



DEL NORTE UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT
DEL NORTE COUNTY OFFICE OF EDUCATION
Jeff Harris, District and County Superintendent
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Board Members: Don McArthur Area 1 Angela Greenough Area 2 Frank Magarino Area 3 Charlaine Mazzei Area 4 Jamie Forkner Area 5

Governor Gavin Newsom
California Governor's Office
1303 10th Street, Suite 1173
Sacramento, CA 95814

Sent Via Electronic Mail

Dear Governor Newsom,

We are proud of how our schools have weathered the COVID-19 pandemic. Like most of the state, our campuses were closed for in person instruction in the spring of 2020, but we were one of the few counties and districts within the state to have our students physically back on campuses from mid-September through the end of the year for the 2020-2021 school year. We are also pleased that, although we did have positive cases to which we had to respond, there were very few instances of person to person transmission in our schools. In fact, our schools were some of the safest environments our students had during the pandemic.

On October 1, 2021, our school district and county office of education were notified about your new order to CDPH to mandate vaccinations for all K-12 students and staff throughout California. We understand that this mandate is not to go into effect until specific criteria are met for students in identified grade spans, that the earliest that the 7-12 grade and employee vaccine requirements will go into effect appear to be July 1, 2022, and that the earliest that the K-6 mandate will become effective may be January 1, 2023.

The implementation of a mandated COVID-19 vaccine will have far reaching impacts on our schools, our community, and our ability to provide educational support services for our students. We believe that these mandates will create significant issues of inequity and result in a lack of educational access for already beleaguered students and families, especially in rural areas, such as Del Norte. The issues are:

1. **Student Vaccine Mandate-** Although the state currently requires a number of student vaccines to engage in in-person public education, these vaccines have a long history with significant medical research and historical data. This is not the case with the COVID-19 vaccines. We applaud the rapidity in which the state has made these vaccines available to the public, but that same rapidity has done little to assure many of our families that the vaccines are safe, both in the short-



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and long-term. Families should have the right to make informed medical decisions for their children, especially in the absence of long-term data.

2. **Staff Vaccine Mandate-** There are currently no vaccines or medical tests to which school staff are universally required to submit to be employed. It seems highly reactive to require all school staff to be vaccinated or lose their employment (and by extension, income, housing, food access, medical benefits, etc.). In the event that the vaccination mandate becomes effective for staff, without exemption, so many of our staff have indicated their refusal to vaccinate that our district and county will not be able to meet the needs of our students. Rural areas, like Del Norte, already suffer from a significant lack of qualified staff and struggle with recruitment and retention of staff. The mandate will make the already difficult job of hiring necessary staff nothing short of impossible.

3. **State Authority-** From the beginning of the pandemic, our students, parents, staff, district, and county office of education have had to respond to State regulations, mandates, executive orders, changing legislation, and other shifting and evolving requirements and regulations. The burden for communication, implementation, and enforcement of these mandates has been placed squarely on the shoulders of staff, site administrators, district and county administrators, and school boards. We hear and see the real frustrations and impacts that these rules have on our community, and yet we have no real local control or authority to respond in ways that reflect the needs or the lived reality of our community members.

We respectfully request that you strongly consider the issues that we have presented. As the Board of Trustees and as the Superintendent of Schools for the Del Norte County Office of Education, we ask you to support on the following recommendations:

1. The State should strongly recommend the COVID-19 vaccination for students, but not require it. If the State proceeds with a mandate for students to receive the vaccine, we ask that the personal and belief exemptions not be removed and that the requirement for medical exemptions to be processed through the California Immunization Registry (CAIR) be waived.

2. The State should strongly recommend the COVID-19 vaccination for all staff, but not require it. If the State proceeds with a mandate for staff to receive the vaccine, staff should be allowed to use personal and belief exemptions, as well as medical exemptions, and do so in a manner that preserves their ability to work in-person, without loss of income, benefit or employment.

3. The State should immediately engage the public in highly visible, transparent ways that clearly communicate current mandates and explicitly reinforce that the



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authority over these mandates lies with the State and how to actively and effectively engage with State level authorities as new or updated mandates or guidance are released.

4. In addition, we request that the State identify specific benchmarks to be met in order to end universal masking in classrooms.

We understand the role of vaccines in public health, including preventing serious illness and death, reducing the spread of disease, shortening quarantines, and preventing dangerous variants. Local communities must, however, have the options listed above in order to fully address COVID-19 and the legitimate concerns of parents and staff, in a way that will least impact our ability to provide a quality education for students. Any vaccination goal set by the State would be better served through persuasion rather than compulsion.

Thank you for your time and attention to these critical matters. We look forward to a day when these issues are no longer challenging our ability to focus on the important and necessary work of educating and supporting our children.