

# Schools begin to adopt vaccine mandates

09-16-2021, Rutland Herald, by Jim Sabataseo

As the delta variant of COVID-19 continues to spread, more Vermont school districts are making vaccines mandatory.

A day after Gov. Phil Scott recommended it, several districts reported they have already adopted a vaccine requirement for employees. Others said they were currently, considering it.

Recently, Scott has taken a more proactive approach to vaccine mandates.

Earlier this month, he required all corrections workers, Vermont Veterans Home staff and state psychiatric hospital employees be vaccinated. Starting Wednesday, he extended that order to all state employees under the executive branch, affecting about 8,500 workers.

The move comes as the Biden administration announced last week it will require employers with 100 or more workers to adopt a mandate as part of the requirements under the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA).

At his regular news conference Tuesday, Scott said he's seeking clarity to see if school workers would be included in those requirements.

The governor said, without a state of emergency in place, he cannot issue a vaccine mandate for school workers.

"But I encourage school districts, who are the employers, to use the state as a model and take a similar approach," he said.

On Wednesday, Scott administration representative Jason Malucci said in an email that the OSHA rule President Biden referenced has not yet been issued.

"In the meantime, the governor is encouraging school boards to follow the state's lead by instituting similar policies for their school employees as the governor has done for executive branch state employees," he stated.

Rutland City Public Schools Superintendent Bill Olsen stated that he is hoping to get more clarity about those recommendations, “as well as any interpretation of a school district’s obligation in meeting the expectation set forth by the president.”

Jeanne Collins, superintendent of the Rutland Northeast Supervisory Union, said in an email that RNESU is considering a vaccine mandate.

“Last weekend’s outbreak affected 6 staff; 5 were vaccinated and did not need to quarantine, thereby not affecting student education,” she wrote. “We are having internal discussions about it and waiting to digest the presidential mandate as well.”

But while some districts are just beginning to weigh vaccine mandates, others are ahead of the curve.

Harwood Unified Union School District in Washington County started the school year with such a requirement.

Montpelier Roxbury Public Schools followed suit two weeks ago, according to Superintendent Libby Bonesteel.

“I’d say 99.9% of our staff is vaccinated, currently,” she said Wednesday.

Bonesteel noted that the district is still in negotiations with the local AFSCME union, which represents custodial staff, technology staff and administrative assistants.

She reported that only two employees applied for medical or religious exemptions. Unvaccinated employees will be tested on a regular basis.

While Bonesteel believes a vaccine mandate is an effective way to keep the virus out of schools, she is less certain about the efficacy of surveillance testing in a school context.

For example, she said an employee could test negative on a Friday but the school wouldn’t get the results until the following Monday. In the meantime, that employee could potentially contract COVID over the weekend and the district wouldn’t know until later that week — well after that employee has been in contact with children for a significant period of time.

The Slate Valley Unified Union School District Board approved a vaccine mandate for all employees and contractors at its regular meeting Monday, said Superintendent Brooke Olsen-Farrell.

According to a letter sent to district employees Tuesday, all employees must have at least one dose of a COVID vaccine by Sept. 30.

Medical and religious exemptions will be granted. All unvaccinated employees must submit to weekly testing.

The letter is unequivocal on the consequences for employees who choose not to comply, stating, “Should you not provide a record of vaccination, medical note, or religious exemption letter by the dates above, you may not report to work. If you do not work, you may be disciplined, up to and including termination.”

Olsen-Farrell said Wednesday she felt it was important to move forward with a local mandate rather than wait for a federal one to be issued.

“My recommendation (to the School Board) was to move ahead and institute this policy for the continuity of education within our district.”

In addition to concerns over the safety of staff and students, Olsen-Farrell said the mandate was motivated by the district’s “critical” staffing shortage.

“When unvaccinated teachers or staff need to quarantine, it puts an additional burden on the system,” she said. “In some cases, it could potentially impact learning for students.”

Olsen-Farrell acknowledged that she’s heard about “a couple people” in the district who are upset with the mandate, but noted others are in favor of it.

“I think, in this type of situation, you’re not going to please everyone or meet everyone’s needs,” she said. “But I think, overall, as the majority of our staff are vaccinated anyway, that it’s pretty well supported.”

The push to protect schools comes as positive cases in K-12 learning communities around the state continue to climb and more children who are ineligible for the vaccine are contracting the virus.

According to state data, 159 cases of COVID have been reported in schools as of Sept. 12 — almost double what was reported last week.

Heading into the new school year, the Agency of Education released a two-page memo advising school districts to require universal masking for the first 10 instructional days of the school year while student vaccination rates were determined. The governor revised that plan last week, recommending schools keep universal masking in place through Oct. 4.

All but one school district in the state have adopted the AOE’s recommendations. Some have gone further, implementing universal masking for all students and staff regardless of vaccine status, as recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the American Academy of Pediatrics.

But some groups, like the Vermont-NEA, have argued that masks alone weren't enough.

Don Tinney, president of the Vermont-NEA, which represents around 13,000 teachers and school workers, said the union has been a strong advocate for vaccinations.

"We believe that everyone within the school system who is eligible to be vaccinated (currently those 12 and older) should be vaccinated," Tinney stated in an email Wednesday. "Both science and history definitively prove that vaccines are essential in preventing infectious diseases, so we understand the importance of having every eligible Vermonter vaccinated as soon as possible."

On Wednesday, the state reported 136 new cases of COVID, including 39 hospitalizations with 10 people in intensive care. One new death was reported. Rutland County reported 16 new cases and 239 in the last 14 days. Washington County reported 11 new cases and 295 in the last last 14 days.