MESSAGE FROM STATE SUPERINTENDENT REGARDING VACCINATIONS

Students benefit from in-person learning, and safely returning to in-person instruction in the fall 2021 is a priority. Unless there are mitigating circumstances, we expect the vast majority of students across the state to return to in-person instruction, all day, for five days each week.

The Alabama Department of Public Health (ADPH) continues to advise Alabamians who are eligible for COVID-19 vaccines to get vaccinated as quickly as possible in order to avoid contraction and spread of the disease. The Pfizer vaccine is the only COVID-19 vaccine currently authorized for ages 12 and older. Currently, our county health departments are giving the Moderna vaccine, which is authorized for ages 18 and older. Other providers, such as hospitals and some pharmacies, are giving the Pfizer vaccine. These other providers may also be offering the Johnson and Johnson vaccine, which is currently not authorized for those under 18 years of age.

In coordination with ADPH, we are encouraging adults in the school community to get vaccinated or to speak with their medical provider about getting vaccinated. We are encouraging parents to follow ADPH advice and speak with their children’s medical provider about vaccination. Nevertheless, there is no plan to require the COVID-19 vaccine for students in the K-12 setting.

Parents and adults in the school community should be mindful that COVID-19 continues to spread in our state and around the globe. It is classified as a notifiable disease, meaning that positive cases will continue to require sustained isolation/quarantine for an appropriate number of days according to the current restrictions in place at the time of diagnosis. Close contacts (i.e. those who are found to have been within 6 feet of a positive case for 15 minutes, cumulative over a 24 hour period, or the “6-15 rule”) will also continue to be ordered into isolation/quarantine. The exception to this rule is that those close contacts who are fully vaccinated will not be subject to quarantine/isolation.

Because fully vaccinated adults and students will not be subject to quarantine/isolation, our chances of having an uninterrupted school year are obviously much greater as the percentage of fully vaccinated people in our school communities increases. The more of our folks who are vaccinated, the better our chances.

There are challenges that lie ahead for this upcoming school year. For instance, students under age 12 are not eligible for vaccination. This makes it even more important for elementary teachers and other adults to be vaccinated. In other scenarios, as some older students are vaccinated and others are not, it may lead to program disruptions in this upcoming school year.
For instance, if a positive case were to occur on a volleyball team, other members of the team and/or coaches, managers, scorekeepers, etc. are likely to be identified as close contacts. These close contacts will have to be quarantined/isolated, leading to a disruption for the entire squad and their competitors - except that those who are vaccinated will not be subject to the quarantine/isolation.

Ultimately, it remains the personal decision of each adult and parent as to whether to take the vaccine. As state superintendent, I want each person in our statewide school community (more than 1 million people) to understand the implications and possible impacts of their decisions on themselves and others. At every opportunity I have encouraged everyone from teachers to local school leaders to parents to speak with their medical providers about the benefits of vaccinations. Medical providers can also provide specific information on any possible side effects or concerns. For more information about vaccination, visit COVID-19 Vaccine | Alabama Department of Public Health (ADPH) (alabamapublichealth.gov).

Eric G. Mackey
State Superintendent
July 20, 2021

Eric G. Mackey, Ed.D.
State Superintendent of Education
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Dear Dr. Mackey:

I hope this letter finds you doing well. I am reaching out to you about COVID-19 vaccination in children and especially would like to discuss the risks and benefits of vaccination of school children in Alabama.

As you are probably aware, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP) recently reported the rare occurrence of heart muscle inflammation (also known as myocarditis) in a small number of mRNA COVID-19 vaccine recipients, mostly young males who were between the ages of 12-29 years. This condition generally occurred four or more days after the second dose of vaccine, and in those children of school age, (ages 12-17), the rate of myocarditis was found to be 62.8 cases per million second doses of vaccine. Most of these cases had only mild symptoms and the children recovered without the need for any specific therapy. This small number of cases was detected because of the rigorous safety monitoring processes that are in place for these vaccines, but unfortunately there are some in the public who have misunderstood these reports to claim that the vaccines are not safe for children. These claims are simply not true.

Since myocarditis can occur with many other childhood infections or even without a recognized cause, and because of the potential complications that can arise from becoming infected with the COVID-19 virus in those who remain unvaccinated, CDC and ACIP looked at all reported cases of myocarditis in order to calculate the benefits versus the risks of vaccination in young persons. Their review found that, for every million second doses of COVID-19 vaccine, based upon the current data in males age 12-17 years of age, approximately 5,700 cases of COVID-19 would be prevented, including 215 hospitalizations, 71 ICU admissions, and 2 deaths within the group. Given that most cases of myocarditis resolve without treatment, the benefits of
vaccination clearly outweigh the risks. The ACIP, the CDC, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), and the Alabama Department of Public Health all continue to support vaccination for all persons 12 years of age and older, in order to reduce the severity of COVID-19 disease and control the pandemic.

Please remember that COVID-19 can be a significant disease in children. In Alabama, about 9.7 percent of cases of COVID-19 disease have been in persons 5-17 years of age, and this group represents 1.3 percent of Alabama’s overall hospitalizations, with some children experiencing extended stays in intensive care and requiring mechanical ventilation. At least 108 children in Alabama have developed Multisystem Inflammatory Syndrome of Childhood (MIS-C), although fortunately, none of Alabama's MIS-C children have died of this condition so far. While children generally do better than adults when infected with this virus, there are still many children who are experiencing severe long-term complications. This is not a benign illness for our young people.

Thanks for your consideration, and please let me know if there is any other information I can provide.

Sincerely,

Scott Harris, M.D., M.P.H.
State Health Officer

SH/PV