126 or 2 local concern is a number of parents in Kauai Civics as it relates to vaccinations. Many of them are Seventh Day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, or other Christian, Jewish or Muslim groups, and it would prevent them from being in school except. Eliminating non medical exemptions would force schools to discriminate against students based on their religion. This is a constitutional concern. This is a concerning violation of government activity.
>
> Kauai County Council member Mason Chock on potential problems requiring HB 1126 in the personal capacity, explaining that she is a Seventh Day Adventist and a member of a church whose sacred text, the Bible, discourages medical treatment.

The Hawai'i Department of Education — where schools would mostly be responsible for enforcing vaccine requirements and denying religious exemptions — says it believes the health department on the issue, but pointed out in testimony that ending the religious exemption could prevent some children from attending school and limit access to public education.

"This could disproportionately affect certain communities with deeply held religious beliefs, cultural practices and mistrust of medical community, hindering their participating fully in education," the department wrote.

For some schools, ending the religious exemption could affect nearly a third of their students. On Kauai, 30% of students received a religious exemption last academic year, compared to about 10% of students statewide, said Kauai Board of Education at-Kilauea Elementary School.

While Takayama voted in favor of the bill, he wasn't thrilled. It will pass this year in addition to strong public opposition to the measure, he said, the state administration hasn't presented an urgent need for the change. Rush's feeling is premature for colleagues to support the bill as it passes through the committee.

In a written statement, Green said he's concerned about the rise in cases of the best ways to keep families safe, including the state's vaccine mandates. "We have a lot of ways to reach consensus with people of different ideologies, to make sure we are healthy in Hawai'i."

Enforcement Challenges Remain

Even if the bill is and the religious exemption takes place, it doesn't guarantee that more children will receive their vaccines.

When California ended its personal belief vaccine exemption in 2016, families found ways around the law, including school vaccine requirement, said Paul Offenstein, an associate professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The state saw a small uptick in the number of homeschooled kids, he said, and the number of medical exemptions for children spectacularly.

"People will go to great lengths not to vaccinate their kids," Detmarian said.

Even as the state tried to crack down on vaccine exemptions, it was still hard for schools to enforce the law. While California students were allowed to attend class if they don't have their vaccines or a medical exemption, they couldn't be counted as part of the school's attendance. Many schools were effectively adding that administrative work to keep their enrollment up, but they didn't want to disrupt students' classes.

School administrators are facing similar challenges in Hawai'i, where roughly 17% of enrolled students are seeking vaccinations or have no immunization record at all.

Kim Sims, Mililani High School's Covid-19 Response Coordinator, is a mother to Dominic Sims, who is a senior at the Mililani Technology Academy. Dominic's parents testified against the bill. (Courtesy: Kim Sims)

Limited access to vaccines is becoming a growing concern for doctors and state lawmakers as the Trump administration has dismantled access to childhood vaccine programs. The federal decrease in the Children program currently provides vaccines to roughly half of Hawai'i kids whose families can't afford vaccinations.

"If the state's vaccine supply, lawmakers are considering another bill that would allow the state to purchase vaccines in bulk and distribute them to providers across the state. Hawai'i would still participate in the federal program, but would also have its own program to fill gaps. Hawai'i's own purchasing program would ensure that local doctors have access to vaccines, Takayama said.

DOH has estimated the bulk vaccine purchase approach would cost between $2.8 and $3.6 million, but the state could recoup some of the costs from doctors, who could purchase the vaccines from the state at a low cost.

Simmons, the pediatrician who Rep. Gregg Takayama said it's important for the state to take drastic/simply measures, but she also worries that some families won't understand the value of vaccines until children become seriously ill. As the current drop in vaccine rates, she added, it's not a matter of if but when an outbreak happens.

"This is a public health problem," Simmons said. "We see it coming, and we're terrified."

See every public school's vaccination numbers for the 2019-20 school year here:

Public School Immunization Data
2023-24 School Year

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School Name	Students Enrolled	Students Vaccinated	Missing Immunizations	Medical Exemption	Religious Exemption	Not Up To Date	Missing Immunization Rate
Waianae Elementary School	279	5	27	0	0	38	13
Nanakuli High and Intermediate	1,000	6	27	0	0	33	3
Kaiser High	1,779	9	27	0	0	36	2
Farrington High	1,779	9	27	0	0	36	2
Waianae High	1,779	9	27	0	0	36	2
Kapolei High	1,779	9	27	0	0	36	2
Waianae Elementary School	279	5	27	0	0	38	13

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