

# The Star-Ledger

FINAL EDITION

NJ.COM

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 2, 2011

## Objections to vaccination must be validated

By Drew Harris  
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**R**eports about fraudulent research linking vaccines with autism once again have started a national conversation about the risks versus benefits of this life-saving public health practice. At its core are questions of how best to balance community health and individual choice, and whether we're doing enough to properly inform parents of the risks and benefits associated with that choice.

New Jersey law empowers the state Department of Health and Senior Services to mandate that all children entering any licensed day care or K-12 school receive specific vaccines. This list includes vaccines that prevent more than a dozen devastating childhood diseases, such as measles, mumps, rubella and Hib.

Parents are rightly concerned about the complications of any medical treatment, including vaccination. However, evidence is overwhelming that the benefits of routine childhood vaccination far outweigh risk.

Vaccines protect communities, not just individuals. One unvaccinated child can become the means by which serious infectious diseases reach those who are too young, immune-deficient or medically compromised to be immunized. To protect everyone, high vaccination-compliance rates are necessary to achieve what epidemiologists call "herd immunity."

New Jersey's law provides for medical and religious exemptions from vaccination. However, enforcement is left up to the schools, subject to audit by local public health officials. The criteria for medical exemptions are straightforward, but until recently, the state provided little guidance on what constituted a bona fide religious

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exemption. So when an increasing number of parents concerned about vaccine safety requested exemptions, school officials turned to the state for clarification and help in managing these requests.

State officials have instructed the schools to accept a simple statement from the parent "that the mandated immunization interferes with the free exercise of the pupil's religious rights, as long as the statement

does not rely solely on a moral or philosophical objection."

This hurdle, now incorporated in state regulations, is too low to separate those with sincere religious objections from those who are looking to temporarily avoid some or all of the childhood vaccinations.

Last month, an Assembly committee released a resolution calling on the state Department of Health to either amend or withdraw the weak religious exemption regulations. We support this resolution and call on the state Senate to do the same.

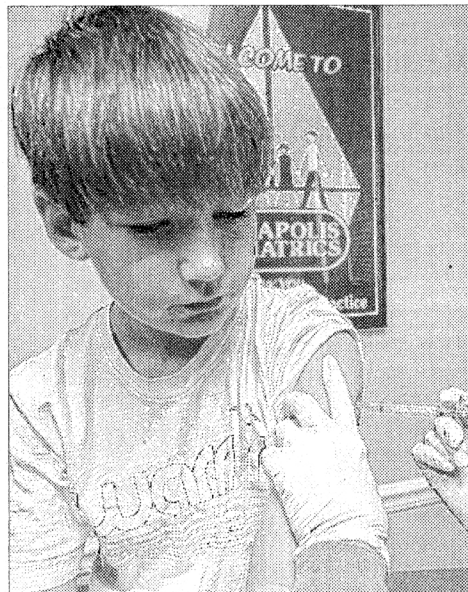
Since the weakening of the requirements, the number of children in New Jersey granted religious exemptions has tripled to almost 6,000. Anecdotally, New Jersey health care providers and public health officials are reporting an increase in the number of parents being granted religious exemptions after they were denied their requests for medical ones.

According to national Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, every dollar spent on vaccination saves \$18.40 on direct and indirect costs.

Unfortunately, New Jersey consistently ranks below the U.S. national average for immunization coverage. So, the potential for economic savings is great.

Universal vaccination is the one public health measure that stands between us and a return to a time when parents lived in dread of diseases we now prevent. Strict enforcement of the religious exemption requirements is necessary to prevent a calamity now in the making.

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**Many parents object to inoculations on religious grounds.**