



**Date:** September 30, 2021

**Subject:** Guidance to Local Contra Costa County School Districts regarding vaccination of students as the best tool to protect students from Covid-19 and keep children in the classroom

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For the safety and health of students, staff, families and the community, and as an effective tool to help keep students in the classroom, I offer my strong support for each and every school district that takes continued and additional steps to promote Covid-19 vaccination for their students.

Contra Costa Health Services and I as Contra Costa County's Health Officer recommend that all eligible students age 12 and older get vaccinated against Covid-19 at their soonest opportunity. We recommend that schools and school districts continue to take steps to increase the vaccination rate of their student body. These steps may include promoting vaccination in regular communications with students and parents, offering on site vaccination opportunities in partnership with the local health department or health care providers, limiting certain events and/or high risk extracurricular activities to vaccinated students only, and requiring Covid-19 vaccinations for all students age 12 and older. We recognize that different school districts have very different vaccination rates of their students as well as different levels of local community Covid-19 transmission, and different approaches may be more effective than others based on local conditions.

We are experiencing the greatest public health crisis in a century. Over 900 people have died of Covid in Contra Costa, and we are approaching 700,000 deaths from Covid in the nation. While schools have taken many important and effective steps to reduce Covid-19 transmission on school campuses, including universal masking, enhanced ventilation, isolating sick students and quarantining exposed close contacts, vaccination is far and away the best method we have to prevent the transmission of Covid-19 to teachers, staff, students, the families of students and staff, and the wider community. The Covid-19 vaccines that have been granted Emergency Use Authorization (EUA) by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) have been found to be very



safe and effective in preventing Covid-19 infection, and even more effective in preventing severe illness, hospitalization and death. The Pfizer Covid-19 vaccine has been granted full FDA approval for ages 16 and up based on even more extensive safety and effectiveness review. It also has a EUA from the FDA for ages 12-15, and the safety profile for this age group is very similar to that of older teens and adults. We now have real world experience of millions of US teens having received the Pfizer vaccine over the past six months to add to its already impressive record of safety and effectiveness.

In addition to protecting students from becoming ill and spreading Covid-19 to vulnerable adult family and community members, vaccination of the student body has additional benefits for the education of children. Student absenteeism and missed days of both in-person and remote education have risen to high levels in many school districts since the start of the pandemic. Since children who are vaccinated are less likely to develop Covid-19 after an exposure, they are less likely to miss school due to the need to stay home for isolation or symptoms from an infection. Fully vaccinated students are also not required to quarantine at home after an exposure, as long as they remain asymptomatic. In this way vaccination can prevent significant disruptions in a child's education, and help keep kids in the classroom.

California and other states have a long tradition of requiring vaccinations against contagious diseases in order to keep the classroom a safe environment for children. The first vaccine mandate in U.S. schools was enacted in Massachusetts in the 1850s to prevent smallpox transmission. By the late 1970s, all 50 states had enacted school vaccination requirements against seven diseases for which vaccines are routinely given in childhood: diphtheria, measles, mumps, pertussis, poliomyelitis, rubella and tetanus. Later, hepatitis b and chicken pox were added to the list of required vaccines. Due to the high vaccination rates of US children against these diseases, it is estimated that 14 million cases of disease and 33,000 deaths in children are prevented each year. Unfortunately, there are still approximately 300 deaths each year in unvaccinated or incompletely vaccinated children from these diseases each year.

Covid-19 is a current threat to children's health greater than all those other vaccine preventable diseases combined, due to low vaccination levels in teens and the lack of an authorized vaccine for children under age 12. Since the pandemic began last spring, and as of September 22, 2021, there have been 544 Covid-19 deaths in children from Covid-19 in the US, more than the estimated number of deaths from all the other vaccine preventable diseases listed above combined in the same time period. Children who get Covid-19 are particularly at risk for a condition known as Multisystem Inflammatory Syndrome in Children, or MIS-C. To date there have been 603 reported cases of MIS-C in California children. While overall mortality from MIS-C remains low in California (under 1%) the disease can be severe. Approximately half of children with MIS-C in California were admitted to the ICU. Due to the continued impact of



Covid-19 on school aged children, I urge and support our state leaders in adding Covid-19 vaccination to the list of vaccines required for school entry.

California state law does not recognize religious or personal belief exemptions for student immunizations, and only accepts valid medical exemptions certified by a California licensed physician. I would recommend that for local school districts who are considering a vaccination requirement for students, they institute a similar strict and more health protective policy and only allow medical exemptions for students. Several large and small school districts across California have already taken this important step to protect their students, and I would support any of our local school districts who decide a local vaccine requirement fits into their strategy of raising student vaccination rates.

