



**Interested Party Testimony  
House Bill 561  
Parental Clarity on Health Options and Information on  
Conscientious Exemption (C.H.O.I.C.E.) Act.  
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**Submitted by  
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and  
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Chairwoman Schmidt, Vice Chair Deeter, and Ranking Member Somani, my name is Kelly Morris. I am a registered nurse and health commissioner, and I am testifying on behalf of public health professionals across Ohio who are members of the Ohio Public Health Association (OPHA). Today, I am submitting interested party testimony on House Bill 561, the Parental Clarity on Health Options and Information on Conscientious Exemption (C.H.O.I.C.E.) Act.

At a time when vaccine misinformation and mixed messaging are creating real challenges for families and health professionals alike, recent Ohio data offers an important and encouraging perspective. A statewide poll conducted in October 2025 by the Ohio Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics and Bowling Green State University found that most Ohioans continue to support routine childhood vaccinations. Specifically, 87% of respondents said it is important for parents to vaccinate their children, and 75% support requirements for vaccines against preventable diseases.

Equally important, trust in medical professionals remains strong. Nearly nine in ten respondents reported confidence in their pediatrician or family physician as a trusted source of vaccine guidance. While anti-vaccine rhetoric has grown louder in recent years, it does not reflect the views of most Ohio families.

At the same time, vaccination rates are slipping below levels needed to prevent outbreaks. Ohio's kindergarten measles, mumps, and rubella (MMR) vaccination rate is approximately 88%, well below the 95% threshold required for community protection. This gap increases the risk of outbreaks of highly contagious diseases like measles, which can have serious and sometimes life-threatening consequences for children and vulnerable populations. Recent outbreaks linked to low vaccination rates have occurred in states including Texas and New Mexico, where a large 2025 outbreak led to hundreds of cases and multiple deaths, as well as in South Carolina, which is currently experiencing

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one of the largest measles outbreaks in decades. Additional outbreaks have been reported across states such as Arizona, Utah, Kansas, Oklahoma, Indiana, and even Ohio, often concentrated in communities with lower vaccination coverage.

We strongly support informed decision-making by parents and the important role of healthcare providers in guiding those decisions. However, House Bill 561 includes provisions that we believe would undermine long-standing public health safeguards and increase the risk of disease transmission in schools and communities. We would like to work with the committee and the bill sponsors to address the following areas of concern:

- **Elimination of a critical outbreak protection tool:** The bill would repeal current Ohio law allowing schools to exclude unvaccinated students with exemptions during an epidemic. This safeguard has long been essential to limiting the spread of contagious diseases and protecting medically vulnerable children.
- **Weakened exclusion standards during outbreaks:** The bill would restrict exclusion to only those children who are symptomatic or diagnosed. This approach does not reflect how diseases like measles and chickenpox spread. Individuals can transmit these infections before symptoms—particularly rash—appear, making early exclusion of unvaccinated individuals a key prevention strategy.

While proponents suggest that children who are sick should simply stay home, real-world experience – that school nurses see on a regular basis - tells us that children frequently attend school with mild or early symptoms. In these situations, public health measures must account for the realities of disease transmission and prioritize the protection of all students.

This proposal comes at a time when the Ohio Department of Health continues to urge residents to stay up to date on vaccinations. Effective vaccine policy must balance parental choice with the responsibility to prevent outbreaks of vaccine-preventable diseases.

For these reasons, we respectfully urge you to address the concerns raised in this testimony. Ohio's children, families, and communities depend on maintaining strong, evidence-based public health protection.

We welcome the opportunity to work with you to amend House Bill 561 and support policies that promote informed decision-making while preserving the tools necessary to prevent outbreaks and protect public health.

Thank you for your consideration and your service to the people of Ohio.