

Schools grapple with COVID mandates

August 20, 2021



With the first day of school less than two weeks away, the Del Norte Unified School District is grappling with two new state COVID-19 mandates targeting schools.

In an August 11 announcement, Gov. Gavin Newsom said teachers and other employees will have to show proof of vaccination status or face weekly testing. The policy took effect the next day, and schools must be in full compliance by October 15. Newsom said the move is intended to ensure a safe return to in-person learning.

"We think this is the right thing to do, and we think this is a sustainable way to keeping our schools open," said Newsom.

In late July, Newsom announced a different mandate requiring students and school workers to wear masks indoors during the upcoming school year, however, he left it up to individual districts to decide how to enforce the rule.

Last school year, a temporary state law allowed school districts to force students into distance learning, if they refused to wear a mask in the classroom. However, the rule recently expired.

During a school board meeting last week, Superintendent Jeff Harris said it was rare for the district to force distance learning on students, most of the time, counseling them about the importance of masks was enough for them to put one on.

“Even in situations where students were opposed to wearing a mask, after just talking with the child and having those conversations, or maybe engaging with the parent, the child wore a mask,” he said.

Harris recommended taking a similar route to mask-enforcement as last year, using counseling instead of punishment.

Board member Charlaine Mazzei was also in favor of counseling over suspension or more severe punishments. She said the district’s COVID-19 guidelines for last year seemed to work.

“As far as we know, there were no transmissions on school sites. I think we know that if we follow the rules, we can keep everybody safe,” said Mazzei.

Board member Frank Magarino said he did not believe enforcement would be an issue for most students. Magarino expected they would be excited to return to in-person classes.

“I think the last year and half, we’ve all been conditioned to wear a mask. So, I think the kids are going to be respectful. If we ask them to wear masks, they’ll do it. They’re happy to come back to school; they don’t want to be locked down again,” said Magarino.

During public comment, high school teacher Heather Young said most students did cooperate with mask wearing last year, but she did have some problems.

“Did I have a ton of students who refused to wear masks last year? No. But, did I have one student who wore it underneath his nose every single time he was in class? Absolutely,” Young said.

Young asked the board for clearer direction for teachers about how to address non-compliance.

“How many times is it reasonable to remove educational time by me having to stop class and deal with that student who is not wearing their mask properly, or the student who refuses to?” Young asked.

Board member Don McArthur also wondered how the district would handle those select few students to continue to refuse a mask.

“I think there will inevitably be kids who — for whatever reason — are not wanting to follow the rule. So, we need to craft a response,” said McArthur.

Harris said the district could recommend a hybrid distance learning model to those students, but if they refuse, the student would be sent before the School Attendance Review Board, which is a group intended to

help truant students and their parents or guardians solve school attendance and behavior problems through the use of available school and community resources.

Another option, Harris said, could be reporting the non-compliant student to the county public health department, which could potentially fine the family.

During the meeting, some parents brought up health concerns about children wearing masks for extended periods of time. While recognizing masks can help mitigate the spread of COVID-19, board member Angela Greenough shared some similar concerns.

“We know that it can change a person’s breathing pattern — everyone breathes differently with a mask on — and we know that if it changes the breathing pattern of a child, it can have some significant effects on their speech, it can have significant effects on their taste, and on even just oxygen. These are things we know, and have to study more,” said Greenough.

Greenough also called the state mandates unconstitutional.

“I love again that the state says, ‘here you go, now it’s your problem local community,’” she added.

Ultimately, the board decided to take a position of counseling before punishment, and to report continued non-compliance to SARB or county public health.