



Activists wait as the Supreme Court announces decisions, on Capitol Hill in Washington, Friday, June 21, 2024. The justices are also still weighing whether former President Donald Trump is immune from criminal prosecution in the election interference case against him, roughly two months after hearing arguments. (AP/J. Scott Applewhite)

by Associated Press

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The [Supreme Court](#) on Monday rejected a challenge to a 2021 Connecticut law that [eliminated the state's longstanding religious exemption](#) from childhood immunization requirements for schools, colleges and day care facilities.

The justices did not comment in leaving in place a federal appeals court ruling that upheld the contentious law. A [lower court judge had earlier dismissed](#) the lawsuit challenging the law, which [drew protests](#) at the state Capitol.

Connecticut law requires students to receive certain immunizations before enrolling in school, allowing some medical exemptions. Prior to 2021, students also could seek religious exemptions. Lawmakers ended the religious exemption over concerns that an uptick in exemption requests was coupled with a decline in vaccination rates in some schools.

The change allowed current students in K-12 who already had a religious exemption to keep it.

"This is the end of the road to a challenge to Connecticut's lifesaving and fully lawful vaccine requirements," Democratic Attorney General William Tong said in a statement. "We have said all along, and the courts have affirmed, the legislature acted responsibly and well within its authority to protect the health of Connecticut families and to stop the spread of preventable disease."

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Brian Festa, vice president and co-founder for the group We The Patriots USA Inc., a lead plaintiff in the case, called the decision "disappointing" but said it's "not the end of the road for us in our fight to win back religious exemptions for schoolchildren."

The group — which has challenged other vaccination laws, including for COVID-19 — had argued along with several parents that Connecticut violated religious freedom protections by removing the exemption. The new law shows a hostility to religious believers and jeopardizes their rights to medical freedom and child rearing, they said in court papers.

Tong's office said only one part of the case remains active. It involves a single plaintiff's claim based on the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). While the office said it was confident the claim will be dismissed, Festa said federal law is clear that schools are required to provide "a free and appropriate education" for children with disabilities who have individual education plans, even if a child claims a religious exemption to vaccinations.

We The Patriots USA also has an ongoing federal lawsuit filed on behalf of a Christian preschool and daycare that's challenging Connecticut's vaccine mandate on constitutional grounds.

"It is our practice at We The Patriots USA to battle on many fronts simultaneously, and to never put all of our eggs in one basket," Festa said, calling the Supreme Court's decision on Monday "one setback, but far from a total defeat."