

Experts Warn Massachusetts Vaccine Exemption Legislation for School Would Exclude Students and Deepen Inequities

Massachusetts leads in vaccination rates and lowest hesitancy. Experts warn removing the 1% religious exemption would harm students and families of faith

BOSTON, MA, MA, UNITED STATES, November 4, 2025 /EINPresswire.com/ -- A multidisciplinary panel of experts in medicine, law, psychology, education, and faith leadership recently gathered at the Massachusetts State House for a briefing hosted by [Health Action Massachusetts](#) to warn that two pending bills — [H.2554](#) and [S.1557](#) — would eliminate the Commonwealth's long-standing religious exemption for school immunizations.



Alida Moncada, founder of a private ministerial association dedicated to preserving Indigenous spiritual traditions.

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Removing the exemption, used by about 1 percent of families, would do more harm than good — disproportionately affecting students with disabilities, faith-based families, and low-income communities.”

Experts Panel Statement

Watch the full briefing video:

<https://www.HealthActionMA.org/briefingvideo>

For more than fifty years, this policy has allowed Massachusetts to protect public health while respecting families of faith and preserving every child's right to an education. Panelists called the proposed changes misguided and unnecessary, noting that Massachusetts leads the nation in vaccination rates and maintains effective safeguards — such as temporary outbreak exclusions — that already keep schools safe.

Experts cautioned that removing the exemption, claimed by roughly one percent of families, would do more harm than good — disproportionately affecting students with disabilities,

families of faith, and low-income communities by permanently excluding them from public education. Department of Elementary and Secondary Education data show that 55.8 percent of public-school students are high needs, 42 percent are low income, 20.6 percent have disabilities, and 36 percent are children of color — meaning the one percent affected would include many of the Commonwealth's most vulnerable students.

Massachusetts Already Leads in Vaccination Rates

"Massachusetts has excelled in vaccine uptake for years and leads the nation with the highest school vaccination rates," said Alex Flett, RN, a licensed school nurse. "Since 1967, the Commonwealth has respected diverse religious beliefs. Should those missing one or two vaccines for religious reasons be kicked out of school? This will not enhance my students' health."

Modest Exemption Growth Mirrors Increase in Required Vaccine Doses

Michael Tambe, Ph.D., an MIT data scientist, reviewed more than three decades of state immunization data to assess claims that religious exemptions are rising sharply.

"In 1987, only eight vaccine doses were required for kindergarten entry. Today, that number has grown to roughly twenty," Tambe explained. "Religious exemptions have increased incrementally over the same period as more doses have been added to the Massachusetts schedule. There is a clear correlation — the more doses we require, the more exemptions are requested. The core issue has been misdiagnosed, and the wrong solution is being recommended."

Doctors Warn of Educational and Mental-Health Harms



State Senator Ryan Fattman (R-Worcester & Hampden District)



MASSACHUSETTS IMMUNIZATION AND EXEMPTION BRIEFING

Legislative Briefing – Massachusetts State House
Boston, MA | October 28, 2025

Immunization and Exemption Briefing Hosted by
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Dr. Sylvia Fogel, a psychiatrist specializing in neurodevelopmental disorders, warned that losing access to in-person schooling would be devastating for students with autism and other special needs who rely on daily, multidisciplinary therapies to ensure stability and progress. She emphasized that many special education services and therapies are not replicable in a homeschool setting, stating, “When proponents say families can simply homeschool, it’s just not true for many students with disabilities.”

Fogel added that youth with psychiatric illnesses would also be harmed by permanent exclusion from school, noting, “Our youth mental health crisis exploded after pandemic school closures — yet here we are facing legislation that would again force children out of schools, away from peers, sports programs, and essential therapies.”

Faith and Legal Concerns

“The religious exemption wasn’t an oversight — it was deliberately added to Massachusetts law in 1967 to protect the free exercise of religion,” explained Vanessa Pompei-Britt, J.D. “After the Supreme Judicial Court’s *Dalli v. Board of Education* (1971) found it unconstitutional to limit protections to recognized denominations, the Legislature expanded it to include all sincerely held religious beliefs. It was a deliberate act — and it’s worked for over 50 years.”

Reverend Evan C. Hines noted that Massachusetts ranks among the most secular states in the nation and urged legislators to recognize how that context may shape policy. “There may be implicit bias or limited understanding among policymakers regarding the central role religious observance plays in many families’ lives,” he said.

“When legislators say only ‘major religions’ count, it tells families like mine our beliefs are invisible,” added Alida Moncada, an Indigenous Peruvian-born lawyer and founder of a ministerial association preserving ancestral traditions. “I’ve been excluded enough — by my color, my accent, and now my Indigenous faith.”

Panelists also pointed out that noncompliant students — those missing required vaccines with no exemption on file — outnumber exempt students by seven to one, raising questions about why faith-based families are being singled out.

Protecting Rights and Preventing Exclusion

Selena Fitantes, J.D., a Massachusetts civil-rights attorney, warned that “oppressive and unnecessary public-health measures that limit educational opportunities will only increase distrust in government and public-health institutions. Given Massachusetts’ high immunization levels and strong constitutional protections, these bills are unnecessary — and unlikely to withstand judicial scrutiny.”

Candice Edwards, Executive Director of Health Action Massachusetts, concluded:
“State regulations already allow schools to temporarily exclude exempt students during outbreaks to protect public health. Those protocols work — and they’ve worked for decades. There’s no justification for permanently excluding roughly one percent of healthy children from classrooms. Massachusetts has always led by balancing sound public health with respect for religious rights. These bills would break that balance.”

Health Action Massachusetts (HAMA) is a 501(c)(4) advocacy organization protecting medical, religious, parental, and disability rights in education. HealthActionMA.org

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