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TRANSCRIPT: GOVERNOR PHIL SCOTT AND DR. MARK LEVINE DISCUSS DELTA, VACCINE EFFECTIVENESS AND PANDEMIC DIVISIVENESS AT WEEKLY COVID-19 BRIEFING

08 SEPTEMBER 2021

Montpelier, Vt. – At a press conference Tuesday, Governor Phil Scott and Health Commissioner Mark Levine, MD, both addressed the growing divisiveness and heated rhetoric during the current Delta wave, reiterated the effectiveness of vaccines, and encouraged Vermonters to make informed choices and come together to continue moving the state forward.

The Administration also announced an update to the Agency of Education advisory memo for schools, which extends the length of the universal masking requirement in schools to October 4. Schools have been asked – and all but one has implemented – a policy to require masking for all those in schools through the first 10 instructional days and then consider lifting the requirement for the eligible population (12 and over) if 80% of eligible students have received both doses of the vaccine. An updated [advisory memo](http://web.archive.org/web/20210909232248/https://education.vermont.gov/sites/aoe/files/documents/education-vermont-french-levine-advisory-covid19-prevention-measures-fall-2021-updated.pdf) (<http://web.archive.org/web/20210909232248/https://education.vermont.gov/sites/aoe/files/documents/education-vermont-french-levine-advisory-covid19-prevention-measures-fall-2021-updated.pdf>) is available on the [Agency of Education's COVID resources page](http://web.archive.org/web/20210909232248/https://education.vermont.gov/news/covid-19-guidance-vermont-schools) (<http://web.archive.org/web/20210909232248/https://education.vermont.gov/news/covid-19-guidance-vermont-schools>).

A full transcript of the Governor and Dr. Levine's remarks are embedded below. [Click here to view the full press conference](http://web.archive.org/web/20210909232248/https://www.orcamedia.net/show/governors-press-conference)

(<http://web.archive.org/web/20210909232248/https://www.orcamedia.net/show/governors-press-conference>), including additional remarks from Secretary of Education Dan French, Human Services Secretary Mike Smith, and the state's [weekly data and modeling presentation](http://web.archive.org/web/20210909232248/https://dfr.vermont.gov/document/covid-19-modeling-september-9-2021) (<http://web.archive.org/web/20210909232248/https://dfr.vermont.gov/document/covid-19-modeling-september-9-2021>) from Financial Regulation Commissioner Michael Pieciak.

To find out where to get a free, safe and effective COVID-19 vaccine today, visit [healthvermont.gov/myvaccine](http://web.archive.org/web/20210909232248/https://healthvermont.gov/myvaccine) (<http://web.archive.org/web/20210909232248/https://healthvermont.gov/myvaccine>).

Transcript of Governor Scott's remarks:

Good afternoon, I hope everyone had the chance to enjoy the long weekend.

As you know, last month I announced we were moving forward with a vaccine requirement for state employees in certain areas, like Corrections, the Veterans' Home and the State Psychiatric Hospital, which went into effect on September 1.

At last week's press conference, I said we were beginning discussions on expanding the policy to more state employees. We have now notified the State Employees Union that, effective September 15, all State of Vermont executive branch employees will be required to attest they are vaccinated or be subject to at least weekly testing and mandatory masking at work.

As I've said, we want as many people as possible to get the vaccine – because we know they work – and we feel it's the best way to put this pandemic behind us. I continue to urge other employers to follow suit.

Next, as you know, in early August, my Administration issued an [advisory memo](http://web.archive.org/web/20210909232248/https://education.vermont.gov/sites/aoe/files/documents/edu-vdh-memo-french-levine-advisory-covid19-prevention-measures-fall-2021-updated.pdf) (<http://web.archive.org/web/20210909232248/https://education.vermont.gov/sites/aoe/files/documents/edu-vdh-memo-french-levine-advisory-covid19-prevention-measures-fall-2021-updated.pdf>) urging schools to mandate masks at the beginning of the school year for all students, regardless of age and vaccination status. Despite what you might have heard, we have achieved a near universal mandate with only one small school not following our guidance to institute a masking requirement.

Let me repeat that, because some seem to keep missing it: By encouraging schools to implement the State's recommendations, we've essentially achieved a universal masking requirement in schools, without a State of Emergency.

Now, we did offer an exception after this initial period with a goal of incentivizing vaccinations, which is that once 80% of a school's eligible students have been vaccinated, we recommended schools lift the masking mandate for those over 12. It's important to remember this is only for students over 12 where that group is 80% vaccinated. Our guidance to schools has always been that all those who are ineligible for the vaccine continue to wear masks until they become eligible.

This transition was originally supposed to occur after the first 10 school days, but today we're [updating our advisory memo](http://web.archive.org/web/20210909232248/https://education.vermont.gov/sites/aoe/files/documents/edu-vdh-memo-french-levine-advisory-covid19-prevention-measures-fall-2021-updated.pdf) (<http://web.archive.org/web/20210909232248/https://education.vermont.gov/sites/aoe/files/documents/edu-vdh-memo-french-levine-advisory-covid19-prevention-measures-fall-2021-updated.pdf>) asking schools to maintain the universal masking requirement, regardless of vaccination status, until October 4. We hope by then the Delta wave that has impacted the entire country – though fortunately not anywhere near as severely in Vermont – will have begun to subside.

Secretary French, who foreshadowed this change to superintendents last week, will go into more details in a few moments.

We also wanted to make you aware of a school vaccine incentive program we've been working on. I've Directed the Agency of Education to reserve \$2 million in grant dollars for schools who achieve high vaccination rates. There will be benchmarks with corresponding awards as a school reaches higher percentages. Funds will be awarded to schools when they reach those thresholds and submit grant requests with input from students. Again, Secretary French will go into further detail, but we're hoping to emphasize just how important it is to be vaccinated because it remains the single best tool we have to move from pandemic to endemic.

I'm sure some are wondering whether vaccines make a difference because you've been reading so much about the small percentage of breakthrough cases. But before you arrive at that conclusion, it's important to look at Vermont's data.

As we've learned, the vaccines were designed – first and foremost – to limit severe illness. While we hoped they would nearly eliminate cases, that's not really how vaccines work. The goal is to limit the number of people who are hospitalized or lose their life once vaccinated. And they are doing just that.

As the entire globe has been hit by Delta, Vermont – with the nation's most fully vaccinated population – also has the lowest hospitalization rate. That's not a coincidence.

In short, vaccines continue to save lives; they allow us to do things we had to leave behind in 2020; and they are our best path forward to put this pandemic behind us.

What we also have to acknowledge is that COVID isn't the only virus taking hold right now.

With the Delta wave, has come a wave of divisiveness and anger – a resurgence of polarization that had just started to subside earlier this summer.

If we are truly going to move forward, we have got to reflect on the language we use, the fear and anger these words might stoke, and the wounds we are deepening.

This is the time to rally and pull together because COVID-19 is not going away. We *must* not let it tear us apart, especially as the risks are being significantly reduced through vaccines.

We have already gotten through the hardest part of the pandemic, and we did it together. Let's rise to that challenge again because we *are* beating this virus.

-END-

Transcript of Commissioner Levine's remarks:

I'd like to start off by acknowledging the unique stage of the pandemic we are in now.

Throughout this pandemic, we have all been presented with various points of view related to restrictions, guidance and behavior. Perspectives and opinions we have wrestled with and considered as we sought to

protect Vermonters from the worst effects of COVID-19.

But the challenges of the Delta surge has rekindled and intensified a new level of passion and divisiveness.

Nearly two years in since the first reported case in China, Vermonters have a high degree of fact-based knowledge about the virus, which is a great public health achievement. Yet, I have never seen such differences in people's awareness of, and view of, current conditions.

People who are steadfastly for or against vaccines or masks; people who are pushing for more masks; people who shame the unvaccinated and blame them for current events; people who let their passions turn into unacceptable school board screaming matches and displays of intolerance and incivility in front of children; and people are making their own decisions about what they consider safe, versus risky behaviors, sometimes counter to medical and science-based recommendations.

So, first I want to say, I get it. These times are hard, in a new way, as we navigate a changing reality once again. The term "pandemic fatigue" can't even capture it anymore. It's disappointing and frustrating for all of us, coming as it does after the gains we made in the spring and early summer.

But I must ask you to remember, the enemy is the virus — not one another.

Let's not blame and make enemies of each other. Yes, every case of a highly transmissible virus is potentially preventable, but the spread of virus cannot always be blamed on a specific policy or lack thereof.

We are learning how to manage, prevent, and live with this evolving and even more contagious virus. While there are things we can all do to help prevent spread, the Delta variant is adept at finding ways to move through our communities, and we will continue to see cases. Just about everywhere is dealing with this surge, despite a wide variety of policies, from very few limits to heavier restrictions.

It is my hope that we can all responsibly support and encourage our leaders, school districts, businesses, nursing home administrators, childcare operators, state officials and even our neighbors to do the right thing in practice and in policy.

Despite the increase in cases we are seeing here, Vermont is still in a relatively good position to weather the surge, due to our high vaccination rates – now with more than 76% of eligible Vermonters fully vaccinated.

Vaccination is still our strongest, most protective defense against COVID-19 right now.

Yes, in addition to cases, we can expect to see outbreaks during this current surge. Outbreaks and what we call "situations" – which are cases associated with events and workplaces, for example – are a reflection of the presence of virus in our communities. And a vaccinated population is our best defense.

Two recent outbreaks have illustrated how we need to really pay attention right now to both risks and following everyday prevention guidance.

At a summer camp in central Vermont that had 127 campers and three pods of campers mostly too young to be vaccinated, their activities were mostly outdoors, but there were indoor gatherings on rainy days during which the children did not wear masks. 38 campers tested positive, with 21 in just one pod and 75% were

already infectious by the time we were notified and began investigation. Adults, who were all fully vaccinated, were spared. Other lessons learned are noted on the slide.

And a central Vermont wedding outbreak demonstrates the risk of attending large gatherings, with many families, with food and drink, as illustrated on this next slide.

Such experiences demonstrate and teach us why our current school and overall masking guidance is so critical.

They highlight why we now recommend masks in indoor settings, regardless of vaccination status. And that people should consider any large gathering a possible exposure, and to get tested three to five days afterward, *whether you are vaccinated or not*.

This was the advice we gave before vaccine was available, and it still holds now. I am heartened to see these recommendations gaining traction – if you have been invited to such functions this summer, you know that many invitations require either vaccination or testing. These basic prevention steps can have an impact on how and where this virus spreads. And, importantly, keeping it from doing so.

And as I've said before, if you do test positive or think you might be a close contact of someone who did, you do not need to wait to hear from us. Please [visit our website](http://web.archive.org/web/20210909232248/https://www.healthvermont.gov/covid-19) (<http://web.archive.org/web/20210909232248/https://www.healthvermont.gov/covid-19>) so you can act right away to protect yourself and to prevent further spread.

With this variant, the interval between exposure and the development of symptoms has been quite brief. Because Delta is so contagious, we need your help working even faster to make sure anyone who comes into contact with the virus knows what to do. Think about your calendar, whether you worked, traveled, went to a social gathering, went to school or a medical appointment, and with whom.

I hate to mention the term, but one more thought on so-called breakthrough cases. From LA county we again learn that the rate of infection in people who are unvaccinated is **5 times** the rate of those who have received the vaccine, and the rate of hospitalization – meaning severe illness – is almost 30 times higher if you are unvaccinated.

And from Singapore comes more confirmation that the risk of transmission from a vaccinated person to others remains relatively low, usually occurs during a symptomatic phase, early on, and that viral loads rapidly decrease when the immune system kicks in, making for a very brief window of contagiousness.

Now, with regard to booster shots, let's take a step back – there are still many questions.

Is the current Delta surge and rise in cases and hospitalizations due to the power of Delta itself? Or is Delta overcoming some element of vaccine effectiveness? Or a waning of effectiveness? Is the surge due to a reduction in use of mitigation measures by the population? Will we all need boosters, or just certain populations? Or, most likely, a combination of much of the above.

Evidence coming from Israel is indeed encouraging and speaks to real-time evidence for a booster strategy impacting the Delta surge. Not all of this is peer reviewed yet. And there is further evidence from the companies that make the vaccines that antibody levels will indeed rise after a third dose.

But we are not quite there yet. I encourage patience for the next 10 days. By then, I expect we will have answers to many of these questions and will be prepared for whatever type of large-scale vaccination effort is needed to meet demand, as we were the last time.

And, as always, we will keep everyone informed about what they need to do, when, and how. Please keep checking our website for continually updated information, data and guidance. For example, we have just posted the first of the weekly K-12 school case data reports. You can find it on our [K-12 page](http://web.archive.org/web/20210909232248/https://www.healthvermont.gov/covid-19/your-community/prek-12-schools) (<http://web.archive.org/web/20210909232248/https://www.healthvermont.gov/covid-19/your-community/prek-12-schools>) and the 'COVID in Communities' (<http://web.archive.org/web/20210909232248/https://www.healthvermont.gov/covid-19/current-activity/covid-19-communities>)' pages (same locations as last spring) at [Healthvermont.gov/covid19](https://www.healthvermont.gov/covid19) (<http://web.archive.org/web/20210909232248/https://www.healthvermont.gov/covid-19>).

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