



Senate Judiciary Committee

March 7, 2022

Sarah Irsik-Good, Board Member

Immunize Kansas Coalition

Chair Warren, and Members of the Committee, on behalf of the Immunize Kansas Coalition I provide my testimony **in opposition of Senate Bill 541.**

At face value, this bill appears to be focused on all things Pandemic Response and COVID-19. After all, the opening language on page 1, lines 8-11 states:

“...prohibiting school officials from issuing or requiring use of a COVID-19 vaccination passport or discriminating against a student based upon COVID-19 vaccination status; requiring schools to recognize exemptions from vaccination requirements....”

This statement seems focused on COVID. However, as this bill is currently written, it could have far-reaching implications, well beyond COVID-19. It is important that you, as legislators, understand any unintended consequences that may result from the passage of this bill as it is currently written. Specifically, new section 4 (e) on page 5, lines 23-25 redefines “religious beliefs” as “theistic and non-theistic moral and ethical beliefs as to what is right and wrong that are sincerely held with the strength of traditional religious views”. Under this proposed re-definition, philosophical exemptions or objections would qualify as “religious beliefs”, even though they’re not by any other definition of the term. **This re-definition would allow \philosophical exemptions (or redefined “religious exemptions) to the current required wellness vaccines for childcare and school entry.** The bill’s subsequent reference to KSA 72-6261 (Health tests and inoculations; definitions) on line 26 confirms that is the intent of this section of the bill. Further, in Section 15 on page 20 and 21, the amendments to KSA 72-6262 further modify the current statutory language requiring documentation of religious exemptions for required wellness vaccines. This bill amends the current statute to only require an attestation of the statement “sincerely held religious belief”, using the term interchangeably with the term “philosophical belief”. This section then repeats the re-definition of the term as an amendment to KSA 72-6262 (page 21, lines 24-34), clarifying its intent to provide additional and expanded exemptions to the current statutory requirements for wellness vaccines and childcare/school entry.

Current Kansas law requires children attending childcare facilities or K-12 schools receive certain wellness vaccines, and only recognizes medical or religious exemptions (under the current and commonly accepted definition of religious exemptions). The current statutory language does not require any validation of sincerity of the belief but does ask that the parent/guardian designate the specific “denomination whose religious teachings are opposed to such tests or inoculations”. This statute has been in place for over 50 years with minimal revisions or issues.

Vaccinations continue to be among the greatest achievements of public health. Since the 1940’s, as new vaccines are introduced, the incidence of infectious diseases that once affected thousands of Americans have plummeted.

Polio and rubella are gone in the US; diphtheria is rare¹. However, “Historical amnesia” of the consequences of vaccine-preventable diseases have fueled vaccine hesitancy over the years. As a result, measles is now resurgent in the US and we at risk of losing measles elimination status². It is important that we don’t forget what the US looked like pre-polio vaccination.

Considering the preponderance of evidence to support childhood vaccines, Kansas voters overwhelmingly support the current practice. A recent Statewide Survey of voters found that 91% of all voters³, across party lines, support the existing wellness vaccine requirements for children attending childcare facilities or K-12 schools in Kansas. Further, a majority of voters in every political group disagree that we should add another wellness vaccine exemption based on philosophical objections³. Actually, a majority (61%-65%) of Kansas voters would like to see a tighter application of religious exemptions and 67% oppose expanding the number and type of wellness vaccines exemptions³. There is no reason to believe that the COVID vaccination would be required for school entry; the list of required vaccines has only been modified three times in the last forty years, and vaccines are only added after they’ve been successfully administered for decades. As such, there is no reason for these specific provisions to be in this bill unless they are really intended not to prevent mandatory COVID Vaccine Policies, but rather to undo the decades of successes we’ve achieved through school and childcare wellness vaccines requirements.

As such, I would encourage you to strike these specific provisions from this bill as you work it in this committee. Thank you for the opportunity to present our concern. In summary, we **oppose SB 541**, as it is currently written. It is vitally important to maintain the status quo as it relates to required wellness vaccines for childcare and K-12 schools, and it’s what Kansas voters want.

Sarah Irsik-Good, Board Member

Immunize Kansas Coalition

¹ Richard Conniff, “The world before vaccines is a world we can’t afford to forget,” *National Geographic* (2019). Retrieved from <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/culture/article/cannot-forget-world-before-vaccines>

² Kristen Feemster & Clairer Szipszky, “Resurgence of measles in the United States: How did we get here?”, *Curr Opin Pediatr*, 2020 Feb;32(1):139-144. doi:10.1097/MOP.0000000000000845; Retrieved from <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/31790030/>

³ Kansas Statewide Survey: How do Kansans feel about vaccines? <https://nurturekc.org/solutions/immunization/#survey>