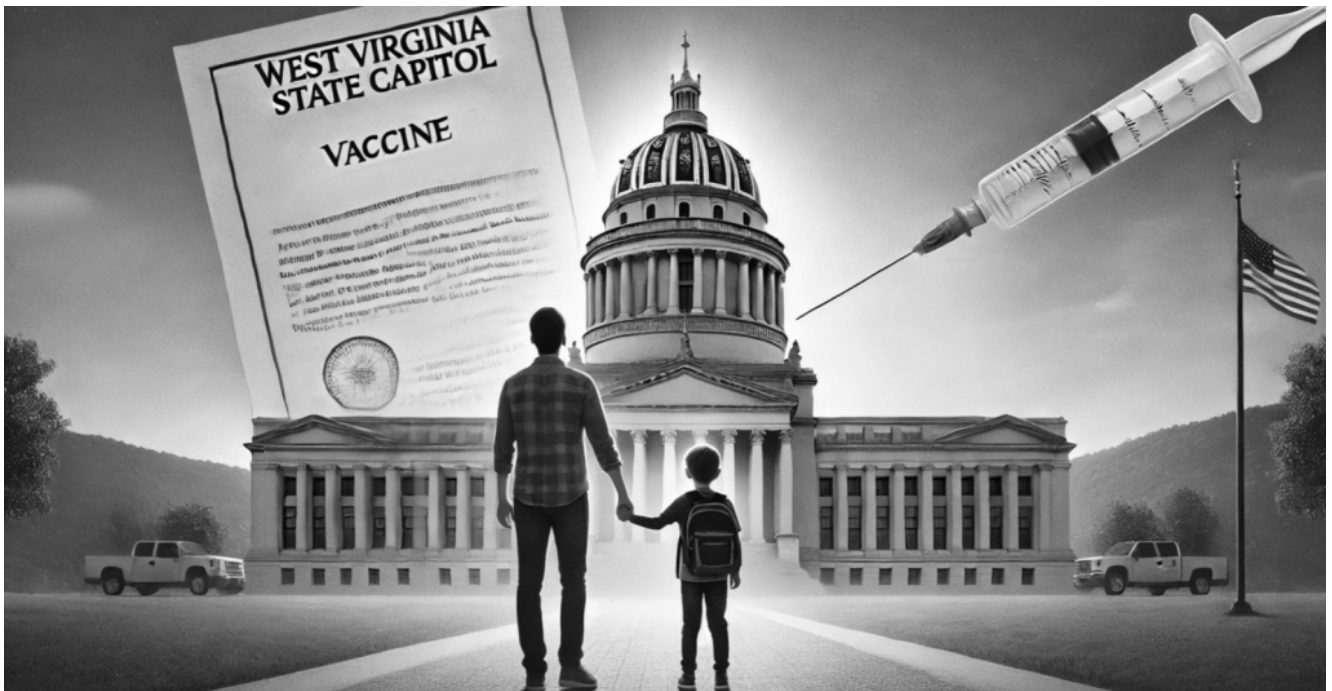


New Governor Signs Executive Order Allowing Vaccine Religious Exemptions in West Virginia



West Virginia has a new governor, and he wasted no time granting parents the freedom to claim a religious vaccine exemption to opt their children out of required school vaccinations.

Just 24 hours after his inauguration, Republican Governor Patrick Morrisey signed an [Executive Order](#) allowing parents to claim religious or moral exemptions for their students to attend state schools and state-regulated childcare centers—a monumental shift for a state historically known for having some of the strictest vaccine mandates in the country.

State law requires children to receive vaccines for chickenpox, hepatitis B, measles, meningitis, mumps, diphtheria, polio, rubella, tetanus, and whooping cough before starting school and only allows medical exemptions for

vaccination requirements.

Former West Virginia governor and current Republican U.S. Senator Jim Justice, just last year, vetoed a less extensive vaccination bill passed by the Republican supermajority in the Legislature, which sought to exempt private school and certain nontraditional public school students from vaccine requirements.

Justice, known nationally for his pro-vaccine stance during the COVID-19 pandemic, defended his veto by emphasizing the need to listen to licensed medical professionals who “overwhelmingly” opposed the bill.

Governor Morrisey, who previously served as West Virginia’s attorney general from 2013 until his inauguration on Monday, argued that religious exemptions to vaccinations should already be protected under the state’s 2023 Equal Protection for Religion Act, which mirrors the First Amendment by prohibiting the government from “substantially burdening” a person’s exercise of religious freedom unless it can demonstrate a “compelling interest.”

The Executive Order directly acknowledged ongoing legal battles over vaccine mandates and cited instances where the state’s compulsory immunization laws were used to bar religious families from enrolling their children in state schools.

One notable case involved a religious couple who faced state opposition when their young, unvaccinated child was barred from attending a remote, online school. Morrisey’s order recognized the absurdity of such restrictions, highlighting how the law was misapplied even in cases where public health risks were nonexistent.

The process for applying for a [vaccine exemption](#) is still being finalized, but the governor said it will likely require parents to provide a written statement of their religious

beliefs to the state Bureau of Public Health. He added that he will explain to lawmakers that the religious exemption is permitted under the state's vaccine statute.

According to CDC data, West Virginia previously had one of the highest vaccination rates in the country. However, West Virginia and Mississippi, which also formerly prohibited religious exemptions, have the nation's worst health outcomes and lowest life expectancy rates—which is no coincidence.

Governor Morrissey's executive order has been hailed by many as a long-overdue correction to the state's restrictive vaccination policies and reflects a growing movement across the country demanding that personal and religious freedoms be honored when it comes to medical decisions.

The move also aligns West Virginia with 45 other states that recognize religious exemptions for school vaccinations, leaving only a few states that still enforce mandatory vaccination without exceptions.