

Parents may sit out to protest vaccine mandate

October 15, 2021



On Monday, Oct. 18, Del Norte County families who oppose Governor Gavin Newsom's COVID vaccine mandate for kids under the age of 12, may join a grass-roots movement by not sending their kids to school.

Throughout the week, posters and messages stating that kids are "not an experiment," along with rallying cries to join the "Sit Out," have been circulating on social media.

Richard Nehmer, a Del Norte County resident with children under the age of 12, told the Triplicate he may join others opposed to the vaccine mandate, and not send his kids to school.

"We are absolutely against the mandate for kids under 12," said Nehmer.

Nehmer added that he is vaccinated against COVID, but is against mandating the vaccine for children under the age of 12 because other vaccines are already required, and this one should be up to families to decide.

"Kids are already getting Hep A and Hep B vaccines," Nehmer said. "This one should be up to us."

In California, students in class-based settings must receive a roster of about 10 vaccinations, including ones for Diphtheria, Tetanus, Pertussis, Polio, Measles, Chicken Pox, and others.

Jeff Harris, superintendent of Del Norte Schools - which includes 3,400 kindergarten through 12th grade students - stated that while he is sympathetic to the movement, keeping students out of the classroom may not be the best approach.

"I get and feel the frustration," said Harris.

He added, however, that the planned sit out will have two outcomes for school-aged children: "First, they will lose time in school, when they've already lost half of 2020 and a big chunk out of last year," said Harris.

And second, Harris implied a local sit out would likely go unnoticed by the ones who make the decisions.

"If our state legislature, or anyone else, reaches out to a large school district, then that superintendent can say how many students didn't go to school and know the impact," explained Harris. "But very seldom does Sacramento reach out about what's happening in rural areas."

The sit out movement decided to take the issue to the schools, under the assumption that it would gain traction based on its fiscal impact to what's referred to as the average daily attendance. Total ADA is defined as the total days of student attendance, divided by the total days of instruction.

Last year, the California Department of Education decided to calculate its ADA funding based on pre-COVID attendance outcomes because a high absence and disengagement rate was anticipated while students learned from home. This year's attendance numbers will impact funding levels for next year.

Harris cautioned that not sending students to school is akin to punishing the messenger.

"This is not a school district mandate, it's a state mandate," Harris said. "We, as a district, are required to comply. It would be best if people contacted the governor, state senator or the health department."

In July 2016, California Senate Bill 277, endorsed by Del Norte County representatives, Assemblyman Jim Wood and Senator Mike McGuire, eliminated the personal and religious belief exemptions to the existing vaccine requirements for schools.

As of now, religious and personal belief exemptions still exist for the COVID vaccine, but whether that will change prior to the January, 2022 COVID vaccine deadline for teachers, staff and students is uncertain.

Liz Snow, chief of staff for Assemblymember Wood, stated to the Triplicate that Wood supports the vaccine mandate for school-aged children, but "as far as vaccine legislation, he has no plans to pursue any proposals in that area."

"Quite honestly, I believe that the personal beliefs exemption should remain a component of this (the COVID vaccine)," said Harris. "It shouldn't be forced on families, even nine months from now."

According to the Del County Unified School District COVID 19 Dashboard, there have been five active COVID positive cases reported at its schools, as of Oct. 12. Three of those were at Del Norte High School, one at Crescent Elk Middle School and the other at Redwood Elementary. All of the cases were amongst students. There have been no reported cases amongst teachers or staff.