

Re: School Immunization Requirements and Enforcement

Date: November 20, 2020

The NM Department of Health reminds school districts that school immunization requirements remain in force even when students are not on campus and are receiving on-line instruction from home. Given the pandemic and disruptions caused by it, today the **Department is recommending that school districts implement a one-month grace period on disenrollment** for students not in compliance with immunization requirements, through December 31.

The Public Education Department recently received the following question:

Our Deputy Secretary received an inquiry yesterday from a concerned school district where approx. 98 3yo-8th grade students are out of compliance with their immunizations. The district states parents are pushing back because their students are in virtual status and/or they are fearful of taking their children for their vaccines due to COVID-19. The district is asking if and when they need to begin disenrollment proceedings (is there a specific timeline?) for their virtual students. This would mean they no longer have access to online education.

Policy Considerations and Response

New Mexico and the US has seen a reduction in childhood immunization rates, around the country, of 16% for 2020 compared to 2019. This is attributed to fear of going to medical offices for vaccinations, and to the fact that students are not on campus where school nurses can check their immunization records and assure they are in compliance. Therefore, enforcing school requirements is necessary to avoid a more serious decline in coverage and spread of infectious disease.

At the same time, disenrollment has always been a last resort and large-scale disenrollment is not a desirable outcome. Therefore, the following approaches are recommended.

- 1) Send warning letters to give families a chance to catch up on immunizations.
- 2) If possible, temporarily withhold admission to classes for a period of several days without disenrolling
- 3) Educate parents that almost all clinics have established safe vaccination practices with social distancing and masking. It is very low risk to get vaccinated.
- 4) Exemptions can also be used to keep children in compliance, though of course immunization is the preference.

Overall, the goal should be to work with parents towards getting children up to date with vaccines and to keep disenrollment as a last resort. **After the New Year, schools will again need to begin disenrollment** for students who are not in compliance with immunization requirements.

Sincerely,

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