

PUBLIC HEALTH

Schools brace for whooping cough



TDAP: New state law requires those in seventh grade and above to get this vaccine.



KAREN T. BORCHERS/MERCURY NEWS PHOTOGRAPHS

PREVENTION: Christopher Carbone, 10, gets a whooping cough vaccine Friday from Tanya Zuno in Palo Alto.

District officials report low compliance so far for new state law requiring vaccine

By Sandeep Ravindran
sravindran@mercurynews.com

It's not even summer break yet, but Melinda Landau already is grimacing at the thought of keeping thousands of students home next school year if they fail to turn in the latest state requirement for anyone entering seventh grade on up: proof they've gotten the whooping cough booster vaccine.

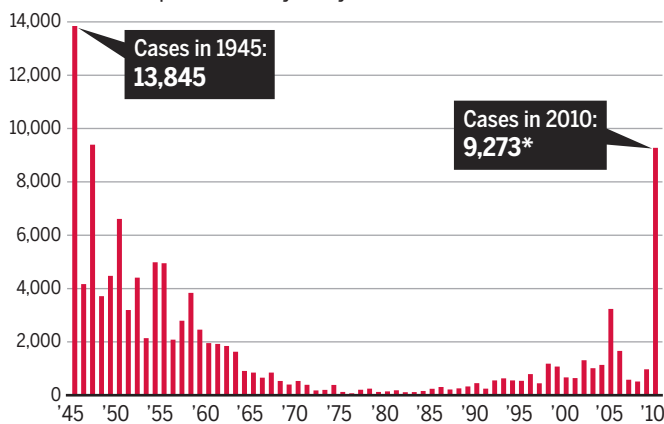
"If school started tomorrow, only 4,500 of our 16,000 kids would get to start," said Landau, the manager for health and family support programs at San Jose Unified School District.

And with public health officials scrambling to keep up after the worst whooping cough outbreak in 63 years, school officials from Gilroy to Palo Alto are urging parents to get their children vaccinated soon — to keep the

See **COUGH**, Page 10

Whooping cough makes a comeback

The number of reported cases of pertussis (whooping cough) in California was up dramatically last year.



*Data for 2010 are preliminary
Source: California Department of Public Health
MERCURY NEWS

ONLINE: More health news at www.mercurynews.com/health

BROKEN FAMILIES, BROKEN COURTS

Foster group urges secrecy

Advocates say bill to open dependency courts would likely end up humiliating youths

By Karen de Sá

kdesa@mercurynews.com

A Democratic state legislator who vowed to better protect California's 58,000 foster children by opening up the secretive dependency courts governing their lives now faces opposition from the very youths his bill aims to champion.

ONLINE EXTRA

Read more of the Broken Families, Broken Courts series at www.mercurynews.com/dependency.

Declaring that "children need sunshine to thrive and so does our dependency system," West Hollywood Assemblyman Mike Feuer is pushing a bill that would bring California in line with a growing number of states that have taken the foster care courts out of the shadows. Assembly Bill 73, set for a key committee hearing Tuesday, proposes testing open courts for four years in three of California's 58 counties, including Los Angeles. If the pilot program proves successful, the courts

See **COURTS**, Page 9

PUBLIC TRANSIT

VTa's fortunes make U-turn after deep cuts

Agency to maintain service, fares even as other local systems struggle

By Gary Richards

Cough

Continued from Page 1

highly contagious disease from spreading and to meet the new state law, which begins next school year.

So far, too few parents are following through.

Less than a third of schoolchildren meet the requirement in the San Jose Unified and Santa Clara Unified school districts, and only about 1 in 10 do in many other districts, nurses said.

Getting everyone immunized statewide is no easy task. "There's 3 million students from seventh to 12th grade affected by the new law," said Robert Schechter, a medical officer with the California Department of Public Health's immunization branch.

"It has been a huge challenge," said Eileen Obata, Gilroy Unified district nurse.

Publicity campaign

Even if students have the shot, if they don't get the paperwork to the schools in time, they may still be sitting at home when school starts.

Obata said parents need to get their paperwork proof to Gilroy schools before June, "so we don't have complete chaos in August."

Schools and health professionals are blasting parents with emails, automated phone

1	4/22/11	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> DTaP <input type="checkbox"/> DT/Td	PALO ALTO MEDICAL FOUNDATION PEDIATRIC DEPARTMENT 795 EL CAMINO REAL PALO ALTO, CA 94301 (650) 853-2992
2		<input type="checkbox"/> DTaP <input type="checkbox"/> DT/Td	
3		<input type="checkbox"/> DTaP <input type="checkbox"/> DT/Td	
4		<input type="checkbox"/> DTaP <input type="checkbox"/> DT/Td	

KAREN T. BORCHERS/MERCURY NEWS

California now requires students in middle school and high school to show proof of Tdap vaccination, above.

calls, letters and fliers to get the word out. Some students have received incentives.

"Our school is having a competition to fulfill the requirement, and the winning class gets a pizza party or something like that," said 10-year-old Vikram Venkaram, a sixth-grader at Carolyn Clark Elementary in San Jose. Vikram got the shot two months ago and said he'd want it even if there was no prize. "I don't want to get whooping cough, it sounds pretty scary," he said.

Whooping cough, or pertussis, can be scary, particularly for the very young, very old and anyone with breathing problems. The bacterial disease causes uncontrollable, violent coughing and makes it difficult to breathe. That's why everyone wants

to prevent last year's historic numbers.

"Part of the impetus was the epidemic levels of pertussis last year," said Sara

"We really worry about the babies, who are at the greatest risk of dying from it."

— Dr. Stephen Parodi,
Kaiser Permanente

Cody, deputy health officer for Santa Clara County. California had almost 9,300 cases last year, she said. Santa Clara County also saw a steep increase, from 32 cases in 2009 to 461 cases in 2010.

More whooping cough cases were reported in Janu-

ary 2011 than January 2010, Schechter said. Although it's too early to know whether that trend will continue, "by getting immunized now, families can protect themselves," he said.

Most children receive an initial pertussis vaccine before kindergarten, but it wears off by the time they're in middle school, necessitating the Tdap shot. In adolescents and adults the disease can look just like a normal cough and cold, without the sharp intake of breath and characteristic "whoop" sound.

"It's extremely important to get vaccinated," said Dr. Stephen Parodi, chairman of infectious disease for Kaiser Permanente, Northern California. "We really worry about the babies, who are at the greatest risk of dying from it."

Last year, 547 infants younger than 6 months old were hospitalized in California, and 10 died from the disease. "It's really scary for parents. Their babies can go through periods where they stop breathing," said Anjali Mehrotra, a pediatrician and adjunct clinical faculty member at Stanford.

The vaccine has been around since 2005, so many children may have already been immunized, even though some parents may not realize it, Schechter said. As long as children have gotten a Tdap

shot after age 7, they fulfill the requirement. For the rest, children can get the shot at their medical provider, or at pharmacies such as Rite-Aid, Walgreens and CVS. The county public health department also runs an immunization clinic for those who are uninsured or underinsured.

Prevention advice

Stephanie Kershaw said she will get her son Christopher vaccinated when he turns 11 next month. He'll only be starting sixth grade, so he will be fulfilling his requirements a year in advance.

"Whooping cough awareness has definitely increased during the past few months, and I'm concerned for my children," she said.

Along with vaccinations, there are other things people can do to prevent spreading whooping cough, Parodi said. He urged people to wash their hands or use alcohol-based hand sanitizers, cover their mouths when they cough and, most important, if they are sick, to stay home from school or work.

"Most of us have grown up in a time that we didn't have friends with these diseases, so people tend to forget that these vaccine-preventable diseases can be really, really, deadly," Landau said.

Contact Sandeep Ravindran
at 408-271-5064.