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ALERT TOP STORY

Corvallis parents protest potential COVID-19 vaccine mandate in school district

Maddie Pfeifer

Oct 9, 2021



Protesters line the sidewalk in front of the Benton County Courthouse on Saturday morning.

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People from Corvallis, Eugene, Lebanon, Sweet Home and everywhere in between gathered at the Benton County Courthouse on Saturday morning to protest a potential vaccine mandate for middle and high school students in the

Corvallis School District.

The protest was organized by a group of Corvallis parents. These parents don't want Corvallis School District Superintendent Ryan Noss to go through with instituting a COVID-19 vaccine requirement for all medically eligible 12-18-year-olds in order to attend school in person.

Noss announced that he was investigating the possibility of implementing the vaccine requirement for middle and high school students during a CSD board meeting on Sept. 23. Noss is expected to provide an update on the district's decision during a board meeting Thursday.

“(This event) is really just to inform the community about what’s going on and that the Corvallis School Board actually may have the power to dictate the medicine that our kids take,” Melissa Norland said. “The vaccine should be a parent’s choice whether their child gets it. I feel like the school board should be focusing their energy on a quality education for our students and not this mandatory vaccine.”

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Norland has a child who is a Crescent Valley High School sophomore.

Parents weren't the only ones in attendance on Saturday. Middle and high school students — and even younger children — stood outside the courthouse holding signs protesting the potential mandate.

Ava Tangney is a sophomore at Crescent Valley High School. She said she plans to request an exemption from the vaccine should the school district move forward with the mandate.

“It’s not fair that they’re pushing the vaccine on us,” Tangney said. “The side that pushes the vaccine and talks about equality are going to keep kids from going to school.”

Attendees weren't just from Corvallis. Some didn't have any direct connections to the Corvallis School District. For example, Cindy Nelson drove up from Eugene to protest the mandate.

Nelson said she works with children who have suffered injuries from vaccines and that she has personally suffered injuries from vaccines. This is why she felt the need to drive to Corvallis and spend the morning protesting, she said.

As attendees waved signs saying “My child is not your guinea pig,” many drivers honked in support of the rally’s message. Occasionally, other drivers expressed their opposition to the group’s beliefs with comments such as “get vaccinated.”

During the rally, two speakers addressed the crowd. Dana Robinson, a board member of Oregonians for Medical Freedom, said she was impressed with the event’s turn out.

“When people see others speak, it encourages them to also speak out,” Robinson said. “It’s so important. There are so many people that do not want the school boards to manage these vaccines.”

Following Robinson’s remarks, Albany functional nutritionist Luke Yamaguchi spoke to the crowd. He said he believes that Noss and the school district are well-intentioned. However, he alleged that the vaccine mandate will promote segregation in schools and lead to unvaccinated students being seen as “dirty.”

“After all that we’ve been through with the COVID pandemic, wouldn’t it be better to bring our children together rather than to segregate them apart from one another?” Yamaguchi asked.

David Eveland, who has a daughter at Crescent Valley High School and helped organize the rally, said the school district should not have the authority to force blanket medical decisions onto students.

“It’s amazing how many people showed up and want to stand up for the medical freedom of their children,” he said.

Among the spectators was Oregon State Sen. Sara Gelsler Blouin. Gelsler Blouin represents District 8, which encompasses Corvallis, Albany, Philomath, Millersburg, Tangent and unincorporated parts of Linn and Benton counties.

Gelsler Blouin said she was in attendance to hear what some of her constituents feel on the topic of vaccine mandates in schools.

“It’s important to listen to everyone,” she said. “I appreciate how strongly everyone feels about this. I know some of my other constituents feel very strong the other way ... I’m proud of the work that Ryan is doing.”

She added that she communicated with Noss and verified that students with medical exemptions would be able to attend in-person classes.

During the rally, protesters were urged to write to Noss and board members. Sheets with board members' contact information were passed out during the event.

“This isn't an anti-vaccine message that we want to send,” Norland said. “This is an anti-mandate on our kids message.”

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Reporter
