

EDITORIAL: Bill to provide emergency allergy care for students deserves support

BY THE BEE EDITORIAL BOARD

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Children with food allergies, such as Natalie Giorgi, a Carmichael girl who died from a reaction to peanuts, could get life-saving treatment from trained school personnel under a Senate bill that is opposed by state teachers unions, who want more school nurses to be hired.

Anaphylaxis is a severe allergic reaction triggered by a variety of things, from getting stung by a bee to eating just one nut. It comes on quickly and can kill a person in a few minutes.

Kids are at special risk, as many have unrecognized allergies. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that as many as 6% of all children have a food allergy. Thanks to technology, however, we have medicines and medicine-delivery systems, such as epinephrine auto-injectors, that can counter anaphylaxis in just as immediate a fashion.

State law allows children with diagnosed allergies to keep their prescribed epinephrine auto-injectors, commonly known under the brand name EpiPen, at school in case of a reaction. It's a good law but leaves out all the children who have no idea whether they have severe allergies.

Senate Republican leader Bob Huff, R-Diamond Bar, has a bill that would fix the oversight and require schools to keep a stock of life-saving epinephrine auto-injectors and train some school personnel to use them in an emergency. But this potentially life-saving legislation is being fought by teachers' unions unhappy with the shifting of duties from school nurses to teachers.

In the Senate Education Committee hearing on Wednesday, Kendra Harris, a lobbyist for the California Federation of Teachers, said her organization's members "are concerned that they are being asked to do more and more medical care to students that goes far beyond their training and their general job responsibilities." Then she urged state leaders to increase the amount of nurses and health care professionals working full time in schools.

That lament is understandable; blocking a good-sense measure that might prevent children from dying for the sake of a pipe dream is not.

From the view of children and their families, there's virtually no downside to having a ready supply of epinephrine auto-injectors on hand at school with people trained how to use them. EpiPens and their ilk are easy-to-use, spring-loaded injectors that deliver a pre-measured dose of epinephrine. As a nurse and doctor explained during Wednesday's hearing, non-medical professionals can be easily trained to recognize a severe allergic reaction. Also, a misdiagnosis doesn't pose the same danger as with other medication, such as insulin for diabetics. Epinephrine, otherwise known as adrenaline, is naturally occurring in human bodies and causes the heart to beat very rapidly for a short time. Moreover, the bill would not require all teachers to administer epinephrine auto-injectors, only those who want to and volunteer for training.

Still, Huff's staff expects a battle for this legislation at the next two Senate hearings, then again in the Assembly. That's based in part on this week's hearing and letters of protest from the CFT, the California Teachers Association and the California School Employees Association, and in part to the experience of a similar bill three years ago allowing school personnel to give anti-seizure medication to children. It passed, but the unions also opposed it on the grounds that it would be better to have nurses administer it.

Yes, it would great to be able to afford school nurses again. But the reality is that the state barely has enough money to pay teachers and keep schools open as it is.

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