



Education Report

August 27, 2015

To: Board of Directors of AVCA

From: Vandana Kadam, Education Chair

Subject: What's new for the 2015-16 school year

What Schools and Parents Need To Know About California's New Vaccination Law

Now that California Gov. Jerry Brown has signed into law a bill that says parents can no longer refuse to vaccinate their children in public or private schools based on their personal opposition, schools and parents are parsing the fine print to put the new law into practice.

The law, Senate Bill 277, will roll out in phases, giving school staff time to sort out vaccination compliance issues and parents who oppose full immunization time to sort through their options.

Most school districts in California will be affected, with 47 out of 58 California counties in 2014-15 reporting they had kindergartners with personal belief exemptions to school-required vaccinations.

Still, the numbers are small. Statewide, more than 13,500 kindergartners held personal belief exemptions in 2014-15, a sliver of the state's kindergarten enrollment of 500,000. And the numbers ranged widely across the state, from two kindergartners in Colusa County to 2,100 kindergartners in Los Angeles County.

In the coming months, the California Department of Public Health, in conjunction with the California Department of Education, will be issuing regulations and guidance to schools. At this point, here are answers to frequently asked questions, as explained in the text of the legislation and in analysis by the lawmakers.

WHAT DOES THE LAW SAY?

Private or public child care centers, preschools, elementary schools and secondary schools cannot admit children unless they are immunized against 10 diseases: diphtheria, Haemophilus influenzae type b (bacterial meningitis), measles, mumps, pertussis (whooping cough), polio, rubella, tetanus, hepatitis B and chicken pox.

If the California Department of Public Health decides to add other vaccination requirements, parents will be allowed to obtain personal belief exemptions for those new vaccinations, the law says.

WHAT DID THE LAW CHANGE?

The law eliminated the personal belief exemption for required vaccinations. This exemption allowed parents to opt out of vaccinating their children by completing a form, signed by a health care practitioner, attesting that vaccinations were counter to their personal beliefs.

The law also overrides an allowance for a religious exemption to vaccinations that Brown had inserted three years ago in previous legislation. The religious exemption was not part of state statute.

ARE THERE EXEMPTIONS TO THE NEW LAW?

Yes, there are three: medical, special education and homeschooling or independent study.

WHEN DOES THE LAW GO INTO EFFECT?

July 1, 2016.

WILL KINDERGARTNERS BE ALLOWED TO ENROLL “CONDITIONALLY” IF THEY HAVE NOT YET COMPLETED THE REQUIRED VACCINATIONS?

Yes. School districts already have their own systems for tracking and following up with kindergartners who are not fully immunized. Whatever systems districts are currently using will remain in place.

WHAT ABOUT CHILDREN WHO CURRENTLY HAVE PERSONAL BELIEF EXEMPTIONS ON FILE?

Children who hold personal belief exemptions to vaccinations before Jan. 1, 2016 are “grandfathered in.” The new law does not apply to them until they reach their next vaccination checkpoint – kindergarten or 7th grade.

New Era of Testing Begins in California Schools

A new era of testing in California began Tuesday, as students logged onto computers to answer questions assessing their knowledge and skills in math and English language arts/literacy.

"These tests reflect the exciting changes taking place in California classrooms," said Tom Torlakson, state superintendent of public instruction in a conference call. "Instead of being asked to merely pick out multiple-choice answers, students are being tested on their ability to reason and think. They must draw logical conclusions and cite evidence from what they have read, and they must solve real-world math problems."

Students in grades 3-8 and 11 will take the tests, known as the California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress, or CAASPP. The new exams are aligned with new Common Core standards that are designed to make students think critically, write analytically and problem-solve.

The new tests replace the old paper and pencil standardized STAR tests. Instead of filling in bubbles for multiple choice questions, students take computer-adapted tests that ask different questions based on what they get right or wrong.

"The whole purpose of the test is to provide meaningful data about what students know and don't know," said Terry Koehne, spokesman for the Contra Costa County Office of Education. "So, with every question answered correctly or incorrectly within a particular subject area, it continues to narrow down and pinpoint what kids know and where the gaps are in their learning. This data will help guide instruction in the classroom."

Testing must occur during a 12-week window in the lower grades and during a seven-week window for high school juniors. Districts will receive results within four weeks after testing is completed, but they have until the end of the year to finish.

More than 3 million students will be tested in English and math through June 6, and for the first time, everyone will take the exams on a computer — either tablet, laptop or desktop. All public school students in grades 3 through 8 are supposed to participate, along with some 9th and 10th graders and most 11th graders.

The new tests are linked to state learning goals that have also been adopted by 44 other states and the District of Columbia. The tests and learning standards have raised philosophical and political questions across the country, but the next few weeks will probably be dominated by pragmatic issues as schools struggle with a new process.

"It's time to move forward," state Supt. of Schools Tom Torlakson said Monday during a visit to a school in Culver City. "I'm confident that students in California will embrace this. They're already embracing technology, not only for taking tests, but for learning."

"Many districts are not ready," said Bill Evers, a former federal assistant secretary of education who reviewed the new learning standards for a state commission.

Testing conditions vary widely from school to school or district to district.

For the results to be most meaningful, Evers said, "standardized testing means standardized conditions."

Los Angeles Unified had wanted every student to take the test on an individually assigned iPad, but that effort has been delayed. Still, students in at least 47 schools will take the test on their assigned device. At most schools, however, students will share Apple tablets that are carted from room to room. Some campuses will send students to classrooms outfitted with older desktop computers.

"Many students have never used that kind of equipment for tests," said Judith Perez, president of Associated Administrators of Los Angeles. She's also heard of security concerns among some principals.

Officials said it would be natural to encounter problems — a main reason why test results won't count on this first round. Eventually, the scores will be used to rate schools and teachers.

"We are doing a field test. I want to discover the problems now, not next year," said L.A. schools Supt. John Deasy, adding that for students, "it's very important they have a level of comfort and experience before the test counts."

Although students won't be scored, the tests themselves — and 20,000 questions — will be evaluated to see if they are free of bias and appropriate for the grade and skill level.

Though L.A. Unified is not scheduled to begin its six-week testing period until April 1, students in many other places will log on as soon as Tuesday.

Students have been taking practice exams for months, taking turns on about 100 computers installed in special classrooms, he said.

At nearby Geddes Elementary, even the youngest students have become skilled enough on computers, Principal Irene Garcia said. "It's part of that puzzle to prepare them for the future," Garcia said.

But she's most interested in the addition of an optional midyear exam, which can provide immediate results to guide teaching. "It's a game changer," Garcia said.

Conscious that many schools lack the latest technology, the test designers have tried to create a system that can get by with limited bandwidth and older software.

But the tests nonetheless represent a sea change from paper and pencil.

The new approach is supposed to demand deeper thinking.

A sample sixth-grade math question asks students to evaluate a cereal-box design using a set of rules. Students must explain their answer — a task that requires typing skills. Students then must propose their own design and justify their choice. They are also asked, for example, to calculate the volume of a cereal box, but no list of possible answers is provided.

Problems with the new format could mask a clear reading of a student's academic ability, experts say. On the other hand, the program selects items based on the accuracy of a student's previous answers — a process that should provide a more precise analysis of student skills.

Compton High School Co-Principal Stephen R.D. Glass thinks his students are ready to move from paper to computer, but the experience will help "to make sure our students are ready to take this test."

Statewide test results are expected to be released by the end of August.