

Special Audio Report Transcript

Headline: Some California School Children at High Risk for Whooping Cough Despite Vaccination Law

Reported/produced by: Deirdre Kennedy
Publication: *California Healthline*
Date Posted: October 21, 2011

TEXT:

Local health officials say despite widespread compliance with the state's new vaccination law, some students are still at high risk for whooping cough. This is a special report for California Healthline, a daily news service from the California HealthCare Foundation. I'm Deirdre Kennedy.

Starting this semester, all California students entering grades seven through 12 must provide proof of current vaccination for pertussis. But the law allows students to submit either a medical waiver or a "belief exemption" signed by a parent or guardian. Students who fail to provide documents must be sent home.

School districts will submit their total compliance rate to the state Department of Public Health in December. But Linda Davis-Alldritt -- a school nurse consultant for the California Department of Education -- says most of the districts she's heard from say parents and kids are cooperating.

(Davis-Alldritt): "Those districts wanted me to know they were celebrating because they had 100 percent or 98% compliance. Other districts have not, and have had to exclude students. And then I read in the newspaper about other districts saying they're not going to do it."

The Oakland Unified School District and the Natomas School District in Sacramento were among those who let kids on campus without documents. Both set up on-site vaccination clinics and say they've been tracking down students who haven't provided their paperwork.

Despite the slow start, health and education officials say vaccination rates are higher than expected.

(Martin): "It's relatively unprecedented to have this many kids immunized in this relatively small amount of time."

Catherine Martin, director of the California Immunization Coalition, estimates that more than 90% of the state's seventh through 12th graders are inoculated. She attributes the success to a huge coordinated effort by state and local officials to educate parents and make sure the vaccines were available.

But it's the remaining 10% that still worries health officials.

(Davis-Alldritt): "Part of the effectiveness of immunization is that you get herd immunity. But the more people that you get opting out of immunizations then the higher risk it is that the herd immunity is not going to be effective in protecting people against these communicable diseases that are very vaccine preventable."

The highest numbers of personal belief exemptions are in the state's more affluent communities, including Marin County, which was ground zero for last year's whooping cough epidemic. Eventually, more than 9100 children became ill. Ten infants died.

Marin County Public Health Officer Jason Eberhart-Phillips says more than 7% of Marin's students had personal belief exemptions, and he expects more this year.

(Eberhart-Phillips): "It's particularly concerning because it's not evenly spread. There are areas of the county where the rates are much much higher than that, which amounts to an invitation to an epidemic if the virus or bacterial agent is introduced."

In the 20 states that allow belief exemptions, whooping cough infections are higher, says David Witt, chief of infectious diseases at Kaiser Permanente Medical Center in Marin. He found that parents shun vaccines for a wide variety of reasons.

(Witt): "Some people, it's a combination of all their Internet reading that there's terrible things that happen from vaccines or that there's mercury in them or various combinations. It tends to focus on side effects that have been pretty thoroughly disproven."

California doesn't require parents to provide proof of personal or religious beliefs when they sign an exemption. Catherine Martin says many parents opt out simply because it's inconvenient to get their child vaccinated.

(Martin): "We believe the Legislature needs to look at revisiting the language to make it more specific and require that parents obtain credible reliable information from their physician before they make that decision."

Kaiser Permanente's David Witt agrees.

(Witt): "I would also support absolutely mandating that when there is a disease that you've chosen not to vaccinate your child for in a school that they are not allowed to attend that school until that incubation is passed. That's within state law, it's rarely enforced, but it should be."

The co-authors of the pertussis vaccination mandate bill -- Republican Assembly members Nathan Fletcher of San Diego and Dan Logue of Chico -- say they're considering new legislation to address the public health risks of having unvaccinated students in schools.

This has been a special report for California Healthline, a daily news service from the California Healthcare Foundation.

If you have feedback or other issues you'd like to have addressed, please email us at CHL at CHCF.org.

I'm Deirdre Kennedy. Thanks for listening.