

Kids without immunizations are kept from online classes

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Tens of thousands of New York students started the school year remotely in order to avoid the risk of spreading illness — but some are being excluded from their online classrooms on public health grounds.

State Department of Health guidelines about required immunizations remain in effect this year, even for students who will not set foot in a classroom due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

That means students who lack all their immunizations 14 days after the

beginning of the school year cannot attend school, either in-person or remotely.

The issue has set off a scramble in the mostly urban districts where all classes are remote for now.

Buffalo hit the 14-day mark last Friday and mailed notices to an unspecified number of students that they would not be allowed to log onto their lessons starting Monday until they had their immunizations in order, district spokeswoman Elena Cala said.

Rochester’s 14th day falls on Sept. 28, and the district is trying to reach parents of several hundred affected students to get them to the doctor or a health clinic on time.

Erin Graupman, coordinator of student health services at the Rochester City School District, said the numbers are not significantly greater than in typical years, but getting children to visit their pediatricians has been more difficult due to the pandemic.

large outbreak. The coronavirus pandemic has not only closed schools but also discouraged parents from making regular visits to the pediatrician, where most immunizations are administered.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported in May that the number of vaccine doses administered nationally was down more than 20% from 2019. Just under half of five-monthhold children were reported to be fully up-to-date on vaccines, down from 68% in 2019.

That trend has led to concern among epidemiologists about outbreaks of measles or other illnesses typically contained by immunizations. Last year was already one of the worst years for measles in recent history, and immunization rates in 2020 will be lower still.

On the other hand, the early closure of schools in the spring helped to nearly eradicate measles in the United States: only 12 cases have been reported in the entire country through mid-August, according to CDC data, down from nearly 1,300 in all of 2019.

Some states, including Pennsylvania, have granted grace periods of several months for children to get the required immunizations for the

“This is a common issue we see every year,” she said. “We really try to reach out to parents in the spring, and we did as much as we could, but it was more difficult (because of COVID-19).”

Rochester and the other “Big 5” school districts have petitioned the state Department of Health for a waiver or extension, Graupman said, but they seem unlikely to get one.

“In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, now more than ever, immunizations protect children and those in the community from vaccine-preventable diseases such as measles and mumps,” a state Department of Health spokesman said in a statement.

“Every student must get all of the required vaccinations unless they have a valid medical exemption. This applies to all students enrolled in school, regardless if they attend classes in person or remotely.”

Immunization rates down amid COVID-19

School immunization requirements keep children from spreading illnesses in the classroom but also serve a broader public health function, increasing the number of immune individuals and decreasing the odds of a

2020-21 school year.

New York stiffened its school vaccination requirements last year, ending religious exemptions. The law requires children to have the “first age-appropriate dose in each immunization series” by the 14th day of the school year, according to the Department of Health. Homeless children covered under the federal McKinney-Vento Act are exempt.

Graupman said parents should contact their own pediatricians for an appointment to get caught up on vaccinations.

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