

Absences mount on school sit out day

October 22, 2021



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

In nearby schools across the border and into Oregon, however, where COVID vaccine mandates don't exist, attendance was predictably normal.

"We had 348 more students absent yesterday compared to the week prior," said Tom Kissinger, assistant superintendent of educational services for the Del Norte Unified School District.

All told, 748 of the roughly 3,500 students in the Del Norte County Unified School District didn't make it to their classroom, equating to about 21.5% of the district's student population.

"It's difficult to definitively tell why students were absent, but it appears the numbers are significant enough to indicate that the sit out had some effect," Kissinger said.

A week prior to the protest, posters and messages stating that kids are "not an experiment," along with rallying cries to join the sit out, started circulating on social media.

Richard Nehmer, a Del Norte County resident with children under the age of 12, told the TriPLICATE last Friday that his family would not be sending their 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 kindergarten through 12th grade students - stated prior to the sit out 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 sit out would 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.

On the Friday afternoon prior to the Monday sit out, Harris also penned and posted a letter on the district’s website stating opposition to the sit out.

“School funding will not be impacted by absences - but our children will be,” he wrote.

In the letter, Harris also implied what he told The Triplicate: 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 July 1 anticipated deadline for vaccines to be delivered to 7th-12th grade 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, which updates every Tuesday afternoon, there were six confirmed cases of COVID amongst students in the district over the past 10 days: Sunset High (1 case), Crescent Elk (1 case), and Margaret Keating Elementary (4 cases). The latest update reflects a slight uptick compared to the week prior, when there were five COVID positive cases reported at its schools: Del Norte High School (3 cases); Crescent Elk Middle School (1 case) and Redwood Elementary (1 case). All of the cases were amongst students.

There were no reported cases amongst teachers or staff over the last two weeks.

Currently, California school employees must either be vaccinated, or agree to regular testing.

In early October, the California Teachers Association, State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tony Thurmond and the California School Employees Association all endorsed COVID vaccine requirements in schools.

It also appears that mandated vaccination requirements of teachers and staff within the Del Norte district didn’t compel the subgroups to join the Sit Out movement.

“There were 18 certificated staff (teachers) and 21 classified staff who were out on Monday,” said Kissinger. “In speaking with our HR department, that’s not an outlier or significant number compared to a typical Monday.”

Meanwhile, in school districts just over the border who don’t face vaccine mandates, the sit out movement went virtually unnoticed.

“I have not yet checked yesterday’s daily attendance, but I am not aware of there having been a spike in absences of any sort, and this hasn’t been a topic of discussion for us,” said David Marshall, superintendent of the Brookings-Harbor School District.

Shauna Schmerer, superintendent of Bandon School District #54, concurred. “The sit out didn’t impact us whatsoever,” she said.

Schmerer added that with Oregon Governor Kate Brown only mandating masks in schools, “there are some loud voices against it, but they are a minority.”

That could change, Schmerer said, were the Oregon Health Authority or the governor to decide students be vaccinated.

“Oh yeah, that could turn into a state-wide issue,” Schmerer said. “I’m really hoping they don’t touch on that this year. There is a lot going on our district plates. Let’s ease into that and encourage vaccinations, but not require them.”