

Vaccinate to stem the tide of COVID-19

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Students and staff are returning to school amid the fourth wave of COVID-19 infections and deaths, the third straight school year under the cloud of the coronavirus, and more than 40 percent of eligible Americans—those 12 and older—having not gotten their second or even first vaccination. All this leaves me anguishing over what it will take to break this nightmarish cycle.

Schools have no higher priority than protecting the lives of students and staff—an obligation that has taken on new urgency during the worst pandemic in a century. Vaccination is the single most effective tool to protect ourselves and others from serious illness and death from COVID-19. It weighs heavily on me that children under 12 and people with certain medical conditions cannot get vaccinated against the coronavirus. For all these reasons, my union has urged everyone who is eligible to be vaccinated to do so. And this week, the executive council of the American Federation of Teachers unanimously approved a policy to work with our employers on vaccination policies and requirements, including mandates. In labor terms, that means bargaining the impact of these policies so that we have a voice in how they're implemented.

Most of my members have stepped up—90 percent of the AFT's education members are already vaccinated. But as I crisscross the country for the AFT's Back to School for All campaign, I have met people who are hesitant, scared or opposed to the vaccines, so we need to engage, ask questions and share information.

The effects of having, or not having, vaccines run throughout our nation's history. George Washington required his troops to be vaccinated against smallpox. Franklin Delano Roosevelt was stricken and eventually paralyzed by [polio](#), a disease that killed thousands of American children each year and paralyzed many more, until a vaccine was developed. Today, all 50 states have vaccine requirements for schoolchildren, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has reported that over the course of two decades, immunizations prevented 732,000 [child deaths](#) in the United States.

But there has been an avalanche of [misleading](#) claims and outright lies peddled about both COVID-19 and vaccines—by Russian networks, bots and even elected leaders—and it is putting lives at risk.

Officials have wrestled with how to break through to people who have opted not to get

vaccinated. Some holdouts might be convinced by final authorization of these vaccines by the Food and Drug Administration. Others might be swayed because they worry about getting slapped with a [steep hospital bill](#). Some have gotten vaccinated after seeing a loved one battle COVID-19.

The tools to emerge from this crisis only work if we use them.

Here's another reason to get vaccinated: Healthcare personnel are exhausted, frustrated and traumatized. Hospitals are overrun, many with few or no available ICU beds. With COVID-19 patients overwhelming our health systems, it's an especially dangerous time to have a heart attack, a car accident, a burst appendix or any other need for emergency treatment.

Numerous employers have already mandated COVID-19 vaccines for their employees, including the Walt Disney Co., United Airlines, the state of California and the U.S. military. Several AFT affiliates are already supporting their employers' vaccination policies—in Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, New York City, Washington, D.C., and other cities. Many require employees to be vaccinated or be subject to regular testing.

The Delta variant has created added urgency. While we believe education and voluntary adoption are still the best ways to get people

vaccinated, it may not be sufficient. That's why we must work with our employers on workplace vaccination policies and ensure they are implemented fairly—so that people who need to be vaccinated can get accommodations, everyone has access to vaccines and time to get them, and medical or religious exemptions are honored.

Our union is doing its part. As part of our back-to-school campaign, AFT unions are sponsoring vaccine information sessions and clinics, others are welcoming families to tour schools and see the safety measures in place, and many are offering fairs to provide families with books, face masks, school supplies and information.

Our kids need to be in school this fall and stay in school. That's why we continue to advocate for health and safety mitigation measures such as masking, physical distancing, surveillance testing and ventilation upgrades. It is unconscionable that some governors are prohibiting officials from requiring face masks to be worn in schools.

Unlike at the start of the pandemic—when much about the virus was misunderstood, there were few effective treatments, global mask shortages left many unprotected and there were no vaccines to protect against the virus—these surges are preventable. We have the tools to emerge from this crisis, but they only work if we use them.

As students, families and staff return to school, I am grateful for how far science and medicine have come, and I am mindful of how urgent it is that we move ahead with them. Please be safe and get vaccinated.



Weingarten (in white mask) at a vaccination clinic and voter registration drive at Gateway MST Elementary and Middle Schools in St. Louis, Aug. 7.

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