

In Florida's Panhandle, a Hearing on School Vaccine Mandates Gets Heated

The hearing was the first concrete step toward repealing some of the state's vaccine requirements. Rolling back others would require legislative action.



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Health officials working to eliminate school vaccine mandates in Florida held the first and perhaps only public hearing on the plan on Friday, moving toward ending a policy that public health experts credit with limiting the spread of diseases such as chickenpox and hepatitis B.

The Florida Department of Health workshop drew a passionate crowd of about 100 people to a hotel conference room in Panama City Beach, a conservative-leaning vacation spot that is difficult for many Floridians to get to.

Many members of the public, including a number of parents, said they favored doing away with vaccine mandates as a matter of individual freedom. But there were also doctors, teachers and disease survivors who opposed the policy change, saying it would lead to unnecessary suffering and preventable deaths.

Dr. Joseph A. Ladapo, the Florida surgeon general, and Gov. Ron DeSantis, a Republican, said in September that they intended to make Florida the first state to scrap vaccine mandates for schoolchildren. The announcement stunned the public health community, which is grappling with a growing anti-vaccine movement led in part by Robert F. Kennedy Jr., President Trump's health secretary.

The country is experiencing a resurgence of measles, a highly contagious disease preventable by vaccination. Hundreds of people are quarantining in South Carolina in an attempt to control an outbreak that began in October. There was also a large outbreak in West Texas this year.

The Florida Health Department, which Dr. Ladapo oversees, has proposed repealing its requirement that children be vaccinated against four infectious diseases: varicella (chickenpox); hepatitis B; pneumococcal bacteria; and Haemophilus influenzae type B, or Hib, a bacterium that is distinct from the influenza virus and on rare occasions can be deadly.

But other mandated childhood vaccines in Florida — including those against measles, mumps, rubella, pertussis (whooping cough), diphtheria and polio — are under the purview of the Republican-held State Legislature. Legislative leaders, who were not consulted or informed before Dr. Ladapo proposed ending vaccine mandates, have shown little interest in doing so.

Ben Albritton, the Senate president, told reporters on Monday that while he supports parental rights and did not get the mRNA vaccines that protect against the coronavirus, he is a “believer” in older vaccines.

“Some of these things have been around, just say, forever, a long time, and have a great record,” he said.

Mr. DeSantis, who is term-limited, has said little about eliminating vaccine mandates as he prepares for his final legislative session, a sign to lawmakers that the policy change may not be a priority. Several Florida Republicans, including Senator Rick Scott, a former governor, and Representative Byron Donalds, the front-runner to win his party’s nomination in the 2026 governor’s race, have distanced themselves from the proposal.

A public opinion survey published in October by the University of North Florida found that nearly two-thirds of respondents were against the policy change.

On Friday, vaccination proponents urged health officials to hold more public hearings, especially in other parts of the state. Officials did not commit to a future workshop and said members of the public could email their input, preferably by Dec. 22.

Dr. Frederick S. Southwick, an infectious disease specialist from Gainesville, said he spent \$1,000 for a flight, hotel room and car rental to attend the workshop.

“I feel very sad to hear the distrust of physicians and the medical community,” he said, recounting having to treat patients with sepsis and bacterial meningitis before the Hib vaccine was available. “Your ending that vaccine is going to cause tremendous damage.”

Proponents of vaccine mandates asked for studies looking into the potential public health and economic costs to ending the mandates. Dr. Ladapo told CNN in September that he had conducted no such analysis because the policy change was a matter of principle. A lawyer for the health department told attendees on Friday that any required study would be conducted at a later date.

Any change to vaccine mandates could still take several months. Robert J. Walters, a lawyer for the Florida Academy of Family Physicians, told officials that eliminating vaccine mandates could run afoul of the state Health Department’s statutory authority, which requires it to prevent and control “vaccine-preventable diseases.”

But supporters of doing away with the mandates were noticeably more vocal during the meeting.

A couple of speakers said they were skeptical that the measles outbreaks in South Carolina and Texas were real, underscoring how pervasive distrust of public health warnings has become since the coronavirus pandemic.

As the meeting concluded, Larry Downs Jr., a 56-year-old plumber, yelled, “Freedom!” His shout received boisterous approval from others in the crowd and shouts of “Amen!”

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