West Virginia is First. Let’s Keep It That Way.

Remember that time when parents all over the country dreaded the approaching summer months because they were not sure whether their children would be able to breathe – let alone walk – at the end of summer? Or remember when every year more than 200,000 Americans would start coughing and wheezing uncontrollably, and more than 1 in 10 infants catching the disease would violently pass away. Neither do we.

Thanks to the work of dedicated scientists, we have virtually eliminated two of the cruelest scourges from this country: polio and pertussis. We also do not have to worry about a slew of other once-debilitating diseases that killed and maimed thousands of Americans, including chickenpox (Varicella), diphtheria, hepatitis A, hepatitis B, hib (haemophilus influenzae type b), HPV (Human Papillomavirus), measles, meningococcal, mumps, pneumococcal, rotavirus, rubella (German Measles), shingles (Herpes Zoster), and tetanus (Lockjaw). What a time to be alive, indeed!

Take it from researchers who have published in the leading medical, public health, child development, and health policy journals, with the training to assess other researchers’ work: vaccines are safe. Serious adverse events from vaccines occur at rates lower than one in a million (the chance of getting hit by lighting is one in 700,000). And the only side effects commonly seen with vaccines are minor, temporary ailments like a sore arm or a low fever.

Yet, vaccines only work if the vast majority of individuals are vaccinated. And for once, West Virginia is leading the nation in an important public health measure: school-age vaccination rates. We do so because we have the nation’s strictest vaccination requirements for children in school. Our approach has been so effective that other states are following our example.

The benefits of vaccinations go well beyond not having to see one’s children die or get maimed. Everyone benefits. Costs of even small outbreaks are exceedingly high. A recent minor (just 51 cases) measles outbreak in Minnesota cost that state in excess of $1 million. An earlier outbreak in New York City cost local government $400,000 and more than 10,000 work hours. These are just the direct costs. A recent study showed that routine childhood immunization of US children born in 2009 alone will prevent 42,000 early deaths and 20 million cases of disease. That kind of health impact translates to savings of $13.5 billion in direct costs and $68.8 billion in total societal costs.

Unfortunately, while West Virginia is leading the nation when it comes to school-age children, there is still work to be done: we are dead last when it comes to vaccinating children between ages one and three. According to the 2015 National Immunization Survey, one third of West Virginia children in that age range are missing at least one critical vaccine.

The need to maintain and strengthen protections for our children could not be more urgent. The opioid epidemic has triggered outbreaks of hepatitis all over Appalachia. Outbreaks of measles
and mumps are occurring across the country. Cases of whooping cough are on the rise, and flu season is on the horizon.

Financial barriers to receiving vaccines have largely been eliminated since the Affordable Care Act made vaccines free for virtually all West Virginia’s children. What is left are deliberately misleading voices in the state that spread conspiracy theories, irresponsibly scare parents, and cause great damage to the future of our state’s health and budget. Vaccines are safe and effective. The debate is settled.

It is time for the state’s political leadership, particularly for Governor Justice, Speaker Roger Hanshaw, and Senate President Mitch Carmichael, to take advantage of their pulpit, and strongly come out against these most recent shenanigans that are dangerous to health of our state.

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