

Return to School Committee Meeting Minutes

Tuesday, August 3 @ 4 p.m.

MINUTES

Present: Autumn Belajonas, Jessica Berry, Kate Bourne, Adam Bullard, Beckie Delaney, Amy Drinkwater, Meghan Elwell, Randy Elwell, Mike Felton, Jennifer Garrett, Beth Giggey, Janet Harjula, Amy Hufnagel, Alane Kennedy, Liz Matthews, Josh McPhail, Paul Meinersmann, Sonja Schmanska, Stephanie Simmons, Ruth Thompson, Tammy Upham, Rachel Wilcox

Resources:

- July 31 Axios: [Chart: Less than 0.1% of vaccinated Americans tested positive for COVID-19](#)
- July 30 NYT Article: [Vaccinated People May Spread the Virus, Though Rarely, C.D.C. Reports](#)
- July 30 WP Article: [Internal CDC document urges new messaging](#)
- July 28 [State of Maine Follows Updated U.S. CDC Recommendations for Face Coverings in Indoor Public Settings](#)
 - State of Maine recommends that all teachers, staff, and students in K-12 schools wear face coverings, regardless of vaccination status or community transmission level.
- July 28 [Maine Dept. of Education Priority Notice](#)
 - Public schools must report to DHHS the number of fully vaccinated staff on a monthly basis
 - Public health officials will use the de-identified staff vaccination rate data to promote increased vaccination, inform parents and the public, identify schools that require additional support, and guide safety policies for schools that have lower staff vaccination rates.
- July 27 [U.S. CDC recommends universal indoor masking for schools](#)
 - US CDC recommends universal indoor masking for all teachers, staff, students, and visitors to schools, regardless of vaccination status.
- [Maine Dept of Education COVID-19 ToolKit](#)
 - Includes [Standard Operating Procedure for Positive Cases in Schools](#)
- [Maine CDC COVID-19 Updates and Information](#)
- [US CDC Guidance for COVID-19 Prevention in K-12 Schools](#)
- [US CDC COVID Data Tracker](#)

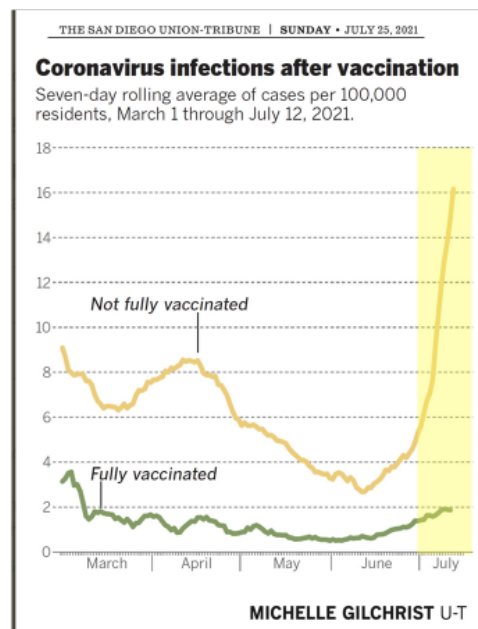
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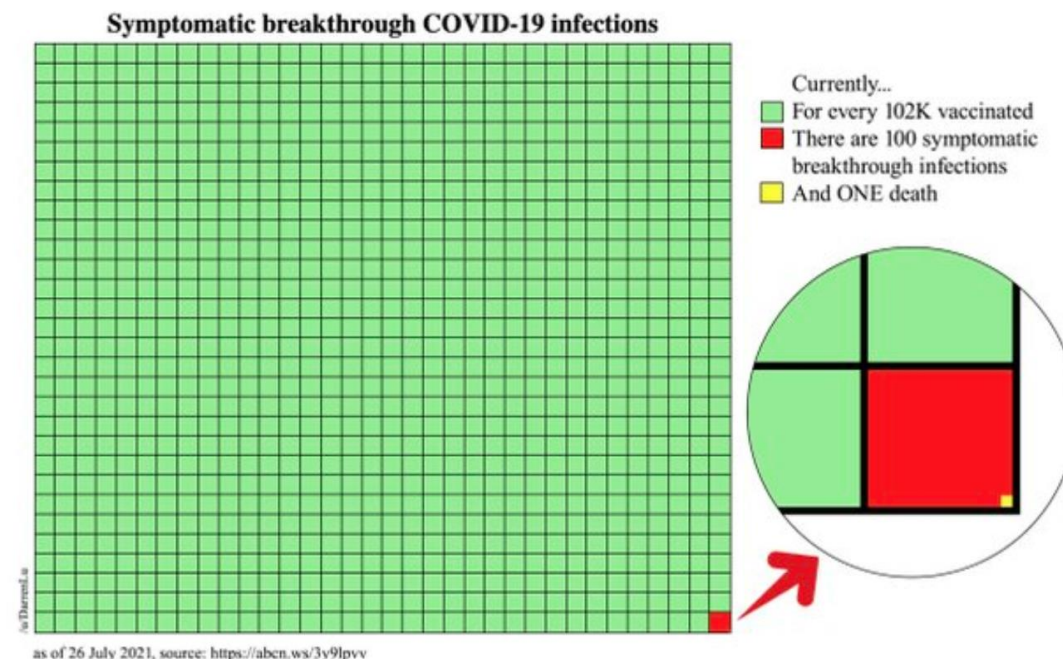
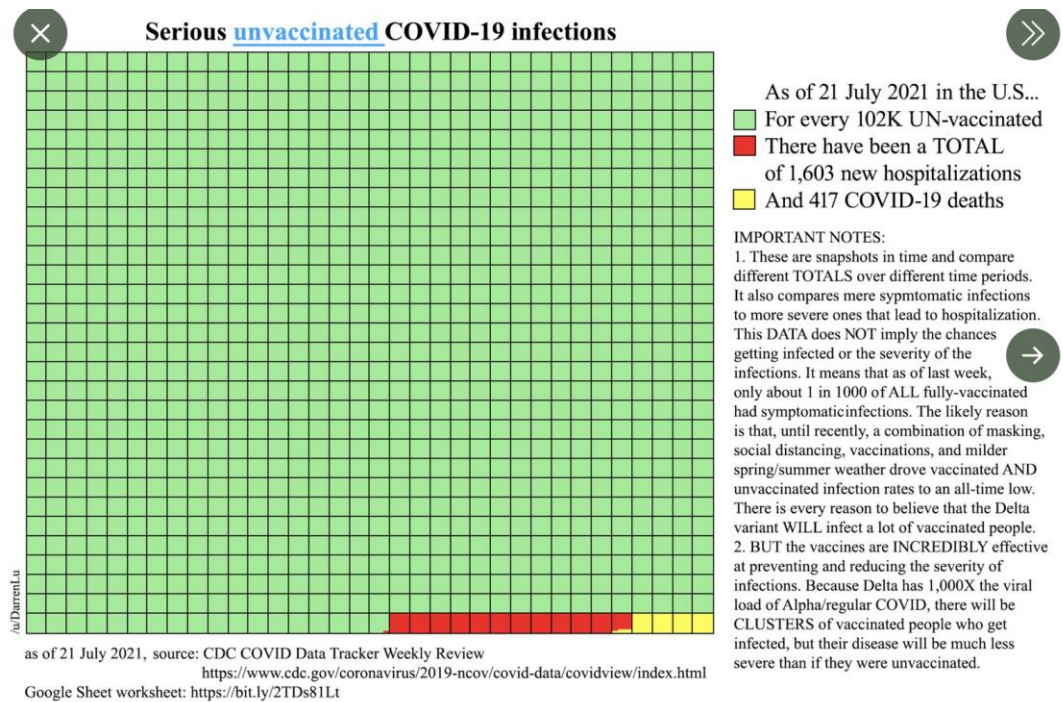
- **Dr. Shah webinar for superintendents and school board members occurred last week**
 - Information shared included:
 - As of July 28, Maine's positivity rate was at 1.5%, up from .05% earlier in the summer
 - Up to 68 positive cases per day and hospitalizations up to 48 people
 - Delta variant accounts for 47% of cases in Maine (up from 3-4% several weeks ago) and 70% of cases in New England (up from 40% several weeks ago)
 - Masks are effective against Delta variant
 - Dr. Shah strongly encourages pool testing
 - School districts will need to report total # of staff vaccinated to state. De-identified information will be posted publicly. It will look similar [Maine Health Care Worker COVID-19 Vaccination Dashboard](#)
- **Welcome**
 - Superintendent Mike Felton stated that all of the work we did last summer and last school year - the planning, protocols, systems, and structures we developed – will help us this year. He said he anticipates a *more* normal school year in the fall. He believes the school will need to continue some

health/safety protocols while others can be ended. Hopefully, this will reduce the stress and disruption for students, staff, and families. He said that research and data indicate that the vaccines work and the fact that a high percentage of St. George, Knox County, and Maine are vaccinated puts us in a stronger place.

- **COVID 19 Situation**

- Presentation by Kate Bourne on most recent research on the Delta variant and vaccines:
 - There have been more than 35 million cases of COVID worldwide and 613,000 deaths
 - In the US and Maine, the daily cases are increasing.
 - Importance of widespread vaccination as the only way to end the pandemic in the near future
 - Widespread vaccination will protect individuals from serious disease, hospitalization, and death; reduce the chance of catching or spreading the disease; reduce pressure on the healthcare system and providers; help get school fully open safely; and deprive the virus of a chance to mutate
- 96% of doctors have been vaccinated
- Shared several graphics demonstrating the effectiveness of the vaccine in preventing infection, illness, and death:





- What is currently known about the Delta variant?
 - About 50% more transmissible than the original Alpha variant
 - Not completely clear if Delta is causing a higher rate of breakthrough infections
 - Conflicting evidence on whether Delta causing more severe illness
 - mRNA vaccines are still highly effective – over 80% against infection and even more against severe illness.

- In the U.S. about 50% of people are fully vaccinated and in Maine approximately 69% of people are fully vaccinated. Researchers estimate that 80-90% vaccinate rate needed worldwide to end pandemic
- Mike shared information from an Administrative Team (i.e., Cassie, Beth, Jess, Adam, Randy, Janet, Liz, Paul, and Mike) meeting that occurred on Monday. Mike shared the following graphic from [Axios](#) describing outcomes of COVID-19 vaccinated Americans:

Outcomes of COVID-19 vaccinated Americans

Of 164m fully vaccinated in the U.S. as of July 31, 2021

Not tested positive for COVID-19

99.923%

Breakthrough cases

00.077

Hospitalized

00.004

Died

00.001

Data: CDC and state Covid dashboards via [NBC](#); Dani Alberti/Axios

- Some of the positives and challenges the district is currently facing in regards to the vaccines, COVID, and Delta as well as health/safety protocols for the school next year:

Vaccines, COVID Rates, and the Delta Variant

<u>Positives</u>	<u>Challenges</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The vaccines WORK and breakthrough infections are RARE <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Out of 164 million vaccinated Americans, 125,000 people have tested positive • Breakthrough cases rarely result in hospitalization or death <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • .004% of U.S. breakthrough cases resulted in hospitalization • .001% resulted in death • Local vaccination rates are high: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maine: 69% • Knox County: 75% • St. George: 82% 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Delta variant is highly contagious <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It may spread as easily as chickenpox • Nationwide and in Maine, the number of COVID cases is rising • More than 50% of the U.S. population is not vaccinated • Vaccines are not currently available to children under the age of 12 • Most of our students are under the age of 12

Health/Safety Protocols & School

<u>Positives</u>	<u>Challenges</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Masks and other health/safety protocols such as social distancing, hand hygiene, screening, cohorts, and improved ventilation help prevent the spread of COVID and the Delta variant • We have experience using these health/safety protocols and they worked last year 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Families, students, and staff were hoping to return to normal in the fall • Some health/safety protocols disrupt scheduling, instructional delivery, and student socialization. These include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reducing the # of students riding buses at one time • Students eating in classrooms rather than using the cafeteria • Students remaining in the same classroom for entire day • Limiting class size to 15 or less • Some students struggle to wear masks and masks are uncomfortable on hot days

- Rachel Wilcox shared that she has seen COVID cases throughout the summer.

- Question about the metrics the U.S. CDC is using to determine the risk of community transmission at county levels. The numbers in some Maine counties don't seem high but they might be rated as "High" risk by the CDC
- Question about what metrics will indicate that the pandemic is over or that health and safety protocols can be relaxed/ended?
 - Discussion that priority is to have kids in school. We recognize that the changing guidance and understanding of COVID, as well as changes caused by the new variant, are frustrating.
 - It's difficult to pick one metric that determines what our district will do. Instead, we look at trends. At this time the number of COVID cases is increasing in the U.S. and Maine driven by the Delta variant. It's unclear when this surge will peak. Students return to school in a little over 4 weeks. Most of our students (11 and under) are not vaccinated and do not have the option to be vaccinated. These trends and facts are causing concern.
- Questions about the [Maine CDC's Stand Operating Procedures \(SOP\)](#) for responding to a positive COVID case in school:
 - The SOP are requirements, *not* recommendations, i.e., schools have to follow them when dealing with positive COVID cases
 - School Nurses were informed that the SOP might be updated next week
 - At this time, the CDC requires all student close contacts to remain in quarantine for at least 10 days following their last exposure to the confirmed case. Individuals who have completed a COVID-19 vaccine series and have been exposed to a positive case do *not* need to quarantine if the exposure occurred more than 14 days after the individual's completion of the vaccine series.
 - Members of the RtS Committee expressed frustration about students identified as close contacts missing school b/c of the 10-day isolation period even after testing negative. We hope the CDC will change this rule.
- **Plans for next school year already (more or less) decided:**
 - Mike shared that when we began planning for the fall of 2021 last spring we determined that:
 - Class sizes would no longer be limited to 15. The largest class size right now looks to be 21 (8th grade)
 - Students can move between classes, i.e., middle level students can change classes and K-5 students can go to their Unified Arts classes
 - Regular bus runs and regular # of kids on buses at this time
 - Mike Felton, Randy Elwell, and Mike Mathiau will meet to go over the numbers for bus runs
 - Regular start and end time for school (8:00-2:30), returning to 5 full days. Outside recess in the morning for drop off.
 - Keep morning drop off and afternoon pick up locations the same as last year (buses at Art Room entrance and parents at lower parking lot by main entrance)
- **Need to be discussed:**
 - Mike shared that there were several issues that need to be discussed that have not been decided. When thinking about the health/safety protocols to keep in place, we consider the benefit in added layers of protection to keep our students, staff, and families healthy and safe as well as the cost in terms of disruption to the learning process and burden placed on students, staff, and families
 - The RtS Committee makes recommendations and the ultimate decision about health/safety protocols is up to the Board.
 - Masks

- At this time, the U.S. and Maine recommend that all teachers, staff, and students in K-12 schools wear face coverings, regardless of vaccination status or community transmission level
- Ultimate decision about masks rests with each school district
- It was shared that many students are not wearing masks or social distancing this summer while outside of school. Is it necessary to have them wear masks when they return? Students have adjusted to not wearing masks and it will be difficult to get them to wear them next year. Staff members shared that dealing with masks is not something they want to have to focus on next year at the cost of other learning
- Discussion about importance of masks to prevent risk of COVID when students return to school in the fall. Masks are an effective layer of protection against COVID and the Delta variant. Students are wearing masks during summer programs at school and those programs have gone well. We have an obligation and responsibility to keep students safe and healthy. A majority of our student population is under 12 and does not have the option to be vaccinated
- Question about how we'll know when this over? How will we know when we can put the masks away? What are the metrics for making this determination? Currently, this is a district level decision and we will probably look at a variety of metrics including trends in case numbers locally, in Maine, and in the U.S. as well as vaccination rates. It's possible that case numbers could fall dramatically after we return to school and that later this year we won't have to use masks and follow health/safety protocols. At this time, the trends and spread of the Delta variant are not in our favor as we approach the start of school
- Everyone agreed that we are tired of masks and want to move on. However, we also want to keep our kids in school and learning. We had positive cases at the school last year. If we hadn't be using masks, how many students would have been infected while at school? We have a responsibility to our students to take steps to prevent that from happening.
- Some members feel like the masks should be optional, however, they recognize that we would need a strong reason and good data to ignore the recommendations of U.S CDC and Maine DOE. We're not sure we have that data or rationale.
- Mike will email a survey to RtS Committee members to get more feedback from them about masks next year. He will share this feedback with the committee and School Board.
- We need to share information and communicate with the community about next year ASAP.
- Cafeteria
 - Breakfast will probably take place in classrooms after morning recess. Adam Bullard and Jess Berry will share tentative plans with the Leadership Team for feedback and revision
 - We recognize that students eating in classrooms last year caused a major disruption to the K-8 schedule, student socialization and school experience, teacher planning and prep, coverage for recess and lunch duties, and the food services program.
 - We want to find a way to get kids back in the cafeteria. From what Mike is hearing from other superintendents and at some of the webinars he's attended, it sounds like many schools will have kids back in the cafeteria. For some schools, this is the only way to get kids back in school and learning 5 days per week.
 - Looking at our enrollment for the 21/22 school year, we will have the following # of students in the cafeteria for each lunch:
 - K, K/1, 1: 36 students
 - 2, 2/3, 3: 38 students
 - 4, 4, 5: 39 students

- 6-8: 71 students
 - 23 in 6th
 - 27 in 7th
 - 21 in 8th
 - At the Admin Team meeting, we determined that we can fit about 40 students in the cafeteria at a time while providing some spacing between students. This works for the younger grade levels but does not work for middle level with 71 students. Even without COVID, 71 students would be a large group to have in the cafeteria
 - Discussion about middle level crews eating on a rotation in the lunch room, classrooms, and (when possible) outside. Noted that many middle level crews ate lunch outside almost every day last year.
 - Question about whether putting desks in the cafeteria for students to eat at would help with spacing. Not sure about this. Admin Team discussed but didn't think there would be a major benefit if we went with desks.
 - Mike stated that we are planning to use multiple HEPA air filters in the cafeteria during lunch and open windows as much as possible to help reduce risk of viral spread
 - This is not an ideal situation. Concerns about students eating together in groups of 30-40. Is this too much of a risk? Does this counteract our other health/safety protocols?
 - Teachers shared that students eating in classroom caused major disruption last year. Getting students back in the cafeteria would make a big difference in the school's functioning
 - Janet Harjula, Food Service Dir., said she is willing to do whatever it takes to make things work
 - Question about whether students could have option to eat in different location if they wanted to. Yes – school could do this and has done things like this in the past.
 - Mike will email RtS Committee to get more feedback on students eating in the cafeteria
- Pool Testing
- The Maine DOE and Maine CDC are strongly encouraging schools to enroll in the pool testing program
 - At last count, 166 Maine schools are participating in the program
 - In pool testing, a group of students swab their noses on Monday and the swabs are placed in a group (a "pool") and that pool is sent to a lab. The individual swabs are not labeled or linked to individual students protecting student anonymity. The lab tests the swabs and results are sent to the school by Wednesday or Thursday. If any of the swab samples test positive for COVID, everyone in the pool then takes a rapid Binax test. The positive case is identified and other students in the pool who are close contacts can stay at school and do NOT need to quarantine.
 - An advantage of pool testing is that students and staff participating in the program do not have to quarantine when identified as a close contact *regardless of vaccination status*. Under current CDC rules, without pool testing, close contacts who are vaccinated (and asymptomatic) can remain in school but close contacts who are unvaccinated need to quarantine. We want to avoid differentiating or distinguishing between students based on vaccination status.
 - When pool testing last presented to RtS Committee, we had reservations and decided to hold off and see how things looked in the fall
 - Questions and concerns about work required to run pool testing program, take samples, send samples to lab, and follow-up when results come in

- May be worth looking into it so program ready to go if we need it in September and October to avoid lots of absences and kids spending time in quarantine. Want to avoid last spring when, at times, we had entire crews or classes in quarantine.
- Mike will work on drafting something to get community input. Even if school participates in pool testing, up to parents to decide if their child is part of program. If few parents want to sign up, probably not worth running program.
- More info on [DOE website](#).
 - Vaccine information outreach to families. See, for example, U.S. CDC [Myths and Facts about COVID-19 Vaccines](#) and [FAQ about COVID-19 Vaccination](#) [“Pop-up” vaccine clinic](#)
- **Volunteers and Parents in School Building**
 - Want to find ways to re-engage with parents and volunteers next year in the school building. Give parents opportunities to be in building.
 - Could ask parent/volunteers to follow specific protocols; teachers make requests when there are volunteer/visitation opportunities in their classroom. Important to note that classes work with volunteers more than others
 - Not sure we can do Open House in October but this would be a way to start getting parents and volunteers back in the building.
- **Vaccine Clinics & Info**
 - Partner with St. George EMS to hold clinics at Town Office. We can advertise clinics in school newsletter and Facebook.
 - Share facts about vaccine and clinics with families. Plan vaccine info session for families. Encourage parents to talk with their pediatrician.
- **Briefly discussed developing a “Blue Plan”**
 - Adapt Green Plan from last year to be less restrictive and allow for greater return to normalcy.
 - We will need to be clear with students, families, staff, and community that the plan *may need to change* as the situation around us changes and we learn which protocols/practices work best for our community. If the situation with the virus changes for the BETTER, this could mean LESS health/safety protocols and a greater return to normalcy.
- Mike will email ARP ESSER funding priorities to RtS Committee for review