

## UPDATE on bill to remove religious exemption for K-12<sup>th</sup> grade students

The Massachusetts legislature committee on Public Health **favorably reported on a bill that would remove the religious exemption to student vaccination requirements.** This moves the bill a step closer to a vote by the legislature and enactment. The bill, [H.4813](#), is now before the committee on Health Care Financing.

### What does this mean for me?

- If H.4813 becomes law, you will not be able to claim a religious exemption to *any* vaccine that the Massachusetts Department of Public Health (DPH) requires for school attendance.

### I send my children to a private school, will this affect me?

- **Yes.** If this bill is enacted, religious exemptions will not be available at *any school in the Commonwealth, whether public or private*, including parochial, temple or other church schools.

### My children are up to date on all vaccinations, and I've never needed the religious exemption, why should I care about this bill?

- Currently, DPH can, at any time, add new vaccines to the schedule of required vaccines for K – 12<sup>th</sup> grade students, including vaccines for COVID-19, flu, or monkeypox. If the religious exemption is eliminated and DPH adds the COVID-19 or any other vaccine to the schedule that conflicts with your sincere religious beliefs, your child would be prohibited from attending any school in the Commonwealth unless he or she receives that vaccine. Note that new vaccines added to the schedule may be annual, require boosters, or both.

### I homeschool my children, why should I care about this bill?

- In [several](#) states, vaccination requirements apply to homeschoolers. With the number of homeschoolers on the [rise](#), the Massachusetts legislature may seek to impose vaccination requirements on these students as well.
- Eliminating the religious exemption for K-12th grade students sets the precedent for eliminating the religious exemption to vaccine requirements for undergraduate and graduate students. If you ever wished to stop homeschooling or your child wanted to pursue an undergraduate or postgraduate degree in Massachusetts, your child would have to satisfy all applicable vaccination requirements, unless a medical exemption were available to him or her.

### Will medical exemptions still be available?

- Although the bill does not eliminate medical exemptions, which are rarely given, it would require schools to report to DPH the number of students in each grade from kindergarten to twelfth who are fully immunized and those who have medical exemptions. DPH would publish this data for each school and school district. Even though the bill states that this information will not be made public if it would result in the disclosure of identifying personal information or violate applicable privacy laws, there exists a real risk that publishing this information will lead to the identification of medically fragile, unvaccinated students in smaller schools and close-knit communities. This kind of disclosure would likely lead to bullying and other harmful outcomes for these children.

### **Is this bill necessary?**

- **No.** Massachusetts has the [highest vaccination rates](#) in the country. Of kindergarteners in Massachusetts during the 2021-2022 school year, [only 0.87% of students](#) claimed religious exemptions, down from 0.93% the previous year.
- The religious exemption has been part of the statute for decades, showing that Massachusetts has succeeded in achieving exceptionally high vaccination rates without resorting to punitive, anti-religion measures that discriminate against a tiny minority of religious families.

### **What can I do?**

- Call and email your senator and representative (<https://malegislature.gov/Search/FindMyLegislator>) and tell them you oppose H.4813.
- H.4813 is an extreme and anti-religion measure that will exclude religious families from schools at a time when children are suffering from an education deficit resulting from misguided COVID-19 school closures.
- The past two years have taught us that access to in-person learning is critical for the mental, social, emotional and physical health of our children.
- Intolerant and discriminatory measures like H.4813 have no place in a society committed to inclusivity and diversity.