

Chairwoman Schmidt, Vice Chair Deeter, Ranking Member Somani, and members of the Health Committee,

Thank you for considering my testimony. My name is Leah Wuescher. I am a mother of two wonderful little girls and a research scientist with expertise in host-pathogen interactions. I am **strongly opposed** to HB561.

House Bill 561 broadens non-medical vaccine exemptions and requires schools and childcare programs to honor them, while sharply limiting their ability to ask for supporting documentation or use standard forms. It also requires that every communication about immunizations prominently advertises exemption options, a change that is likely to increase the number of under- and unvaccinated children in group settings over time.

Even if someone is skeptical of vaccines or government mandates, it is important to recognize that higher exemption and under-vaccination rates are consistently associated with more frequent and larger outbreaks of diseases like measles, pertussis, and chickenpox. These outbreaks affect everyone, with the largest burden on infants, children with cancer or immune problems, and others who cannot be vaccinated at all, regardless of their parents' beliefs as we are seeing across the country.

HB 561 would go further by prohibiting schools from temporarily excluding “healthy, uninfected” unvaccinated students with exemptions during outbreaks solely because of their vaccination status, even when public health officials recommend short-term exclusion to break chains of transmission. For highly contagious diseases like measles and chickenpox, people can spread infection before it is obvious they are sick, which is why standard guidance calls for exposed, unimmunized students to stay home for a limited period (often up to 21 days after the last case).

This means the bill gives strong protection to the choice of voluntarily unvaccinated families to keep their children in school during an outbreak, while offering no similar safeguard for families whose children are medically unable to be vaccinated. Those families would be left with an unfair dilemma: either keep sending their medically fragile child into a higher-risk environment or pull them out of school altogether and bear the academic and financial costs themselves.

We can support parental rights and still agree that basic guardrails are needed when individual choices create real risks for other people's children. Weakening school vaccination protections and removing the option of temporary exclusion during outbreaks is less about freedom and more about shifting the burdens of preventable disease—missed work, missed school, medical bills, and sometimes hospitalization—onto the most vulnerable families in our communities.

For these reasons, I respectfully urge you to **VOTE NO** on House Bill 561 and to protect Ohio's ability to prevent and control vaccine-preventable disease outbreaks in schools and childcare settings. Our children—especially those who are medically fragile—deserve learning environments where science-based public health measures are supported, not undermined.

Sincerely,

Leah Wuescher, PhD