

# Oakland's student vaccine mandate starts Jan. 31: Here's what you need to know

Most OUSD students 12 and up will need to be fully vaccinated to continue going to school in person.

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Students in Oakland Unified School District now have about two months to get vaccinated against COVID-19 if they want to continue learning in person for the rest of the 2021-2022 school year. Concerns over a quickly approaching Jan. 1 target date led the school board on Wednesday to extend the deadline 30 days, to Jan. 31.

In September, the OUSD board approved a [requirement](#) that all students 12 and older get vaccinated against COVID-19, and later decided that any student who does not get vaccinated and does not receive an exemption must continue school remotely and online through the district's independent study program.

Over the past few weeks, district officials have ramped up efforts to reach families to request their students' vaccination status or provide information about exemptions, by making phone calls, sending emails and text messages, and mailing letters to students' homes.

Of OUSD's 34,000 students, about 15,400 are 12 or older and eligible for the vaccine. As of Dec. 1, about 60% of those students are fully vaccinated. Of the roughly 6,000 students 12 or older who have not been vaccinated or submitted their proof of vaccination, about 1,000 qualify for an exemption, said Sailaja Suresh, OUSD's senior director of strategic projects, who leads the district's COVID response.

Districts 3 and 7, which include West Oakland and deep East Oakland, have the lowest vaccination rates among students, with more than 60% of eligible

students who are unvaccinated.

With the deadline and schools' winter breaks quickly approaching, we set out to answer some of the big questions about the vaccine policy, exemptions, and how it will be enforced.

## **Who does the requirement apply to?**

Students attending any OUSD school who are 12 years old by Dec. 1, 2021, must be fully vaccinated by Jan. 31, 2022 to continue attending school in person. The vaccine requirement does not apply to students between 5 and 11 years old, even though kids those ages are also eligible to be vaccinated.

Charter schools that use OUSD property, even if their campuses aren't shared with an OUSD school, must also follow the vaccine policy. That applies to about 16 charter schools, along with any charter school that has students on an Oakland Athletic League sports team. More questions and answers about how the policy applies to charter schools are [available online](#).

## **Where can students get vaccinated?**

OUSD has free vaccine clinics at several school campuses every week, including Parker Elementary, Laurel Elementary, Lockwood STEAM Academy, Martin Luther King Jr. Elementary, Madison Park Academy, New Highland Academy, Castlemont High School, McClymonds High School, and the Central Kitchen.

Families can also choose to get their students vaccinated through their health care provider, or from other vaccination sites in the city or county. The Oaklandside created a comprehensive guide to getting COVID-19 vaccinations in Oakland, which we keep updated and can be [read here](#).

## **Which vaccine brand is being given to students?**

Only the Pfizer vaccine, a two-dose shot, is currently approved for children 5 and older. The Moderna and Johnson & Johnson vaccines are approved for people 18 and older. The vaccine has been proven to be safe and effective in adults and children. Some side effects may include having a sore arm, fever or chills, fatigue, muscle aches, or nausea, and these typically resolve within two or three days after the shot. Myocarditis, an inflammation of the heart muscle, is a more severe side effect that is more common in teen and young adult men, and is extremely rare. COVID-19 can also cause this condition with more severity

than the vaccine, said Dr. Noemi Spinazzi, a UCSF pediatrician. Allergic reactions to the vaccines are even more rare, and everyone is observed for at least 15 minutes after receiving the shot to monitor for any adverse effects.

“The pandemic has taken an incredible toll on the lives of children in all facets of their lives, including on their mental and emotional health, on their social well-being and their development,” Dr. Spinazzi said. “Vaccinating our communities is the way that we can safely return to what we thought of as normal lives.”

## **How do families submit proof of vaccination?**

Once a student has been vaccinated, OUSD is directing families to send a copy or photo of their child’s vaccination card to [vaccinestatus\\_students@ousd.org](mailto:vaccinestatus_students@ousd.org).

## **What exemptions are allowed?**

Oakland Unified’s policy offers exemptions for certain medical and personal belief reasons that will allow students to continue learning in person if they aren’t vaccinated. Exemption forms can be found [online](#) in English, Spanish, Vietnamese, Chinese, Arabic, and Khmer. Medical exemption forms must be signed by a doctor confirming that the student has a medical condition that would make receiving any of the COVID-19 vaccines unsafe for the student. To receive a personal belief exemption, a doctor must sign the form indicating that they have advised the family on the safety of COVID-19 vaccines and on the health risks of COVID-19 to individuals and to the community.

Other exemptions include students who are already enrolled in a virtual instruction program, students who turn 12 after Dec. 1, 2021, students who have received their second dose of the vaccine within 13 days before the deadline (individuals are considered “fully vaccinated” two weeks after their final dose), or who have received the first dose within the previous 30 days.

The full policy, along with the list of exemptions, can be found [here](#).

Students with approved exemptions will be able to continue attending school in person for the rest of the 2021-2022 school year. After that, the state’s vaccine mandate will be in effect.

## **How can families request exemptions?**

Request forms are [available online](#) in several languages and can be submitted by email to [vaccinestatus\\_student@ousd.org](mailto:vaccinestatus_student@ousd.org). District officials have also mailed physical copies of the vaccine forms home to families that request them.

## **What will happen to students who don't get vaccinated and aren't exempted?**

Students who remain unvaccinated and not exempted will have the opportunity to transfer to OUSD's Sojourner Truth Independent Study Program for online learning. Families must request a transfer; it will not happen automatically. To request the transfer, families can [fill out an online form](#).

There are currently 1,019 students enrolled, and that number is expected to increase as more families choose to not get their students vaccinated and opt for independent study. OUSD hired 41 teachers for Sojourner Truth this fall and officials anticipate having to hire more teachers to accommodate the increase in enrollment over the next two months. While it's not clear yet how many students will be requesting a transfer to the independent study program, about 4,500 vaccine-eligible students have not yet submitted proof of vaccination. Of those, only 29 had requested a transfer as of Dec. 2.

Sondra Aguilera, the district's chief academic officer, said there's still "a far way to go" before the district knows exactly how many students will require independent study. "We would not be able to accommodate 4,500 students. But of course, the 29 we would."

If space is not available at Sojourner Truth in a particular grade when the family requests the transfer, students will be placed on the program's waiting list and be allowed to attend school in-person until space is available.

Students in charter schools without an online learning program, who want to enroll in independent study, will have to unenroll from their charter school and enroll in OUSD's independent study program or another school with an independent study option.

If a student who is not vaccinated and not exempted continues to come to school in person, they will be unenrolled after they've been given information about the vaccine, multiple opportunities to get vaccinated, and escalating warnings from the district. No student will be unenrolled before Jan. 31, 2022.

## **Are teachers and staff required to be vaccinated?**

OUSD's vaccine requirement only applies to students. Right now, teachers and staff are required to either be vaccinated or tested weekly. The state's vaccine requirement, which is expected to go into effect next summer, will require all school staff to be vaccinated.

## **How does OUSD's vaccine requirement differ from the state's requirement?**

OUSD's mandate goes into effect sooner, on Jan. 31, 2022, and only applies to students. In October, Governor Gavin Newsom [announced](#) that all students and staff at public and private schools in California would be required to get vaccinated against COVID-19 to be on campus or attend school in person. That policy is expected to take effect in July 2022.

## **Is COVID the only vaccine students are required to receive?**

No. Requirements for students to get vaccinated against contagious diseases have been in place for years. [Students in California](#) have to receive shots for tetanus, diphtheria, whooping cough, polio, hepatitis B, measles, mumps, rubella, and chickenpox to attend school. The California Department of Public Health most recently updated its list of required shots in 2019, when a two-dose shot of the chickenpox vaccine was added. Prior to that, only one dose had been required since the 2001-2002 school year. In October, Gov. Newsom directed the state Department of Public Health to add the COVID-19 vaccine to the list.