



Executive Committee President

Tanya Fitts, MD, FAAP
Lafayette Pediatrics
1300 Access Rd Suite 400
Oxford, MS 38655
Phone: 662/236-3939
Email: tfitts@lafayettepediatrics.net

Vice President/President Elect

Patricia Tibbs, MD, FAAP
Ellisville Pediatric Clinic
1203 B Avenue
Ellisville, MS 39437
Phone: 601/477-3550
Email: ptpatibbs@aol.com

Treasurer

Claire Gilliam, MD, FAAP
University of MS Medical Center
2500 N State St
Jackson, MS 39216-4500
Phone: 601/815-8418
Email: cenettles@umc.edu

Immediate Past President

Anita S. Henderson, MD, FAAP
The Pediatric Clinic
101 Medical Park Drive
Hattiesburg, MS 39402
Phone 601/579-3000
Email: anitahend@aol.com

Chapter Executive Director

Angela Weathersby, Ph.D.
Post Office Box 296
Madison, MS 39130
Phone: 601-605-6425
Email: director@aapms.org

www.aapms.org

Mississippi Chapter

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RELIGIOUS EXEMPTIONS FOR REQUIRED CHILDHOOD VACCINATIONS FOR SCHOOL ENTRY

MADISON, MS – On April 18, a federal judge ordered the Mississippi State Department of Health to develop a policy that allows for religious exemptions for required childhood vaccinations for school entry. This action undermines our state’s record of public health success in fighting preventable disease.

Community-wide immunity conferred through routine childhood immunization protects all people in our state from deadly infections. We all have patients or relatives who have immunocompromising conditions like childhood cancer, immunodeficiencies, transplants, or autoimmune conditions that put them at risk for serious complications of these vaccine-preventable diseases. In other states that allow nonmedical exemptions for childhood vaccination, preventable diseases like measles have reemerged. However, Mississippi has not had a case of measles in over 20 years due to our high levels of childhood vaccination coverage. An outbreak of measles this year in Ohio led to 85 total cases, with 36 of those children hospitalized—all in children that were not fully vaccinated. Any time that we leave children unprotected from vaccine-preventable disease, we take unnecessary and unacceptable risks.

As an organization, we are disappointed and outraged that a federal judge overruled state statute and prior legal precedent that has been law for decades. In 1979, the Supreme Court of the State of Mississippi issued a ruling upholding the statute that was passed in 1972 as “complete in and of itself” without religious exemptions. We have now had more than 50 years of healthier children in our schools because of our strong state immunization laws, and Mississippi has been a national leader in rates of routine immunization of its children. That track record of success—and the health and well-being of Mississippi’s children—is now at risk due to this deeply flawed and reckless decision. Despite this outcome, Mississippi’s pediatricians will continue to promote routine childhood immunizations as the best way to protect our patients and the public at large from preventable diseases and needless harm.

Respectfully,

Tanya Fitts, MD, FAAP
Executive Committee President
Mississippi Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics

Patricia Tibbs, MD, FAAP
Vice President/President Elect
Mississippi Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics

Supporters:

Robert Santos, MD – Pediatric Infectious Disease Specialist
Charlotte Hobbs, MD - Pediatric Infectious Disease Specialist

For further information: *Dr. Angela Weathersby, MSAAP Executive Director,*
director@aapms.org, 601.951.5546

The following pediatrician is available for interviews: *Dr. Tanya Fitts, Oxford,*
tfitts@lafayettepediatrics.net, 662.236.3939