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Patrick Ishmael is a policy analyst at the Show-Me Institute, which promotes market solutions for Missouri public policy.

TESTIMONY

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A CLEAR VISION OF THE EYE EXAM MANDATE

By Patrick Ishmael

Testimony Before the Missouri Senate Education Committee

To the Honorable Members of the Committee:

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Patrick Ishmael and I am a policy analyst for the Show-Me Institute, a nonprofit, nonpartisan Missouri-based think tank that supports free-market solutions for state policy. The ideas presented here are my own.

Before this body is a proposal that would renew a state mandate requiring optometrist or physician eye exams for incoming kindergartners in Missouri's public schools (Senate Bill 641). The mandate places both a legal

and financial burden on Missouri families that only two other states in the country place on their citizens. There are several troubling aspects of the proposal.

As a preliminary matter, is the state sending contradictory messages about health care mandates? In 2010, Missourians said "no" to a mandate for health insurance that the federal government had passed into law. It is unlikely the message that Missourians meant to indicate was that they preferred state bureaucracies intervening in their health care decisions instead of federal bureaucracies. In fact, it is fair to say the referendum showed

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that Missourians do not want government at any level playing a pervasive and coercive role in their health care decisions. The philosophical underpinnings of the law contemplated here should give everyone pause. If Missouri fights the federal imposition of health care mandates on its citizens, the state probably should not simultaneously be imposing costly health care mandates of its own, particularly when there is no significant health or safety concern at issue.

In addition to that philosophical contradiction, there are three practical considerations that cast doubt on the wisdom of the vision screening mandate as proposed.

First, private insurance plans do not typically cover optometrist exams. The St. Louis Post-Dispatch estimated the cost of an optometrist exam per kindergartner to be roughly \$100. That is \$100 that Missouri families would not be able to spend on other necessities, and it is questionable to assume that the state knows better than families how to manage their health care dollars.

Second, school nurses have administered vision exams to children for decades, and the essential purpose of the mandated exams – to detect vision problems before they turn into learning problems – could continue to be achieved through that school nurse system. Moreover, the state's Children's Vision Commission (CVC) estimates that the cost of an augmented school nurse vision program that would achieve most of the mandate's objectives for student vision would be roughly \$100 per school – essentially, the cost of one eye exam. The mandate is not only unnecessarily coercive; it is unnecessarily costly.

Third, even assuming the law did not have philosophical or financial deficiencies, the mandate has been ineffective at promoting its ostensible objective of improving children's eye health. The CVC found that only about one-third of Missouri's 65,000 kindergartners were actually getting the mandated vision exams that the law imposed, with the families of the remaining two-thirds of students either opting out or ignoring the law

entirely. Oscar Cruz, the Saint Louis University ophthalmologist who chairs the Commission, is right to worry that as school budgets tighten, vision screenings that already take place in schools – which superficially would be rendered unnecessary because of the mandate – might be cut, leaving kindergartners worse off than they were before the mandate was imposed.

Vision issues can lead to learning issues, but the solution proposed here, in the end, benefits health care practitioners far more than it benefits the children. If the state really wants to ensure that children do not fall through the cracks of its educational system, it should redouble its focus on fixing schools, promoting school choice, and reforming state programs that have created gargantuan state liabilities – like a tax credit system run amuck

– that drain funding from our school system. Educational reform is better than promoting, under the auspices of “education,” a proposal that, lacking a strong foundation in policy, has all the appearances of one of the worst kinds of political cronyism.

This mandate overlays a patina of educational improvement onto a program which incurs costs to families that, as the state’s CVC has found, need not be imposed through a system of health care mandates – a system that Missourians have, in fact, vehemently opposed in the past.

There are more efficient and effective ways of ensuring children’s vision needs rather than imposing a blanket mandate. I hope those alternatives are considered.

Thank you.

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