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Why Experts Say Teachers Should Be Prioritized For The COVID-19 Vaccine

If we want any real chance at getting kids back into their typical routines, educators and school staff should be first in line, they argue.

By Catherine Pearson

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FORECAST

ST. PETERSBURG

8PM
52°
CLEAR NIGHT

11PM
52°
CLEAR NIGHT

8AM
47°
PARTLY CLOUDY

COVID-19 IN FLA
TODAY: 8,797
CASES: 1,008,166
DEATHS: 18,679

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02:04
CDC: healthcare workers, long-term care residents should be first to get COVID vaccine

6:02
53°
abc ACTION NEWS

The U.K. has become the [first country to authorize a COVID-19 vaccine](#) for emergency use, and the United States [likely will not be far behind](#). It is plausible that there will be two [COVID-19](#) vaccines available for use here before the end of this year.



Prevention [has now recommended](#) that health care workers and nursing home residents should be the first to get a COVID-19 vaccine.

But who comes next? As a debate develops over how to prioritize distribution among high-risk individuals, including essential workers and older adults, there is a growing push to put teachers on the next rung of the priority list.

This week, 12 of the country's largest [education organizations](#), including the major teachers unions and National PTA, joined together to urge the CDC to prioritize educators and school staff. Here's why.

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Teachers and school staff come into contact with a lot of people

The CDC has identified [several “distinctive factors”](#) that impact



contact with kids and other adults throughout the day, even if schools take pains to maintain social distance. Duration is also a factor. Teachers and school staff are indoors with children for hours at a time, every day.

And those children may be silent spreaders. According to one recent estimate, [one-third of children who have COVID-19 show no symptoms](#) so they're unlikely to be identified unless schools are doing robust testing.

Of course, schools that reopened for in-person learning during the pandemic can — and have — done a lot to [prevent COVID-19 spread](#), like cutting class sizes and adopting a hybrid model, keeping students in cohorts, and requiring masks.

But in-person learning puts teachers and school staff at risk.

“A child over the course of a school day — and this really depends on how the school's flow is structured — will probably only have contact with a small group of other students,” said [Dr. Sandra Kesh](#), an infectious disease specialist with Westmed Medical Group. “Teachers on the other hand, they're exposed to large groups of kids every day. And then those kids are going back into their homes.”

That's one reason she believes teachers and school staff should be among the first to be vaccinated.

“I'm very much in support of moving teachers up the line of priorities,”



JOHN MOORE VIA GETTY IMAGES

Third grade teacher Cara Denison speaks to students in November while live-streaming her class via Google Meet at Rogers International School in Stamford, Connecticut.

Kids might be last in line for a vaccine

While COVID-19 vaccine development has been astoundingly fast, the process has been — and will continue to be — slower for children. [The American Academy of Pediatrics has called for kids to be included](#) in



begun testing its vaccine on children age 12 and up). Experts predict the vaccine may not be available to most children in the U.S. until sometime in the next academic year.

“This research takes time. If this does not begin soon, it will be less likely a vaccine will be available for children before the next school year,” Dr. Yvonne Maldonado, chair of the AAP Committee on Infectious Diseases, [said in a press release last month](#).

That makes vaccines for teachers and school staff particularly important. The primary benefit of a COVID-19 vaccination is to the teachers themselves.

“But then there is that important secondary benefit of limiting spread to all the kids they have contact with over the course of the day,” Kesh explained.

So vaccinating teachers and school staff also decreases the risk of COVID-19 for students who may not be able to get the vaccine yet themselves — as well as their families.

Vaccinating teachers could help solve major staffing problems

One of the biggest challenges administrators have faced in reopening schools has simply been staffing. There has long been a teacher shortage in the U.S., exacerbated during the pandemic by the fact that an



a higher risk for serious complications from COVID-19. In New York City, for example, [more than a quarter of public school teachers](#) have been granted medical exemptions that let them work remotely — which is important to keep them safe, but makes it difficult to staff in-person learning.

The problem has reached a boiling point in districts around the country where [schools have been forced to close](#) as case counts have surged and staff have needed to quarantine.

As one [superintendent in Maine said](#): “We have now entered a stage where we will be going between in-person and remote more frequently than we would like” — simply because there are not enough teachers, and not enough substitutes.

Teachers could help spread public trust in a vaccine

Evidence certainly suggests many Americans are wary of getting vaccinated. Earlier this fall, [half of respondents to a Pew survey](#) said they would probably not or definitely not get vaccinated if an option were available at the time. [Other surveys have indicated](#) that parents are less likely to get their children vaccinated against COVID-19 than they are to vaccinate themselves.

Groups like the AAP know this is a problem. “Fear and mistrust of routine immunizations has been on the rise in this nation largely due to



and that movement is already actively promoting misinformation about a COVID-19 vaccine, [it has warned](#).

It's unclear what impact vaccinating teachers, administrators and other school staff might have on COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy among parents, but they are [generally well-trusted professions](#). In [their appeal to the CDC's advisory committee](#), national educational groups acknowledged this, arguing that if teachers are among the first to get vaccinated that could help increase public trust. "The education community could be a 'trusted messenger' to help ease anxieties and increase the trust factor," the groups said.

Experts are clear that in order for the new COVID-19 vaccines to bring the pandemic to an end, vaccination must be widespread.

"I think you're going to see this big rush of people who are the believers, who want to get the vaccine and have this peace of mind," said Kesh.

"What I worry about is the group of people who are not going to want to get vaccinated because of their concerns about safety. And then the question will be: Do we have enough herd immunity by those who do get vaccinated to mitigate the spread by those who don't get vaccinated?"

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Experts are still learning about COVID-19. The information in this story is what was known or available as of publication, but guidance can change as scientists discover more about the virus. Please [check the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) for the most updated recommendations.

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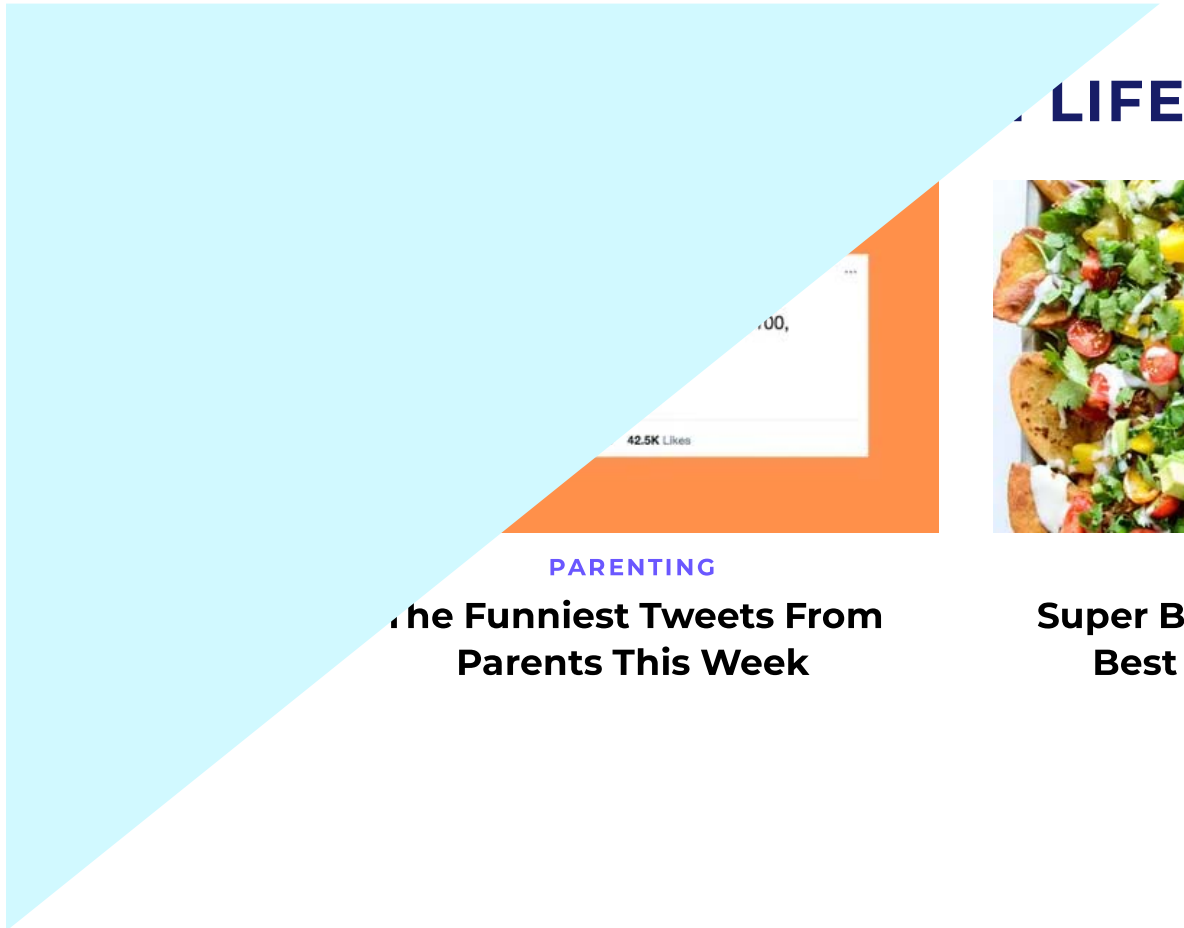
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Catherine Pearson

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