Editorial: Protect kids, promote vaccines

By Editorial Board

JUNE 10, 2015, 4:00 PM

Parents in Illinois send a child to school with the expectation that he or she will be safe from common childhood diseases because the other students have been vaccinated. But in many classrooms, that’s not true.

Thousands of children in Illinois attend schools where vaccination rates have sagged. It’s important to maintain what doctors call "herd immunity" — a critical level of protection that prevents an epidemic from taking hold and spreading rapidly. The lower the rates, the higher the risk.

One reason more children aren’t vaccinated in Illinois: Parents can easily opt out by claiming a religious exemption.

The Illinois House and Senate have passed a bill that would set a higher standard for parents to opt out of vaccinating their children based on religious objections. We urge Gov. Bruce Rauner to sign it.

Right now, parents who don’t want their kids immunized merely send a letter attesting to their religious objection to vaccination. The proposed new law would require parents to fill out a form and have a conversation with their doctor or another health care provider to learn about the risks and benefits of immunization. The provider would sign the form to confirm that the conversation happened. The provider would not approve or deny the exemption; that would still be up to school officials.

Why make it tougher to gain such an exemption? Because studies show that when the rules are tougher, few exemptions are claimed. Children are safer. It’s likely that parents who have fears about vaccinations will listen to their doctors and gain confidence about the science behind vaccine safety and effectiveness.

What happens when exemption rules grow too lax? Last year, a measles outbreak at Disneyland spread to several other states. California lawmakers are moving to tighten that state’s rules. Under a bill approved by the California Senate, parents would no longer be able to opt out of vaccinations based on their personal beliefs. Medical reasons would be the only sufficient grounds to avoid immunization.

The American Medical Association staked out the same position this week, saying parents should not be able to use personal or religious reasons to refuse vaccines for their children.

The Illinois bill doesn’t go nearly that far. It does tighten this state’s current rules and would help to curb the rising numbers of exemptions.

Vaccinating children is the only way to protect all of them from measles and other diseases that can rifle through a classroom or school when too many
children go without immunization.

Illinois hasn’t had a major measles outbreak in a long, long time. The state still boasts a strong overall vaccination rate for all covered diseases. But scattered measles outbreaks in this state earlier this year remind us that measles and other diseases can still pounce if kids aren’t vaccinated.

Gov. Rauner, here’s a chance to protect children.

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