



Vaccine Attitudes Focus Groups: Educators

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The [Utah Health and Economic Recovery Outreach \(HERO\) Project](#) began in May 2020 as a collaborative statewide testing and analysis project to understand the community-based spread of Covid-19. The goal of the HERO Project is to collect and utilize high-quality local data to help inform decision-makers seeking to guide Utah's citizens and economy through a safe return to normalcy. One year later, the project team is wrapping up its reporting on community testing, impacts of Covid-19 on Utah businesses and consumers, school testing, and vaccine uptake, impact, and implications. This report summarizes and synthesizes focus groups related to vaccines. More information on the HERO Project's past and current work can be found in the project's [previous reporting](#).

Sixteen educators from Utah's K-12 system participated in two focus groups, each approximately an hour long and included eight educators. The focus groups took place in the late spring and early summer of 2021. Researchers from the University of Utah Department of Internal Medicine's Qualitative Research Core worked on behalf of the HERO Project team to identify key themes from the focus group discussions, which formed the foundation for this report.

Key Takeaways

Educators had a variety of experiences teaching during the pandemic and equally broad thoughts on the Covid-19 vaccine.

Educator Experience

- Educators struggled to teach both online and in-person students at the same time; they struggled with the time and effort of content creation and feeling connected to students.
- School administration took Covid-19 seriously and provided resources and policies to keep schools clean.
- Most educators were happy to return to in-person teaching, especially with the drop in student performance and accountability that occurred with online learning.
- Students struggled with attendance and accountability, but motivation and performance increased when in-person teaching resumed.

Vaccine Attitudes

- Participants indicated lack of knowledge about long-term effects as the primary risk of the vaccine, as well as how the vaccine may affect pregnancy. Regardless, they expressed a sense of safety and relief in receiving the vaccine, knowing it would reduce the risk of spreading the virus to others who are more vulnerable. A few disliked the lack of long-term research and the politicization of the vaccine.
- Vaccine distribution—signing up and receiving the vaccine—was quick and easy for most participants, but they acknowledged the difficulties their elderly friends and family had.
- Medical professionals and institutions, research articles, and family and friends were the most trusted source for information regarding the vaccine, while the media was the least trusted source for vaccine information. Some felt information was being withheld from the public and there were feelings of being compelled to receive the vaccine without enough information.

K-12 Educator Experiences and Perceptions of the Vaccine

K-12 educators were asked questions regarding their experience teaching during the pandemic, as well as their perceptions of the benefits of risks of the vaccine, their sources of vaccine information, and logistics of receiving the vaccine. Twelve educators had received both doses of their vaccine, while four had received neither dose.

Educator Experience Teaching During the Pandemic

During the pandemic, teachers faced challenges related to transitioning to online learning, often while simultaneously continuing in-person learning. Participants expressed difficulties in regards to a lack of personalized education materials for children and the lack of online teaching experience of substitute teachers. In the second half of the school year, educators felt teaching became easier to manage than the first half. One felt the pandemic led her to be more creative and adaptable, while another felt more bonded to her fellow educators.

"For me, it's been pretty tiring because not only, especially at the beginning of the year as I've had students go out in quarantine, I was teaching in class, but also having to make sure that all my content was also online. So it's having to make a lot of content, a lot of videos... That's just exhausting."

Many educators also felt supported throughout the pandemic by their administration. Some participants had remained on-site throughout the pandemic, mitigating the pressure to return to in-person teaching, while those that did have to transition did not feel returning in person was an issue. However, one participant knew of other educators who had expressed concerns about returning to in-person teaching. Hygiene and safety were taken very seriously in schools and none of the participants expressed that their school handled hygiene and safety poorly. Many also received cleaning supplies and funding to purchase cleaning supplies.

"I've had a very, very supportive admin team and they've done everything they can to make it--other than making us do Canvas. That has not been easy. That was a big learning curve for a lot of us, but outside of that we've had a very supportive admin team."

Student attendance and accountability were difficult throughout online learning, as was participants' ability to feel connected to students. Once in-person, student compliance with the mask mandate varied, with participants reporting that student athletes and special education students struggled the most to comply. Some participants said student motivation increased after returning to in-person classes, and others said performance went up as well.

"I think last year when we went to the soft closure and to the shutdown, I think there was a huge lack of accountability. I think educators were asked to almost give them a pass, whether they deserved it or not, and I think it created some really bad habits. It has taken quite some time to get them kind of over that, and I think now that the year's winding down, I think a lot of the students feel like they're just done, like they should be out of school."

"And like [another participant] said, we have created incredible amounts of online content for our students who are not physically in the classroom, and it makes me cry when I go and look at the YouTube number of watched times because it's a waste of my time. They're not being utilized, and so a lot of extra work on that."

Attitudes on the Benefits and Risks of Getting the Vaccine

When asked about the benefits of the vaccine, many participants shared they felt the vaccine helped reduce the spread of Covid-19, especially to vulnerable populations. Many educators also felt less worry about unknowingly spreading Covid-19 to these vulnerable populations. Overall, many participants viewed the Covid-19 vaccine as beneficial for reducing the spread of the virus and therefore providing relief and feelings of safety.

"I took some time to really try to research it and really try to think through it, the pros and cons, and think through what I should do and what I wanted to do for myself. And I think that everyone deserves to have that opportunity and have that choice."

When asked about the risks of receiving the vaccine, educators shared worries about a lack of long-term research on the vaccine. While some participants did say the lack of long-term side effects was a net positive of the vaccine, others felt the lack of information regarding the long-term side effects, potential allergic reactions, and the vaccine's potential negative impacts on pregnancy carried unreasonable risk. Others were concerned about the lack of research and lack of proven efficacy, and the possible dangerous side effects that were unknown because of that.

"So some risks I can see is that there's no long-term outcomes from these. There's no studies that are long-term beyond a year."

"There's science, there's evidence, you can draw conclusions, but you really don't know. And so the unknown is I think maybe where some people get some hesitation."

"I simply just don't want to get [the vaccine]. Not enough research for long-term side effects or other effects, and six months of whatchamacallit doesn't seem worth it to me."

Sources of Vaccine Information

Participants said little about the type of information they received about the vaccine and focused mainly on the source of the information they received. Many of the educators strongly disliked feeling compelled or coerced into getting the vaccine, and similarly disliked the politicization of the vaccine, and chose to seek out their own information on the vaccine. One educator felt the media made finding reputable information difficult, and another felt information was being withheld from the public, resulting in a lack of transparency.

"Everybody's just saying get it. They're not saying why, they're not saying how it's made. You got to go up and look that up yourself and if you do there's so many conflicting things."

Many turned to trusted medical professionals and institutions, such as Dr. Fauci, the CDC, and their personal doctors. Some wanted to go directly to research articles, but paywalls made it difficult to access this information.

"I would have to read a couple of different doctors and comparing those doctors and the different information that they provide and finding the links between them."

Others turned to friends and family as a source of information, some of whom were in the medical field. These conversations and information gathered led to attitudes about the vaccine changing over time, but did not result in all those who put in these efforts deciding to receive the vaccine.

Logistics of Receiving the Vaccine

Many of the educators believed the vaccine distribution process was quick and easy, both in terms of signing up for and receiving the vaccine. Some were impressed with the way the state of Utah handled distributing the vaccines. However, some participants still had family and friends, particularly the elderly, who had difficulty in understanding where and how to schedule an appointment to receive the vaccine. One participant suggested more outreach to those who experienced difficulties to provide guidance on scheduling. Despite any difficulties, all those who received both doses of the vaccine were able to easily get their vaccine.

One participant who did receive the vaccine felt the public was being manipulated into receiving the vaccine. Another participant did not think the vaccine was necessary, stating Covid-19 is not as deadly as the flu.

"I think they made it very easy for teachers here in Jordan School District, but then I also feel like just for the community at large, if that's part of your question as well, I think initially, when they first put it out for the older age groups, it was really difficult. I think part of that was, I know my parents and my in-laws had a hard time maneuvering the system to get themselves registered."

"I really liked the speed. I was pleased with how fast I was able to get a vaccine. I signed up within one minute of getting that email so that I could get the vaccine."

Other Considerations

"I think pulling testing and masks will decrease the number of students that get the vaccine." (one participant)

The Covid-19 vaccine brought feelings of hesitancy and uncertainty to some K-12 school educators when it was first announced. However, over time and through research, new information, and conversations with others, some of these educators became comfortable enough to receive the vaccine. Some remain against receiving the vaccine due to the lack of research and potential side effects, but ultimately most of this cohort had received both doses of the vaccine.

Next Steps

HERO Project will publish additional reports of focus groups held with nurses, high school students, long-term care facility staff, people from rural areas, and women. These reports will help to inform the state's reflection, evaluation, and adaptation of their pandemic response with regard to public perception, concerns, and experiences receiving the Covid-19 vaccine.

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