According to a new report, only 61 percent of Kansas children who were kindergartners during the 2012-13 school year had received all their recommended immunizations by age 2. METRO CREATIVE

The on-time immunization rate for Kansas children fell sharply this year after several years of improvement, according to a new report.

“When you look at the trend over time, there is potentially cause for concern,” said Shannon Cotsoradis, president of Kansas Action for Children, which collects and analyzes data for the annual Kansas Kids Count report.

“Kansas has made a lot of progress on immunizations, and you hope that this is perhaps a one-year anomaly,” she said. “But I think there’s reason to believe that there might be some backsliding on this issue.”

According to the report, only 61 percent of Kansas children who were kindergartners during the 2012-13 school year had received all their recommended immunizations by age 2. The percentage was down significantly after climbing from 63 percent to 72 percent since 2009.
The vast majority of Kansas students get the required shots in time to start school, Cotsoradis said. But more parents seem to be delaying immunizations or not following the recommended schedule, she said.

In addition, she said, a rising number of parents are opting out of school shots for their children altogether, echoing a nationwide trend that has health officials worried about possible new outbreaks of diseases.

“We’re seeing the trickle-down of what’s going on at the national level,” Cotsoradis said. “There’s a parent fear about the consequences of immunizing and perhaps not an equal amount of attention to the consequences of not immunizing.”

Kansas schools allow exemptions from vaccine requirements only for medical or religious reasons.

But Kathy Hubka, coordinator of health services for the Wichita district, said school nurses have found instances where parents sign a religious exemption for philosophical or political reasons.

According to data from the Kansas Department of Health and Environment, about 1 percent of Kansas kindergartners opted out of required shots for the 2010-11 school year. Nearly three-fourths of those were religious exemptions.

Current exemptions are difficult to count because district and statewide data is being collected in a different way, Hubka said, but officials should have more accurate figures by next summer.

“I believe that yeah, we probably are seeing more” families opting out of required vaccines, she said. “I don’t think it’s a lot more, but that trend is definitely happening.”

Parents’ reasons for skipping vaccines vary. Some doubt that shots are essential. Others fear that vaccines carry their own risks. And some find it easier to sign a form opting out than to get the shots and required paperwork.

Still others are ambivalent, believing in older vaccines but questioning newer ones, such as the one to prevent chickenpox.
The number and sequence of shots also gives some parents pause, Hubka said. By the time most children are 6, they will have been stuck with a needle about two dozen times – with many of those shots given in infancy.

“Some parents are getting concerned that maybe their kids are getting too many medications or too many vaccines in one shot,” Hubka said. “It’s not that they won’t be fully immunized by the time they start school, they’re just not getting everything by what we would call ‘on schedule’ or as recommended.”

Wichita school district students who aren’t up to date on their required immunizations will be excluded from school beginning Nov. 12.

School nurses have been notifying parents about the requirements and the annual exclusion date, Hubka said. On Nov. 12, students will be pulled out of class and told they will not be allowed to return until their immunizations are up to date.

During suspected disease outbreaks, any child claiming an exemption – whether for medical or religious reasons – will be subject to automatic exclusion from school.

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