

Iowa bill to end school vaccination mandates advances

Opponents call measure a threat to public health

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Iowa students would no longer face any vaccination requirements before they could attend school, under a bill advancing in the Iowa House.

Currently, Iowa students are required to be vaccinated for diphtheria, pertussis (whooping cough), tetanus, polio, measles, rubella and varicella (chickenpox), or to claim an exemption for religious or medical reasons.

House File 2171 strikes those requirements from Iowa law.

Rep. Zach Dieken, R-Granville, who authored the bill, said he doesn't believe education should be connected to vaccines.

"I just don't think students and parents should be required to vaccinate their kids to be educated," he said. "I don't think those things are linked together. So if you want to vaccinate your kids, go for it. If not, go for it."

But opponents called the move a threat to public health.

"I am strongly opposed to this bill," said Rep. Heather Matson, D-Ankeny. "It is one of the most dangerous pieces of legislation I've seen come through this building in a number of years."

A three-member House subcommittee voted 2-1 on Feb. 4 to advance the bill. Later that day, the House Education Committee passed the bill on a 14-9 vote, making it eligible for a vote by the full House. Two Republicans, Reps. Chad Ingels, R-Randalia, and Tom Moore, R-Griswold, joined

Democrats in voting no.

The bill would move Iowa in the same direction as the federal government, which in January revised its childhood immunization schedule to recommend four fewer vaccines.

U.S. Health and Human Services Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. is a longtime vaccine skeptic.

Iowa's vaccination rates have been falling for several years

During the 2025-26 school year, state data show 92.7% of school children were fully vaccinated.

That number is down from 92.9% in the 2024-25 school year and 93.6% in the 2023-24 school year. The state's school vaccination rates have steadily dropped since the 2020-21 school year, when 95.6% of students were fully vaccinated.

A vaccination level around 95% generally is needed to achieve herd immunity in schools for highly contagious diseases such as measles, according to Yale Medicine.

In 2025-26, 4.3% of students claimed a religious exemption, rising from 3.6% in the previous school year. Another 0.2% claimed a medical exemption in 2025-26, while 1.9% had provisional certificates and 0.9% did not provide valid paperwork.

Medical and public health professionals say the bill 'scares them'

Medical and public health professionals attended the 15-minute subcommittee meeting to speak in opposition to the bill, while vaccine opponents and medical freedom supporters spoke in favor.

Chaney Yeast, a lobbyist for Blank Children's Hospital, said the hospital was founded as a response to the polio epidemic and pediatricians are worried.

"This is the bill that scares them the most about children's health," she said. "And I don't think I'm being dramatic about that."

Jane Colacecchi, a former director of the Iowa Department of Public Health under Democratic Gov. Tom Vilsack, told lawmakers that "the science is very clear and settled on this."

"Child immunization practices are one of the most thoroughly studied medical interventions in history," she said. "They've been used for decades with hundreds of millions of doses administered worldwide. The vaccine evidence shows that they are safe, they are highly effective, there are absolutely no credible evidence linking their use to autism or other development disorders."

Seth Brown, a lobbyist for the Iowa Medical Society and the Iowa chapter of the American Chapter of Pediatrics, said both organizations oppose the bill and are concerned it could hurt “Iowa’s already strained health care workforce.”

“These immunizations take very little time on the front end and very little effort,” he said. “And then the diseases they prevent on the back end can hospitalize patients for significant periods of time.”

Threase Harms, representing the Brain Injury Association of Iowa and Easterseals Iowa, said children with chronic conditions and rare genetic disorders rely on herd immunity to keep them safe.

“Repealing immunization requirements puts vulnerable kids with compromised immune systems at risk of serious illness and death,” she said.

Lina Tucker Reinders, executive director of the Iowa Public Health Association, said vaccine requirements encourage parents to speak with medical providers about their children’s health.

“They do not infringe on the right of any child to receive any quality education,” she said. “Medical and no contest religious exemptions already exist and are accessible to parents.”

Supporters of the bill criticized vaccine requirements, question science

Republicans who sat on the subcommittee criticized vaccine requirements and expressed skepticism of some of the testimony of the medical professionals.

Rep. Helena Hayes, R-New Sharon, said, “I wouldn’t exactly say the science is settled,” pointing to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s reduced childhood vaccination schedule.

“I don’t know that I agree with it being so fear-based and fearmongering that terrible, terrible things are going to happen if we don’t demand that people get their children vaccinated,” she said. “They have that choice.”

Rep. Brooke Boden, R-Indianola, said she would move the bill forward because she believes it deserves broader discussion.

“I think there’s some middle ground, I think there’s some conversation to be had,” she said. “And I’d just like to move the bill forward so we can talk about it.”

Oliver Bardwell, a lobbyist for Iowans for Freedom and a member of the Dallas County Board of Health, told lawmakers the bill “restores parental authority.”

“This bill does not ban vaccines,” he said. “It does not interfere with medical care. It simply says that families, not government agencies, should make health care decisions for their children without being threatened with school exclusion.”

House Speaker Pat Grassley, R-New Hartford, told reporters that House Republicans will discuss the bill but they haven’t made a firm decision on what the final legislation would look like if it moves forward.

“I think as we’re looking at this we just need to be mindful that we’re not getting too far ahead of what the federal government does,” he said. “At the same time recognizing there’s a lot of conversations going on with vaccines and vaccine schedules. So I think that’s something we need to continue to talk about.”

Republicans are also considering other vaccine-related bills this year, including two that passed out of the House Health and Human Services Committee on Feb. 3.

Senate File 304 says minors must have parental consent to receive a vaccine for a sexually transmitted disease, including human papillomavirus, or HPV, and hepatitis B. The bill previously passed the Iowa Senate last year.

House Study Bill 605 requires schools and child care centers to display information about vaccine exemptions on their websites, adding to a law passed last year.

What vaccine exemptions does Iowa currently allow under law?

Iowa law already contains exemptions for school vaccine requirements for religious beliefs and medical reasons.

Current law says families can opt their child out of vaccinations if the child’s parent or guardian signs an affidavit stating that vaccination “conflicts with a genuine and sincere religious belief.” Families do not have to cite a specific religious tenet to claim the exemption.

Students can also be exempted if they receive a form signed by a physician saying the vaccine would be harmful to the child.