What is the ethical question?

Under what circumstances, if any, should a state (or our state) grant exemptions to its school vaccination policy?

What are the relevant facts?

- The risk of contracting a disease varies.
- The magnitude of harm caused by the disease also varies, as does the risk of suffering those harms.
- Childhood diseases were once common in the United States, but they are largely unknown today because of widespread vaccination.
- The risk of harm from a vaccine is much lower than the risk of harm associated with getting a disease.
- Vaccines are very safe and effective, but there are some risks associated with them. Sometimes, if there is a high risk of great harm from the disease, individuals might be willing to incur a lesser but still high risk of significant harm from the vaccine. The smallpox vaccine is an example of a vaccine that has a high risk of great harm relative to other vaccines, but because the disease itself has an even higher risk of great harm, the vaccine may be worth getting.
- Vaccines are largely responsible for reducing the number of people who get childhood diseases such as measles.
- Sometimes outbreaks occur because vaccinated individuals haven’t developed an appropriate immune response (“vaccine failure”) or because people have not been vaccinated for a variety of reasons.
- All states allow at least one of the following types of exemption: medical, religious, or philosophical (personal belief).

Who are the stakeholders? (Who or what could be affected by the way the question gets resolved?)

- the school
- parents
- students
- teachers
- the medical community
- the larger civic community
- the school board
- the state public health department
What are the **ethical considerations**?

- **Respect for Persons**

  Under what circumstances and to what extent should we respect an individual's choice not to be vaccinated? How much of a role should the state play in deciding whether people should be vaccinated? How coercive or forceful should the state be in implementing a vaccination policy?

- **Fairness**

  If an individual chooses not to be vaccinated for a readily transmissible childhood disease, the individual benefits from the actions of others yet assumes few risks (individuals who are not vaccinated still run the risk of getting the disease, though the risk is much lower when community immunity is achieved). A whole community may be put at risk if community immunity is not achieved.

- **Other Considerations**

  What responsibilities do individuals have to their communities?