

# Teachers' unions, doctors agree: Vaccines, masks crucial for return-to-school

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(HealthDay)—Schools are reopening as the Delta variant surges across

America, a scary prospect for educators and parents alike.

But experts representing teachers and doctors say reopening must happen for the sake of students, and a combo of vaccination and safety measures will help keep kids and staff safe.

Kids have suffered during the pandemic, and they need in-person schooling this year, Dr. Angela Myers, division director of infectious diseases with Children's Mercy Kansas City, said in a [HealthDay Now interview](#).

"What we know from the data is that when kids were in [school](#) full-time, they learned better and their mental health was better," Myers said. "We know what the right thing to do is, and we know how to keep kids safe and keep kids healthy and keep them where they need to be, which is in school."

The problem is that the Delta variant is much more contagious than the original COVID-19 strain, Myers noted. One infected person will typically spread Delta to five others, as opposed to two others with earlier strains.

"Early on in the pandemic, kids made up a very small proportion of people getting infected," Myers said. "It was around 2%, and then we saw it grow over the course of the year. In most recent weeks, it's been around 15% of infections have been in children. That's a huge difference."

Kids still are less likely to get the kind of severe illness that adults endure, but it's a numbers game, Myers said. Children and teens are one of the largest unprotected populations in the United States, which means they are likely to become infected in larger numbers.

"When you see more kids getting infected because the virus is more contagious, you're going to see more children in the hospital, more children with severe disease in the ICU, and you're going to see an increase in deaths," Myers said. "That just stands to reason."

Vaccination is key to keeping [school kids](#) safe, particularly those younger than 12 for whom no shot is approved yet, said Myers and American Federation of Teachers (AFT) President Randi Weingarten.

In fact, America's two largest teachers' unions are now backing [vaccine](#) mandates for staff as the school year draws near.

### **Support for vaccine mandates**

The 3-million-member strong National Education Association has announced its outright support for vaccine mandates, while the AFT is encouraging representatives of its 1.7 million members to work with employers regarding policies that require either vaccination or regular COVID-19 testing.

"We initially thought the best way to do this was voluntarily, and if you look at it 90% of educators have gotten vaccinations in a volitional way," Weingarten told [HealthDay Now](#). "But the circumstances have changed because of the Delta variant, and we know that vaccines are the single most important way for people to be safe."

The Broward County School Board is considering a vaccine mandate for staff, in the wake of three educators dying from COVID-19 within 24 hours about a week before reopening, local school board member Debra Hixon said in a separate [HealthDay Now interview](#).

"We are actually looking into the legalities of being able to mandate vaccines at this time for our staff," Hixon said. "There's a little question

on if that's possible because the vaccine does not have a full approval by the FDA."

That could soon change, with full FDA approval of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine for people ages 12 and older expected on Monday.

But the lack of a vaccine approved for kids younger than 12 means that COVID-19 shots can't join the list of other vaccinations required for school, Myers and Weingarten said.

"I don't see that happening before it's approved," Myers said. "There are multiple vaccines that are required for school, and those have been shown over decades to save lives. Millions of lives have been saved by requiring kids to get the MMR vaccine, for example, for measles and mumps and rubella."

Educators and pediatricians must continue to promote vaccination for kids 12 and older, fewer than half of whom have taken the shot, Myers added.

"What I would really like to stress is, there's still time," Myers said. "Get your vaccine. You may be starting school before you're fully vaccinated, and that's OK. You're going to be using your mitigation measures. But please, please consider getting the vaccine now, because the sooner you get it the sooner you're protected, and you're protecting your peers at school."

Schools also should enforce masking and social distancing measures to keep everyone there safe, Myers and Weingarten said.

"No one wants to wear a mask," Weingarten said. "I'm an asthmatic. I know how labored it is to breathe with a mask. But if we know this is what's going to help stop or eradicate or stem the tide of transmissibility

with this [contagious disease](#), then we have to do that to keep people safe. And the more we do that now, the faster we might be able to get rid of our masks."

## **Schools plan for quarantines**

Weingarten is confident that most schools have the ability to create social distancing of at least three feet in classrooms.

"Most classrooms can actually accommodate three-foot physical distancing," Weingarten said. "We should just be ingenious about using different spaces to be able to do that. Let's have a can-do problem-solving approach, as opposed to a can't-do."

School districts also need to create [contingency plans](#) for outbreaks, and make sure that parents are fully informed of those plans, the experts said.

"We have to make sure parents know what the protocols are if there's an outbreak," Weingarten said. "They want to know. They need to know that. We need to make that clear and we need to make it transparent."

For example, Broward County has a protocol in place for children who must quarantine, Hixon said.

"We have a learning plan in place for them. There will be cameras on in the classroom, so if a student is in quarantine they can still watch their teacher, although the teacher won't be able to interact," Hixon said. "If a whole class has to quarantine, then the teacher would go back to that remote teaching that we had prior to the school year so that we can continue learning with our students."

It's understandably a bit deflating to be where Americans are now,

Weingarten admitted.

"I think we had hoped July 1 that we were full-speed ahead and COVID was in the rear-view mirror," Weingarten said. "But one thing we've learned about COVID is that the uncertainty of it is there each and every day."

But she stressed that all kids truly need to get back to school, so officials have to do everything it takes to ensure a safe reopening.

"We have to make sure we make it safe and healthy for our school community—for our kids, for our parents and for our educators," Weingarten said. "I think that if we can do that, then we're going to see a real change in this country from the fear and agitation we have right now to a sense of confidence that we are taking care of our kids."

**More information:** The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has more about [schools and COVID-19](#).

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