

Student Learning, Safety are Educators' Top Priority

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As most schools in Merced County move past their second month of reopening, we know with certainty that students thrive best in the classroom with their peers, and adults who care about their well-being. While the COVID-19 safety measures in place may seem drastic to some, our goal is, and has always been, to keep our students and staff safe, and we will continue to follow the guidance from public health experts. The pandemic has made the work of operating our schools much more complex and complicated. In many ways, schools now function as an interpreter of health directives — something we have never been asked to do before — while continuing to connect students with the resources they need for learning and growth. We understand that families and students may have strong emotions and questions about safety measures, including mandatory masking, vaccines and testing requirements. However, keeping children home from school to protest a COVID-19 vaccine requirement announced by Gov. Gavin Newsom, as posts on some social media outlets are suggesting, would only result in lost learning time for our students. Regular school attendance has an enormous impact on a student's academic success beginning as early as kindergarten and continuing through high school.

The Merced County Office of Education and the 20 school districts in the county have no control over the proposed mandate, which would treat the COVID-19 vaccine similarly to the 10 vaccines on the list already required by California law for students attending K-12 schools. The mandate would not apply until COVID-19 vaccines are given full authorization by the Food and Drug Administration. Exemptions for both medical reasons and personal belief would continue to be available, unless the state legislature votes otherwise.

We are also aware of planned protests at County Offices of Education across California, including MCOE, and respect First Amendment rights for people to peacefully and legally assemble. Peaceful protests are an important part of our American history and we want our students to learn from us that when this pandemic is over, we will all still be Americans who share the same values regarding personal expression.

From providing regular meals, safe spaces, emotional and mental health supports, trusted adults, and positive interaction with their peers, the importance of ensuring routines and consistency with school time can't be overstated. People may disagree about the methods schools are required to follow, but I hope we can all agree that keeping our schools safe and open is what's best for our students. Let's keep the conversation going and be mindful that our children are watching.

Together, we can make sure our children have what they need to thrive and be successful in school this year.