

Immunizations and the Role of North Carolina Schools

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Before the routine implementation of vaccination in the United States, thousands of children each year died or were seriously harmed by diseases that are now preventable with vaccines. North Carolina law requires children be vaccinated against 10 diseases before entering school for the first time.

North Carolina schools play a crucial role in the implementation of this law and therefore in the health of our communities. Enforcement of immunization law is in the hands of school principals and public health officials. If a public school student in North Carolina hasn't received all vaccines required for school entry, he or she faces exclusion from school. This rule, which may seem strict, ensures a vital outcome: fewer children suffer from and pass along vaccine-preventable diseases.

Communicating with Parents

Schools account for vaccination requirements by asking parents to submit a vaccination record for their children. Data for each student, classroom, and school is collected and submitted to the Immunization Branch of the North Carolina Division of Public Health, which then submits the information to the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

Schools across the state use a variety of methods to ensure parents know about vaccine requirements. Information is mailed to parents, sent home with students, and even communicated via recorded telephone messages. The North Carolina Immunization Branch develops a variety of materials to assist schools in communicating with parents.

An example of this partnership involves a recent change in state immunization law. As of January 1, 2008, state law requires a booster dose of Tdap vaccine for 6th graders and college students as well as two doses of mumps vaccine for kindergarteners. This rule was changed to address an increase in the incidence of pertussis and mumps. Forty-six cases of pertussis were reported to the state in 2002. That number jumped to over 300 cases in 2006 and 2007. Cases of mumps are also on the rise. Two cases were reported in 2002 while almost 30 cases were reported in North Carolina in 2007.

The new rule mandates that middle schools assess and, in some cases, follow up on the new requirement to assure that children are immunized this fall. Elementary schools, colleges, and universities are accustomed to tracking immunization

records for their students, but was the first time middle schools were asked to do so.

To help get the word out, the North Carolina Immunization Branch created a resource kit for schools. It included bilingual sample letters to parents, postcards, and a report card stuffer.

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Sample scripts were provided for schools to use on websites, in PTA newsletters, and in media releases. The resource kit was mailed to every principal, school health nurse, and superintendent in the state. Schools were able to order additional copies of all the resources.

In many cases schools worked with their local health departments to hold vaccination clinics for their students. Some clinics were held on school campuses to accommodate students who couldn't make it to a provider.

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School-Based Health Centers

Vaccination clinics are not new to schools in North Carolina. In fact, many students in our state are able to take advantage of permanent school-based health centers. School-based health centers operate in a variety of ways. They may be stand-alone facilities or function as an outreach effort from the local health department. School-based health centers can be operated by school nurses, nurse practitioners, or physician assistants. Many function as a resource to parents in medically underserved areas. Some offer a variety of health care services while others only provide vaccines. In all, there are 59 school-based health centers in 23 North Carolina counties.

A Success Story: Roll Up Your Sleeves Campaign

School-based clinics were used with great success in an effort to reduce the incidence of hepatitis B in our state. North Carolina immunization law requires all children born on or after July 1, 1994, to complete the hepatitis B vaccination series. In 1995, North Carolina launched a statewide 10-year initiative to offer hepatitis B vaccinations to all 6th-graders through school-based clinics. This initiative was designed to reach children who missed the vaccination series prior to enactment of state law.

School-site immunization clinics provided a unique opportunity to vaccinate adolescents before the age of greatest risk of exposure to the hepatitis B virus. This initiative offered the best hope for completing the recommended vaccinations over a six-month period, and it was flexible and convenient for parents.

After the initiative began, the number of reported new cases of hepatitis B in North Carolina declined by 77%. The greatest reduction in cases was among the population between 0 and 19 years of age, who experienced a 91% decline. The number of cases in people 20 years of age and older saw a decline of 75%.

This initiative concluded after the 2005-2006 school year because all children entering 6th grade in the fall of 2006 were born after July 1, 1994 and had been mandated by state law to receive the hepatitis B vaccine prior to school entry.

State and Federal Law

Schools in North Carolina are bound by state and federal law in regard to immunizations. North Carolina Immunization Law is part of the state's Public Health Law. It requires that school principals ensure students have the required vaccinations or be excluded from attending school. Violation of the law is a misdemeanor.

In 1994, the North Carolina General Assembly passed Garrett's Law which requires schools in North Carolina to provide information about certain vaccine-preventable diseases to parents

and guardians. Schools must provide information about meningococcal meningitis, influenza, and human papillomavirus (HPV) at the beginning of every school year. The information must include the causes, symptoms, and transmission methods of the diseases. It must also inform parents and guardians where to obtain additional information and vaccinations for their children.

Schools comply with this law in a variety of ways. Schools may mail the information to parents, send it home with students, or contact parents and guardians via phone with recorded messages. The North Carolina Immunization Branch provides materials schools can use to comply with this law.

The federal McKinney-Vento Act created programs to provide a range of services to homeless people in the United States. The act ensures the educational rights of homeless children. It requires schools to admit homeless students regardless of whether a student has required documents, such as an immunization record. Each Local Education Agency (LEA) in North Carolina has a homeless education liaison or coordinator. The liaison arranges transportation to and from school for the student and ensures the student can take advantage of services provided to other students, such as before and after school care. The liaison also works to ensure the student gets required immunizations.

Exemptions to Immunization Law

The state allows two types of exemptions to immunization law. Schools are required to ensure their students have up-to-date vaccination records or a *bona fide* medical or religious exemption on file. Only a North Carolina licensed physician can request a medical exemption. If a doctor treats a patient with a contraindication to a vaccine recognized by the CDC, the doctor must fill out a medical exemption form and provide a copy to the child's school. If the doctor feels a particular condition would serve as a contraindication, but it is not recognized by the CDC, the doctor can submit the exemption for review by the Immunization Branch. If a parent or guardian has a *bona fide* religious objection to a vaccination, he or she can submit a written statement to the school.

North Carolina has an excellent compliance rate for immunizations, typically among the best in the country. The annual kindergarten assessment consistently shows that statewide over 96% of kindergartners have the vaccinations required by law by the time they enter kindergarten.

Controlling the spread of infectious diseases through immunization is one of medicine's most significant accomplishments. Vaccination programs have proven to be a cost-effective means of disease prevention that have saved millions from death. Schools play a critical role in assuring that children in North Carolina are protected from vaccine-preventable disease. **NCMJ**