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Thursday, Nov. 22, 2007

Jail time threats spur vaccine compliance

More than 1,000 students immunized after penalties announced; 900 still in violation

by Dennis Carter | Staff Writer

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About 900 Prince George's County students still need to be immunized against chickenpox and hepatitis B, and county officials said those cases will be examined in the coming days as fines and jail time looms for parents who do not comply.

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School system officials and State's Attorney Glenn F. Ivey announced last week that parents who fail to comply with state-mandated immunization requirements, which came into effect in January, could be fined \$50 for every day their child is not vaccinated or serve up to 10 days in jail. At the time of the announcement, about 2,300 county students – some of whom had been barred from school for several weeks for failing to get immunized – did not have the proper shots.

Judge C. Philip Nichols Jr., who oversees juvenile legal matters, sent a letter last week to parents demanding that they show up at Prince George's Circuit Court in Upper Marlboro Saturday morning to receive the state-mandated vaccines.

One hundred and seventy two Prince George's students were vaccinated Saturday at the courthouse, where about a dozen tables manned by nurses were available for students to receive shots. That number was well below the 800 that school officials projected, but John White, a school system spokesman, said the Nov. 13 announcement spurred more than 1,100 students to come into compliance last week.

As parents filed in and out of the courthouse Saturday, Ivey said families with unvaccinated students could still face stiff penalties.

"This will be on a case-by-case basis," Ivey said. "My goal is to get kids in school, not to put parents in jail."

Lisa Mack, whose daughter attends Thomas G. Pullen School in Landover, was one of many parents who came to the courthouse with proof of immunization after receiving Nichols' letter in the mail. Mack said her daughter came into compliance several months ago, but even after the vaccine documents were presented to Pullen officials, her daughter's records were not updated, so she was summoned to the court.

"We got the letter this morning, so we rushed over here," Mack of Hyattsville said as they left



Bryan Haynes/The Gazette
 DeContee Grant (right) of Upper Marlboro walks Saturday with her 4-year-old niece, Acee Farley; son, Anthony, 16; and daughter, Josephine, 13, outside of Prince George's Circuit Court in Upper Marlboro, where vaccinations were provided for county students who had not received required immunizations.

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the court. "We were just hoping the cops wouldn't be at our door ready to make arrests."

Mack was one of many parents who said schools had failed to update immunization records this academic year. Schools officials acknowledged that mistakes have been made at the administrative level since the immunization requirements took effect. School board member Linda Thornton Thomas (Dist. 4) said she was called and e-mailed by many parents upset by what they described as shoddy record keeping at county schools.

"Whether it was the fault of the ... administrative process or not, that information was ... not documented properly many times," she said. "A lot of parents were upset because they had come [on Saturday] for no reason even though they had their shots in line. ... I can understand them being upset about this. I would be as well."

Thomas said board members would meet with Superintendent John E. Deasy in the next week to discuss strategies that could make school-level record keeping more reliable. She was not sure what those plans could include.

"We need to ensure proper bookkeeping throughout our system," Thornton Thomas said.

Cheryl Sykes sat with her arms folded as her daughter, Shada Redden, 14, received the necessary vaccination shots Saturday. Sykes said the threat of jail time shook many parents out of complacency, although she predicted these latest efforts would not suffice in some cases.

"I'm not trying to go to jail," Sykes of Capitol Heights said calmly. "But you have parents out there who just don't care, who won't get up and get their kids the shots."

Redden, an eighth-grader at G. James Gholson Middle School in Landover, said she missed a week of school this month because she was out of compliance.

"I felt left behind," said Redden, referring to missed homework and tests she had to make up when she returned to school. School system officials have said students will have an opportunity to complete class work they missed if they are withdrawn from school because of a lack of immunizations.

Some young children who had never received any of the shots screamed and had to be restrained by their parents and nurses while they received a series of shots. But most students pulled up their sleeves, received one or two shots, had their parents fill out paperwork and walked out of the building.

The school system has given parents numerous warnings of immunization requirements over the last 18 months. Schools have sent multiple letters informing parents of immunizations requirements, school personnel were sent door-to-door to talk with parents and some schools provided transportation during the day for students to receive shots at a free clinic. When the 2006-2007 school year ended in June, about 1,000 Prince George's students still were not in compliance. For the 2007-2008 school year, Maryland students were required to have proof of immunization by Aug. 20. In September, schools officials announced that more than 3,000 students – about 1 percent of the county's student population – were not compliance with the state vaccination law.

Prince George's school board chairman Owen Johnson roamed the courthouse Saturday, talking with parents and county officials as children offered their arms for vaccination shots. Johnson said he has received criticism, mostly from people outside of Maryland, since parents were ordered to the courthouse last week.

"My response to them is they need to mind their own business," he said. "We're trying to comply with state law."

A small group of protesters stood outside the courthouse Saturday, stopping parents and offering them documents that could exempt their children from immunizations for religious or moral reasons. Many parents discussed the option with protesters, but brought their child into the court for vaccinations shortly after.

The group of about 10 held signs reading, "This doctor says hands off our kids," and, "We say no to forced vaccinations."

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