

School vaccine exemption rate on the rise

By Kila Wink

The number of Durant students who have opted out of vaccinations for religious reasons is substantially higher than the state average for the 2024-2025 school year.

Durant has a religious exemption rate of 5.8 percent, according to Mrs. Whitney Randolph, program coordinator of Cedar County Public Health. The state average is 3.6 percent.

With a total enrollment of 523,736 statewide, 18,729 students received religious exemptions, according to state data.

Students are also allowed to get medical exemptions, but Mrs. Randolph said those exemptions are very rare.

In past years, parents of students who claimed religious exemptions were required to get a form notarized.

Effective July 1, 2024, a form no longer needs to be notarized.

"A parent/guardian can print off the

form online, fill it out, and submit it to the school," said Mrs. Randolph.

For comparison, the Durant religious exemption rate was only 1.88 percent prior to COVID-19.

Mrs. Randolph emphasized the importance of maintaining a high vaccination rate for schools.

"We need high immunization completion rates to keep our communities safe," she said.

"Imagine vaccines as being a dam, and the water it is holding back represents vaccine-preventable viruses and bacteria. If we slowly started removing pieces of the concrete, water (aka vaccine-preventable illnesses) is going to start coming through.

"The more concrete that we remove, the more water we are going to have come through, and we will see an impact on our community."

Mrs. Randolph believes that be-

ing vaccinated plays a vital role in keeping communities safe. Certain people may not be able to be vaccinated for a variety of reasons. They may be undergoing cancer treatment, require an organ transplant, or have an allergy to a vaccine. The lower the immunization rates, the more at risk these people are.

With high immunization exemption rates, the risk of uncommon diseases becomes higher as well.

There were a handful of cases of pertussis (whooping cough) in the Durant school this year so far. Mrs. Randolph cited an article that says states with lower immunization rates have twice the number of whooping cough cases as states with higher immunization rates.

The state of Texas has also seen a measles outbreak that has affected over 300 people including one fatality of a school-age child, who, according to *The New York Times*, was unvaccinated.

Some parents have refused to vaccinate their children over unproven concerns that the vaccines may cause autism, according to the American College of Physicians (ACP).

"Misinformation about vaccines as a cause of autism and/or containing toxic chemicals have some parents choosing not to vaccinate their children even though evidence shows that there are no links between vaccines and autism," said the ACP in an article on its website.

As unvaccinated rates grow in Durant, Mrs. Randolph hopes that the convenience of the new procedure, which doesn't require a notarized signature for religious exemptions, is not being abused.

"With nearly all things in life, you will find some people who don't follow the rules," she said. "We certainly aren't disillusioned that this isn't happening with religious exemptions."

Foreign exchange student experiences American culture



Photo by Kylee Hahn

Foreign exchange student Patcharanun Suwansakon gets recognized for being a football cheerleader on Senior Night.

By Katelynn Toft

Durant High School's current foreign exchange student says she was surprised by the friendliness and punctuality of Americans.

"People here are open and direct, which is quite different from my culture," said Patcharanun Suwansakon of Thailand who is known as Nobel by her Durant classmates.

The sophomore has spent her entire school year experiencing Durant and U.S. culture, and now with the school year winding down, Nobel reflected on the memories she has made.

Nobel is originally from Bangkok and made the decision to travel to the U.S. when she was in Grade M3, which translates to ninth grade.

"I was eager to experience new cultures and expand my horizons," said Nobel.

The exchange program Nobel ap-

plied for branches out into multiple countries, but she chose to come to the U.S.

"I chose the U.S. because I wanted to improve my English skills and experience American culture," said Nobel.

One thing that Nobel found easy to relate to was the importance of family. Families play a significant role in everyone's daily lives both in Thailand and the U.S.

She said that gatherings held on special occasions are common in each culture.

When a student is a part of an exchange program, a person or family volunteers to take in students traveling from other countries. For Nobel, Kathan Kearley opened her home and was the first to welcome Nobel.

Nobel says she has been incredibly supportive and helpful during Nobel's time adjusting to American culture, making sure Nobel feels right at home.

"The exchange program carefully pairs students with families based on shared interests and an openness to cultural exchange," said Nobel.

Back in Thailand, Nobel attended a school in Bangkok called Triam Udom Suksa. She learned about the exchange program from friends and past seniors who had already traveled abroad.

"They shared their experiences and gave me helpful advice," said Nobel.

Comparing her school to Durant, Nobel says that U.S. schools provide a wider range of electives and extracurricular activities.

"My school focuses more on core subjects with stricter structure," said Nobel. "However, both systems prioritize students' skills and knowledge development."

At Durant, Nobel was able to participate in multiple extracurricular activities.

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Area colleges provide high school students with head start

By Gavin Broussard

For the last seven years, Muscatine Community College (MCC) has offered Career Academies ranging from Culinary Arts to Automotive Technician for students at six area high schools.

MCC, along with two other Eastern Iowa Community Colleges (EICC), Scott and Clinton, features a variety of academies. Each provides 12 to 18 credit hours, depending on the academy. Classes are paid for by the students' high schools.

Upon completion, some academies offer industry-recognized certificates. Others give students a "jump start" on a two- or four-year college degree, according to Jeremy Pickard, vice chancellor of academic affairs at EICC.

MCC offers these academies to students at Durant, Wilton, Columbus Junction, Louisa-Muscatine, West Liberty, and Muscatine.

Mr. Pickard said he started the career academy program to provide college opportunities to students who may not have thought about college before.

"We are seeing a lot of students who have a strong interest in mostly working with their hands, mostly males, that are skipping out on college," said Mr. Pickard.

Students who enroll in an academy will take the classes on campus.

"Each day it [the academy] starts from 12:50, and we try to get them done by three," said Mr. Pickard. "Some go just a little bit later, but the goal was always to try to be done by three, and the idea behind that is so that you could get back to play volleyball, or football, or wrestling...whatever your sport was or after-school activity."

While students have to leave school in order to attend the academies, Mr. Pickard ensures that the academies are supplementary to a student's high school education.

"I think there was some worry from the faculty members at the high schools that we were out to try to take their students and take their jobs," said Mr. Pickard. "That couldn't actually be farther from the truth. We don't want the first welding class that a student takes to be in the academy. We want to be partners not competitors."

Enrollment numbers for the academies may depend on available equipment.

"The only time we cap enrollment in an academy has to do with the amount of equipment in the lab for training," said Mr. Pickard.

"In the welding lab for instance, MCC can enroll 15 students at a



Photo contributed by EICC

A student takes part in a Healthcare Academy offered by area community colleges.

time because that's the number of welding booths we have in the lab. Because of the interest in the Welding Career Academy this fall, we are going to open up a morning academy as well. Now MCC we'll be able to enroll 30 students; half of the students will enroll in the morning, and the other half in the afternoon."

Mr. Pickard recommends that before students enroll in an academy, they take classes offered at their high school first to discover their love of the field and profession, if they are offered.

"For example, EICC wouldn't recommend jumping into the Culinary Academy unless you've taken Foods I and Foods II at your high school," said Mr. Pickard.

The academies allow the students to go beyond their high school education in a subject that they enjoy.

"What if you had a student who just loved welding, and they took all the welding classes [in high school], and then there was no additional opportunities," asked Mr. Pickard. "A student would then have to wait

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