

Friday, November 7, 2008

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NEWS

School system to offer flu vaccine for students



Richard Alan Hannon/The Advocate

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- Published: Nov 7, 2008 - Page: 1B - **UPDATED: 12:05 a.m.**

Over the next month, the East Baton Rouge Parish school system plans to give flu vaccinations to as many as 17,000 children, or roughly 40 percent of all students in the system.

This “parishwide” flu vaccination effort is a first for the school system, which in the past routinely offered such vaccinations only at the nine schools with school-based health centers; the system plans to build two more such centers in the next few months.

Conducting flu vaccinations in schools rather than relying on busy parents to take their children to the doctor makes sense, said Sue Catchings, executive director of the nonprofit group, Health Care Centers in Schools, which oversees most student health services for the parish.

She cited a researcher at Baylor University in Texas who tested the idea with local public schools and found that, if at least 40 percent of children get flu vaccinations, the rates of flu contraction go down and school attendance improves.

“If there is any evidence that there’s something we can do that will impact kids, we’ll do it,” said Catchings, who spoke at a news conference Thursday in the gym at South Boulevard Elementary School.

East Baton Rouge Parish is being joined by New Orleans and Shreveport public schools in administering flu shots and FluMist.

Volunteers from Southeastern University’s School of Nursing are helping nurses in Catchings’ organization. They will vaccinate children through Dec. 12.

Before children can get the shot or the mist, their parents need to first fill out consent forms that schools are sending home. The school system is also sending out automated phone messages reminding parents of the effort.

Most of the vaccines being used are in the mist form. The shots are for children who can’t use the mist, including children who suffer from asthma, some metabolic diseases and those with family members with “compromised immune systems,” Catching said.

The vaccines collectively are worth about \$300,000 and come from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The Our Lady of the Lake Foundation is covering about \$75,000 of that cost so the school system can cover all children. The rest of the children already qualify for free vaccinations through a recent CDC effort to expand routine flu vaccinations.

Catchings credited Dr. Bill Cassidy, a state senator who was elected U.S. representative by voters Tuesday, for helping to obtain the vaccine.

Cassidy, who attended the news conference, said he has supported using schools to vaccinate children for at least a decade, noting a successful effort he worked on then to protect children from hepatitis B. He said using schools compensates for the problems of many busy working mothers don't have time to take their children to the doctor.

Superintendent Charlotte Placide said she was happy to participate so that more children will not get sick and won't have to stay home from school.

"If they are healthy, they will be in school every day," Placide said. "If they are in school, they will learn."