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OPINION FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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## **See Immunizations As The Public Health Miracle They Are**

**By Danita Nellhaus**

As a school nurse in Kanawha County, West Virginia, I am proud of how our state sets a positive example for immunization requirements.



We are on the front line when new students enroll. They do not ‘pass go’ until they are cleared. If vaccines are missing, we work with families, the Kanawha-Charleston Health Department and area physicians to establish a catch-up schedule.

Why? Immunizations are a public health miracle! Rarely do we hear of measles, mumps, varicella (chicken pox) or any of the other childhood diseases once common. Childhood immunizations have reduced the incidence of vaccine preventable diseases by more than 90 percent, and, in some cases, as high as 99 percent.

As a result, an increasing number of parents believe that vaccine-preventable diseases are mild or “natural” and that vaccines are no longer necessary. This misguided ideology is partly to blame for the rise in pertussis and measles cases over the past several years.

If children or adults are not fully immunized, they simply are not protected. These diseases can have devastating side effects and long-term ramifications, especially in young adults and adult-aged people.

Vaccines not only provide protection to those who are vaccinated but also provide community protection or “herd immunity” where vaccination rates are high. This herd immunity reduces the spread of disease to those who cannot be

vaccinated, from the youngest infants to immunocompromised individuals of any age.

Health care professionals provide reliable information about the safety and efficacy of childhood immunizations. School nurses are strongly positioned within our communities to educate students, families and school staff about the critical role vaccines play in preventing disease, using evidence-based research.

Lawmakers in this current Legislative Session, as in year's past, have introduced a number of bills designed to weaken West Virginia's exemplary vaccine policies. Among them:

- **SB 230 Allowing voluntary immunization of students in private schools**  
(What better way to protect the vulnerable students than to introduce them to life threatening diseases?)
- **SB 2 Allowing private schools the option of making vaccines required for enrollment**
- **SB 255 Prohibiting discrimination against patients for declining or delaying vaccines**
- **HB 2036 Allowing religious exemptions for vaccines**  
(What religion would want to sacrifice children's health and safety?)
- **HB 2046 Permitting a licensed physician to grant a medical exemption for the required immunizations for a child to enter a school or state-regulated child-care center**  
(The state already has a Medical Director who oversees this very issue and determines whether a temporary or permanent exemption will be granted or denied.)
- **HB 2217 Relating to natural immunity or antibodies to any illness to be treated as equal or better to vaccine-induced immunity**  
(West Virginia already offers exemptions to the Varicella vaccination if the student has a history of Chickenpox. In other circumstances, a titer may be obtained in order to confirm immunity.)

I am hopeful that these misconstrued bills — or any others that could pop up during this Legislative Session — will not make it off the floor.

I urge you to contact your representatives to express your opinion and be a voice for those unable to speak up for themselves. Your senators and delegates

represent you, and it is worth the few minutes it takes to call or email. You can find contact information at [wvlegislature.gov](http://wvlegislature.gov) for your elected legislators.

— *Danita Nellhaus also serves the community as a member of the Kanawha-Charleston Health Department's Board of Health.*

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**FOR MORE INFORMATION, PLEASE CONTACT  
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