

EBR school system expands flu vaccinations to all students

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The Advocate, Baton Rouge, LA

October 02, 2013

In the library at Baton Rouge Magnet High on Tuesday afternoon, a handful of students walked around holding paper towels over their noses.

"I don't like it," said Sage Dalrymple, a senior. Dalrymple had just received the latest flu vaccine. She hates needles, so she opted for the nasal spray instead; the feeling was not pleasant. "I could say that I did this because of it's such a big, important issue, but I really did it because I got to miss a test," said Dalrymple, who will have to retake the test later.



Advocate staff photo by PATRICK DENNIS -- Baton Rouge High school nurse, RN Brandi Watts, charts the progress made after students got their annual flu vaccinations Tuesday in the school library. The school has already has beaten the 209 vaccinations students reported last year and more are scheduled later in the week. --*The Advocate* 10-02-2013

The East Baton Rouge Parish school system came to the high school Tuesday to make the case that all students need to be vaccinated before the flu season reaches its peak.

The school system has expanded from elementary grades to middle and high schools this year in a bid to get every one of its more than 42,000 students immunized. School officials hope to get at least 18,000 students vaccinated, achieving what epidemiologists call "herd immunity."

A pediatrician with Our Lady of Lake Children's Hospital, Dr. Roberta Vicari, said she had watched children die from flu, followed in some cases by their elderly relatives. "Flu is not a benign disease, though many people want us to believe that," Vicari told her audience, which included many students from the high school.

The school system relies on federal, state and private funds to pay for the systemwide vaccinations. The private sponsor is the charitable foundation connected with Our Lady of the Lake, which is putting up about \$150,000 to pay for those whose vaccinations aren't covered by government medical insurance. "It's a small investment to make sure that we keep kids healthy and in school," said John Paul Funes, president and chief executive officer of the foundation.

Flu vaccinations save lots of money, according to Sue Catchings, executive director of the nonprofit Health Centers in Schools. "A \$16 flu mist is a drop in the bucket compared to the cost of an emergency room visit," Catchings said.

Baton Rouge Magnet is taking the issue seriously this year. A poster in the school lobby showed 250 students had reported getting vaccinated for the flu. The school nurse, Brandi Watts, said that number should cross the 300 mark because of the vaccinations conducted Tuesday. Last year, only 209 students reported getting shots all year, she said.

In its annual survey, the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found only 40 percent of children got flu vaccinations by November, around the time influenza typically peaks.

The principal of Baton Rouge Magnet High, Nan McCann, said she used to be lackadaisical on the issue, not even getting her own flu shot. She said she now gets them religiously and preaches to others to do the same.

McCann changed her tune four years ago when a student came to a school dance sick with the H1N1 virus, or swine flu, and proceeded to infect the entire school. "It really stopped the instructional focus of the school for two weeks," McCann said. "It's the worst I've ever seen it."

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Advocate staff photo by PATRICK DENNIS -- Sage Dalrymple, 17, a senior at Baton Rouge High grimaces as she gets her annual flu vaccination via intra-nasal mists instead of a flu shot, because she hates needles, from RN Charlotte Thomas-Perry, with Health Centers in Schools, Tuesday in the school library. The high school is the first school to receive free flu vaccinations this year via an annual campaign conducted by the East Baton Rouge Parish school system. The campaign this year is being expanded into middle and high schools. --The Advocate 10-02-2013



Advocate staff photo by PATRICK DENNIS -- Baton Rouge High junior Jared Martinez, 15, gets a flu vaccinations in the school library via intra-nasal mist instead of a traditional shot involving a needle Tuesday. --The Advocate 10-02-2013