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FOR YOUR INFORMATION

Idaho Press-Tribune

Nampa, Idaho

Saturday, January 27, 2018

Kyle Pfannenstiel

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Vaccine exemption bill to get public hearing

BOISE — The Idaho Senate Health and Welfare Committee voted 5-4 to introduce a bill that would allow parents to exempt children in daycare or school from state immunization requirements with a signed letter, rather than by filling out a state form.

If passed, the bill would add that the exemption does not have to come from “the state board of health and welfare, a daycare or another entity,” and would allow parents to opt out without filling out a form from the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare, which is provided to schools.

Sen. Dan Foreman, R-Moscow, proposed the bill Wednesday in hopes of adding clarity to existing Idaho law that allows for vaccine exemptions. He pointed out how the form allows for an exemption without explanation.

“This bill does not change the meaning or intent of existing Idaho code. It simply clarifies what existing law already expresses,” Foreman said.

According to the Department of Health and Welfare, Idaho has some of the highest exemption rates in the nation, the Associated Press reports.

Co-chair Lee Heider, R-Twin Falls, explained that some schools have said they don’t allow for the exemptions, and said the committee can’t control for such instances. He dissented against the bill.

“What we can control is what the department does to keep children who haven’t been immunized from either exposing others and exposing themselves,” Heider said. “And the form we have currently does just that.”

Foreman and other senators worried forcing parents to sign forms might be a difficult experience, with Foreman saying, “If I don’t want to fill out the bloody form, I won’t fill out the bloody form.”

Sen. Antony Potts, R-Idaho Falls, said, “There’s those who don’t want to fill out a form. ... But unfortunately, because of the way the statute is written, schools have taken upon themselves to think they can require certain things and demand certain things and make a process more difficult. And even more harassing for parents, and I don’t use that word lightly.”

Other senators who dissented were Republicans Fred Martin of Boise, Mark Harris of Soda Springs and Democrat Maryanne Jordan of Boise.

“We would lose, in some schools — without the standardized form — the ability to understand that the parents know that in the case of an outbreak that their child needs to be excluded,” Jordan, the minority caucus chairwoman from Boise, told the committee.

The exemption form issue came up in the West Ada School District in Meridian last fall, according to the Meridian Press.

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The district didn't let a student to enroll in Ustick Elementary because his mother, Sara Brady, had not signed an official state form exempting her son from required vaccinations. Instead, she gave her own written statement requesting exemption for "religious and other objections."

A week after the start of school, the district superintendent sent Brady an email saying her son would be able to enroll. According to the email, the district concluded that Brady's personal statement was sufficient to exempt her son from immunizations, as outlined in Idaho Code 39-4802.

"It's regrettable that the situation progressed to the level it has," Brady told the Meridian Press in an email in September. "I know I am not the only parent with a child who has experienced this type of discrimination and I expect them to take measures to prevent this situation and others like this from occurring in the future."

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