

Will teacher vaccinations get Vermont kids back in classrooms?

03-08-21, WCAX, by Olivia Lyons

RUTLAND, Vt. (WCAX) - Vermont school staffers are now signing up to receive their COVID-19 vaccinations. But do superintendents believe it will be enough to bring all students back to school in-person, full time?

They say it all comes down to space. They believe the vaccine is a step in the right direction, but most schools are not large enough to accommodate their entire student body with everyone staying six feet apart.

"Schools have done well because they have followed the guidance," said Jeanne Collins, the superintendent of the Rutland Northeast Supervisory Union.

In the Rutland Northeast Supervisory Union, middle and high school students are still learning through a hybrid model.

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Collins says there would not be enough room to properly distance all students six feet apart if they return this spring.

And suddenly approving a three-foot distance for the older kids doesn't seem safe.

"I'm still uncomfortable with the idea of full time at the middle school and high school level," Collins said.

Other superintendents across the state say the same. Reducing the distance to three feet, like it is in the elementary grades, allows most schools to fit all of their students, but they worry it will increase the spread of the virus.

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Donald Tinney, the president of Vermont's NEA, says the teachers union does not want to see that change yet.

"We have to remember that with adolescents, they really transmit the virus in the same way adults do and since they are not being vaccinated at this point, we need to be very cautious," Tinney said.

In the Slate Valley Unified School District, Superintendent Brooke Olsen-Farrell says they are tentatively reopening to full in-person learning for their middle and high school students if case counts are low.

"Space-wise it's doable, but we are concerned about some of the common spaces, so we are working to figure out a plan around that," Olsen-Farrell said.

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Olsen-Farrell sent out a survey to staff, parents and students Monday morning to gauge their thoughts.

By afternoon, she got 80 back-- about half in favor of returning full time, about half against.

She says there are many factors contributing to the final decision.

“The fact that teachers are being vaccinated helps us to look at the possibility of bringing students back,” Olsen-Farrell said.

Tinney says pushing education staff to the front of the vaccine line was ultimately worth it.

“Going 100% full time in person, that certainly will be the goal but really it’s to keep schools open for any in-person instruction requires that the education workforce be protected,” Tinney said.

The state plans to reevaluate physical distancing requirements to determine if they need to change.

All superintendents tell me their staff is very excited to get vaccinated.