



February 8, 2022

Representative Rick Ladd, Chairman
House Education Committee
Legislative Office Building, Room 207
33 N. State Street
Concord, NH 03301
Email: HouseEducationCommittee@leg.state.nh.us

RE: HB 1241 prohibiting a school district from mandating a COVID-19 vaccination for school attendance

Dear Chairman Ladd and Members of the Education Committee:

Bi-State Primary Care Association and our members respectfully request HB 1241, prohibiting a school district from mandating a COVID-19 vaccination for school attendance, be recommended inexpedient to legislate. Bi-State staff and our members will not attend legislative hearings due to the risk of COVID-19, and we thank you for the opportunity to submit written testimony to your committee electronically. Bi-State and our members write to you in strong opposition of HB 1241 because it eliminates a critical tool that school districts need to protect children and members of their communities from COVID-19.

Bi-State Primary Care Association (Bi-State) is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, formed by two health and social service leaders in 1986 to advance access to comprehensive primary care and preventive services for all, with special emphasis on those most in need in New Hampshire and Vermont. Today, Bi-State represents 28 member organizations across both states that provide comprehensive primary care services to over 300,000 patients at 146 locations. Our members include community health centers (CHCs), federally qualified health centers (FQHCs), rural health clinics (RHCs), area health education center programs, and Planned Parenthood of Northern New England. New Hampshire's 13 health centers serve approximately 112,000 patients at locations across the state, including in those districts represented by the members of this esteemed committee.

Bi-State and our members oppose HB 1241 because it will tie the hands of individual school districts.

New Hampshire, like all states, requires childhood immunizations to attend school.¹ It is our understanding that school districts follow the recommendations of the New Hampshire Department of Health and Human Services' administrative rules on communicable diseases. HB 1241 prevents local governments from deciding what is best for their communities. As we have seen over the past two years, the level of COVID-19 spread differs community by community. Public health measures, such as mask and vaccination requirements, are designed to protect all community members, including those who cannot wear masks or be vaccinated. It is

¹ See Chapter He-P 300 Diseases last accessed on Jan. 31, 2022.

irresponsible to restrict the actions of individual school districts when the needs of their communities vary drastically in different areas of the state.

On January 19th, the New Hampshire Department of Health and Human Services reported there were 117 active COVID-19 clusters in the K-12 schools, with an average of 12.8 cases per cluster.² The Department also reported 40 active childcare clusters. Masks and the vaccination of the people around them are the only things keeping children who are not old enough to be vaccinated safe. There are likely several factors that caused the drastic rise in pediatric cases, and the rise in school and childcare clusters, including the lack of mask mandates and access to vaccination. We know that employing mitigation measures such as masks and vaccinations in schools prevents the spread of disease. On January 3rd, one health center reported it received over 600 calls from parents and caregivers calling for COVID-19 tests for children. COVID-19 will continue to overwhelm our health care system if we do not slow the spread of disease. Prohibiting the ability of local authorities to require vaccination against COVID-19 in statute is premature and unnecessary.

Access to childhood vaccinations affects families, education, health care workers, and our economy.

The COVID-19 pandemic has made it clear that children and their families suffer when children cannot attend school in person. New Hampshire is experiencing some of our highest numbers of COVID-19 infections, hospitalizations, and deaths since the beginning of the pandemic, along with extraordinary staffing shortages that are impacting all residents and their ability to access primary and emergency care. Staffing shortages at CHCs are *not* due to vaccine requirements; ~5% of their workforce is currently out sick due solely to illness from COVID-19. This does not include their health care staff who are unable to go to work because they are at home caring for a sick child, nor does it illustrate the incredible strain that working at reduced workforce capacity puts on the rest of their staff. Children need access to vaccinations to keep them in school, and parents need their children in school so that they can work, including at health care organizations.

The lack of childhood immunizations, masks in schools, and other mitigation measures in our communities is eroding our health care system's ability to respond to urgent primary care needs: Primary care providers across the state cannot prioritize their regular patient visits because their staff are responding to COVID-19. Utilizing a package of mitigation strategies including vaccinations is economically prudent, will reduce the number of health care workers taking care of a sick child, and will, most importantly, save lives. HB 1241 unnecessarily impedes the ability of local school districts to decide what is best for their communities.

For these reasons and more, Bi-State Primary Care Association and our members respectfully request the Committee recommend HB 1241 be inexpedient to legislate.

Sincerely,

Kristine E. Stoddard, Esq.
Senior Director of NH Public Policy
kstoddard@bistatepca.org
(603) 228-2830 ext. 113

² NH DHHS COVID-19 Education and Childcare Partner Call (January 19, 2022)
<https://www.covid19.nh.gov/sites/g/files/ehbemt481/files/inline-documents/sonh/hcp-call-presentation-011922.pdf>