

Greetings Chairman Lipps, Vice Chair Holmes, Ranking Member Russo, and members of the House Health Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today in opposition to House Bill 248. My name is Haley Klimaszewski, I am a medical student here in Ohio and I am strongly opposed to House Bill 248.

There are many reasons to reject this bill, but today I would like to talk about three of the strongest factors that determine my decision to oppose this bill. I oppose this bill because it 1) would put myself, my family, and my community in danger, 2) this bill goes against scientific evidence that shows that vaccines are safe and essential for public health and safety, and 3) this bill is an insult to all the people who have suffered and sacrificed during the COVID pandemic.

At a young age, I remember pointing to a small scar on my mother's arm and asking what it was from. She had to look to see what I was pointing at, she had almost forgotten it was there, but then quickly answered that it was from her polio vaccine. I was confused and a little scared, so I continued to question her. I thought vaccines were good, why did this one scar her arm? My mother explained to me that the scar was just part of the way that the vaccine worked and that it was sign that she was protected from catching or spreading a very dangerous illness. She went on to explain that since so many people got the vaccine since she was a child, polio was gone in the United States, so I didn't have to worry about it. Even though I was no more than eight years old, this was not a hard concept for me to understand; sometimes we must do things that we do not necessarily want to do for the people we love. Whether it be a small scar on our arm or the side effects many felt from the COVID vaccine, these consequences are far better than what could happen if someone you love got sick with polio, COVID, or any of the other diseases we vaccinate against. To keep our family, friends, and community safe from horrible, preventable disease, we need people to share this mentality. If we want to eradicate disease like we did with polio, we need to see the value in vaccination and encourage it. This bill does not share this mentality. It does not promote the importance of vaccination. It does the opposite; by requiring schools to make it know that vaccines are optional, it sews doubt in vaccinations and leads people to question why these options to opt-out have been put in place. This bill makes it easier for people to refuse vaccination, which will endanger our communities with diseases that were previously eradicated.

The importance of vaccination became even more clear to me last year. I was working at the National Institutes of Health when the pandemic hit. Normally I would have been studying cancer, but as we sat quarantined at home, COVID and the research for a vaccine was all we could discuss. Through this experience, it became abundantly clear to me that the research shows vaccines are safe and essential for public health. Yes, there are some adverse effects, but the benefits far outweigh the risk of adverse events which are incredibly rare. However, we only see the full benefit of vaccines when a large proportion of the public receives them. This protects people who are unable to receive the vaccine for valid health reasons from contracting and spreading dangerous illnesses. Therefore, we need legislation that encourages vaccines because the science and the evidence show that vaccines are safe, effective, and save millions of lives. This bill would instead protect people who refuse vaccines based on false, conspiratorial information, and allow those people to spread dangerous illness that will cause the death of many innocent people.

I finished my first year of medical school a little over a month ago and my education this year was significantly limited by the COVID pandemic. I learned very few of the clinical skills I should have learned, such as drawing blood, or even administering a shot. I did not get to shadow doctors like I wanted to or spend time in the hospital. However, I know that the sacrifices I made were small in comparison to what the patients at Ohio State were facing. Grandparents unable to see their new grandchildren, loved ones unable to say their last goodbyes or even host a funeral. The sacrifices I made were small compared to the doctors and nurses who worked long hours and had to quarantine and isolate away from the families for weeks. We all anxiously awaited and prayed for a vaccine, for an end to this suffering. Now we have that vaccine and the vision of a return to normal life is once again on the horizon. This bill is not only blocking that vision but spitting in the face and on the graves of everyone who has suffered and died from this pandemic. I fully respect the right of individuals to make their own health care decisions, however, when their choices put other people in danger, it is up to the law to act. Take for instance, HIV. If you contract HIV and decide not to seek treatment, that is your choice. But if you engage in situations that could spread your HIV, you could be criminally liable. This COVID vaccine, and all the other vaccines that will keep my future patients safe, should be mandatory, especially in public institutions like schools and hospitals. Therefore, I oppose this bill.

Thank you for the opportunity to share my thoughts on this legislation.