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STATEMENT ON SCHOOL IMMUNIZATION RULING

The following should be attributed to Nancy Looe, Executive Director, The Parents' Campaign.

JACKSON – A recent ruling by a federal judge, in a lawsuit financed by an out-of-state-group, threatens the health and safety of Mississippi's public school children.

The Mississippi law that protects our children from crippling and dangerous diseases, such as polio and measles, has been weakened significantly by U.S. District Judge Sul Ozerden. This federal ruling will force public schools to submit to the preferences of a small group of parents who choose not to immunize their children against deadly diseases and want to send those unvaccinated children into our classrooms. These parents allege that Mississippi's longstanding, nationally recognized vaccination requirement is a violation of their religious rights.

Judge Ozerden's ruling undercuts Mississippi's state law and thwarts a 1979 Mississippi Supreme Court ruling that "The protection of the great body of school children attending the public schools in Mississippi against the horrors of crippling and death" resulting from these diseases is the overriding obligation of the State. We agree with our state's highest court, which held that allowing a religious exemption would violate the Fourteenth Amendment rights of the majority of school children by exposing them to the "hazard of associating in school" with unvaccinated children.

Mississippi law does allow an exception for medical reasons when a licensed physician signs a certificate of exemption. These medically vulnerable children, who are unable to receive certain vaccinations due to specific health conditions, and teachers who are or expect to become pregnant, would be at the most severe risk from unvaccinated children entering public school classrooms at will.

Mississippi Attorney General Lynn Fitch, who is charged with defending Mississippi's laws, has declined to do so, siding with the federal judge and against the health and safety of our children.

The Parents' Campaign strongly condemns this ruling and AG Fitch's shirking of her duty. We agree with the Mississippi Supreme Court's 1979 ruling that the health and safety of the great majority of our state's children take precedence over the religious beliefs of a few. We urge the Mississippi Department of Health to intervene to protect the public health and welfare of Mississippi children.

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The Parents' Campaign is a statewide, grassroots network of public school supporters that informs its members of legislation affecting public schools, helps them identify and contact their own legislators, and reports to them how their legislators vote on education-related bills. See more at msparentscampaign.org.