

Testimony
House Bill No. 1457
House Human Services Committee
Representative Matthew Ruby, Chairman
February 4, 2025

Chairman Ruby and committee members, my testimony specifically addresses the issue of North Dakota public school staff manipulating information about vaccination exemptions.

My name is Alexa Johnson and I am a West Fargo mother of 6. My oldest two boys have autism.

I have had multiple questionable experiences with school staff regarding honesty about vaccination exemption filing. The first was at the Williston Public School District office roughly 7 years ago. I was a young mom who had just decided to quit following the CDC recommended vaccination schedule. My son was entering kindergarten and I was not knowledgeable about exemptions, though I knew they existed. When I asked the district office about the exemption paperwork I was told exactly this.

"You need to go down to the Upper Missouri District Health Unit office so they can talk to you about vaccines."

This was a completely inappropriate request. The very idea that a school district staff would require a parent to drive to an off-school location to be counseled by a vaccination-administering facility is the definition of overreach.

My boys attended Wilkinson Elementary School in Williston. I remember one day I happened to be on the phone with my boys' head teacher and she mentioned that students were receiving vaccinations at school that day. I told her that mine would not be getting the shots and that I had signed no such authorization.

"Well then you better get down here with a handwritten note stating that, or they might get the shots accidentally," she said.

We moved to the West Fargo Public School District in 2017. I have filed my childrens' exemptions correctly and on time. But twice I have received phonecalls from nurses employed by the district asking when I plan to schedule my childrens' vaccinations. The nurses never mention my legal right of exemption. Three years ago, the school nurse at Willow Park Elementary loudly lectured me about my daughter's vaccination status in front of other parents and staff members.

An old family physician also attempted to pressure me to vaccinate by being dishonest about school requirements. "If you don't give the kids shots what are you going to do about school?" he asked. "I'll just fill out an exemption form," I answered. His face fell and he looked at his feet. I had caught him trying to manipulate my medical decisions.

Most parents do not know exemptions exist and in my personal experience, the schools like to keep it that way. Please do look at the 2023 West Fargo High School health curriculum excerpts which contains highly editorialized comments about vaccines and autism. I had asked to view this health curriculum prior to my son's starting the class. The teacher told me that the curriculum was not yet ready. So imagine my surprise when I found the one-sided vaccine-championing content in my son's backpack.

I choose to file exemptions as a result of the life-changing vaccination injuries that befell my precious two oldest sons.

We vaccinated our first son, Ray, at 4 months. Hours later he let out only what I can describe as "crack baby" screams. High-pitched, blood curdling sirens.

I frantically called our doctor's office and she refused to see him. She told me he was having a normal reaction. I believed her. But by the time Ray was 18 months old he was still not speaking.

Stupidly, we continued going to the same doctor when our second son, Ronnie, was born. His face was riddled with

eczema and his dirty diapers were rancid. They smelled abnormally acidic. At this point I had started reading about alternative vaccination schedules...schedules that recommended only 1 immunization at a time.

"I'd like to space out Ronnie's shots," I announced to our doctor. "I'm worried about his immune system. And, uh, autism," I shyly said.

"There are NO studies that link vaccines to autism," she laughed. "Don't worry about that. Keep Ronnie on schedule."

And again, I did as I was told.

Ronnie's skin and diapers never improved. But he was an incredibly easy baby. He never fussed. When Ronnie was 18 months old he received his regularly scheduled vaccines. In the days that followed my easy baby turned into a nightmare. My easy sleeper now required hours of bouncing in a dark room to fall asleep. He had started speaking months earlier, but after those shots his vocabulary quit growing.

My boys were nearly impossible to potty train and refused to eat anything but a handful of favorite foods. Ronnie's favorite activity became grabbing anything out of the fridge--especially 18-packs of eggs--and smearing them into the carpet. He spit everywhere, often running to the sink or even the toilet if I dared leave the bathroom door open. Eventually he started banging his head against the wall when he was angry. When we left our rental in Williston we spent \$5,000 to repair the walls, replace the carpet and even the kitchen counter (stained by all his spitting).

Ray will graduate from West Fargo High next year, but probably will never have the awareness to drive, live on his own or support himself.

Ronnie, now 15, never learned to talk. He is still not fully toilet trained and now has epilepsy as well as severe autism. I would be standing in that room with you right now but we just got Ronnie home from the hospital. He spent 5 days there as a result of complications from a new psychiatric medication. He is increasingly violent with me and sometimes bangs his head and wrists to communicate. We have installed shatterproof windows and created a padded room for him in our home. We are currently getting quotes for a garage remodel to expand living space for him because he is wrecking our flooring by jumping on it vigorously with his heels. He sometimes stays awake for 30 hours at a time, despite many medications and treatments. It will cost tens of thousands of dollars to complete the project and we will lose our garage. Ronnie only goes to school for 4 hours each day. Getting consistent respite care for him has proved impossible. Thus far, I have been unable to work to contribute any money to our household. A respite staff shortage has been a long-term statewide problem for the disability community. Even when offered \$30/hr and a flexible schedule, most of our past hires have petered out. I could not even secure care for my mother's funeral. So I had to watch the livestream on my phone in the church parking lot while I cared for Ronnie.

My husband and I are terrified for our sons' futures. The thing we fear the most for our boys is sexual abuse at the hands of a caregiver. A 2011 Arc document states that children with intellectual disabilities are 4 times more likely to be sexually abused than neurotypical children. And that 49 percent of people with intellectual disabilities will experience sexual abuse 10 times within a lifetime. We have already fired one agency caregiver who we suspected was involved with a sex trafficker. My husband and I firmly believe we would not be in this current position if not for the vaccines. And these are the same shots currently required in North Dakota schools.

Were my boys genetically predisposed to autism? Absolutely. Did the shots push them over the edge into autism? Absolutely. No study or doctor can tell me otherwise. I saw what vaccines did to my boys with my own eyes. We have had 4 more children and not vaccinated them. None of them have autism. For us, the proof is in the pudding.

My parenting experiences in the North Dakota public school system and doctors' offices bring me to support a do pass recommendation on this bill.

Please feel free to contact me with any questions.

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