

# Parents, leaders contend COVID vaccine for children will keep schools safer

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*Parents and leaders such as Council member Christina Henderson (I- At Large) are waiting for the FDA to approve the COVID-19 vaccination for children so that they can safely attend in-person school. (Photo by Lucio Patone on Unsplash)*

**By Katia Pechenkina**

[Special to the AFRO](#)

Millions of children in the United States who are too young to be vaccinated have been back in classrooms since August, while many parents have been anxiously waiting for the vaccine to get approval for the emergency use authorization from the Food and Drug Administration (FDA).

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The FDA meeting is set for Oct. 26, but the vaccines won't be distributed until the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) makes recommendations on the use of the vaccine in children ages [5-11](#).

Some D.C. parents have been frustrated with how the city handled the reopening of schools: the limited amount of testing performed every week, unavailable flexibility when it comes to virtual learning options, and the lack of acknowledgement of the seriousness of the Delta variant.

Elizabeth Mitchell, Ward 3 Committeewoman for the DC Democratic State Committee, and a parent of two elementary school children said it felt "beyond strange" to send her children back to in-person learning.

Mitchell's father had pancreatic cancer in 2020 and their family tried very hard to protect him. "This year, it feels like we're just completely leaving our children behind," she said.

Mitchell also had cut back on her work hours, because she anticipated that this was going to be a difficult time for their family and she would need to spend more time at home. It turned out to be true.

She felt that the DCPS "failed" the children and parents. "It feels like betrayal," said Mitchell.

Mitchell is concerned about the limited number of testing performed by the DCPS. At Janney Elementary school, where her children are enrolled, parents have been testing their children outside of school and last week have discovered more positive cases than the school, according to Mitchell.

"We have parents that are doing their own contact tracing, we have classrooms that are doing that. None of it is DCPS," she said.

Mitchell has testified at a D.C. Council public hearing before and she wishes that the legislative process would be faster when it concerns the lives and safety of children. She is also certain that the Mayor Muriel Bowser has a "consolidated power to act quickly on these things."

"And this is exactly why we're supposed to have mayoral control," Mitchell said. "So to see that power, consolidated with someone who refuses to do anything to protect her children, is beyond frustrating."

"I think a vaccine is a huge answer for me. I'm vaccinated, my husband vaccinated. I felt the wave of relief when my parents got vaccinated. I just want that for my children right now," said Mitchell.

As more students become eligible for the COVID-19 vaccine, the District's officials are

and future students deemed eligible by the FDA to be fully vaccinated against the coronavirus on or before December 15, 2021”, according to the [press release](#).

Amanda Farnan, Communications Director for Henderson says that the Council member has been closely following the reopening of schools and childcare facilities.

“The science is telling us that vaccines are the most effective mode of protection against COVID-19. And those who are eligible in our schools should be vaccinated,” said Farnan.

She pointed out that the COVID-19 vaccine just adds to the list of vaccines already required to attend a public school.

“We think that this kind of mandate, if you will, will push students to say yes to something that maybe wasn’t in their regular day to day schedule or they didn’t feel the need to go and get vaccinated. It will just get them to that,” said Farnan.

Currently only [44.1 percent of 12-15 year old students](#) and [42.4 percent of 16-17 year old students](#) in the District are fully vaccinated.

The District’s child care employees would also be required to be vaccinated against the coronavirus if the legislation is approved.

“Those employees are in such close contact with our youngest children in the District, that they should be subject to getting vaccinated as well, just to allow her family to have kind of peace of mind going forward in bringing their kids back to childcare and then also back to school,” said Farnan.

The D.C. Council Committee of the Whole Public is scheduled to hold a [hearing on the legislation on Oct.27](#).

“Pediatric patients, especially kids between the ages of five and 11 make up a good percentage of Americans in the United States,” said Dr. Mutiat Onigbanjo, Medical Director at the Outpatient Pediatrics at the University of Maryland Medical Center Midtown and the Assistant Professor of Pediatrics at the University of Maryland School of Medicine.

“Having them be eligible for the COVID-19 vaccine will allow kids to be able to get back to some sense of normalcy, meaning that parents will feel potentially more comfortable with having their child attend school. And it may just lower the stress that families deal with their child potentially being at risk of becoming infected with COVID-19,” Onigbanjo said during an interview.

She pointed out that the Delta variant of coronavirus infection changed the way we think about COVID-19. The need for herd immunity is greater now, and in order to achieve that level, the country needs to vaccinate more people, including children.

She indicated that while some parents are “really itching for the vaccine to be available for their child,” others are choosing to wait some time before giving the shot to their kids.

“I would like for my children to return to school, and I would like the schools to be safer,” said Emily Roderer, a D.C. parent whose nine and eleven year old children are still not eligible for COVID-19 vaccination.

Her family had to choose homeschooling for their children. They felt that the city administration’s plan was not thought through: children at the District’s public schools are supposed to wear masks, but not at lunch or during a snack time while being inside the building. She was also concerned about the ventilation in schools.

Dealing with public school has been the most challenging aspect of homeschooling for the Roderer’s family.

Because they did not notify the school of their decision to homeschool, Roderer’s family was investigated by the DC Child and Family Services Agency. “That was incredibly uncomfortable. Both of my children were disenrolled from their schools,” she said.

Roderer said she would like the virtual option to be available for her children. The recent expansion of the number of students who are eligible for virtual learning only includes students with medical exemptions and does not apply to most families. The D.C. Council [voted](#) for the expansion on Oct.5.

For now, Roderer’s plan is to wait for her children to get vaccinated and build a two week period of immunity before they go back to in-person learning. Roderer is also a member of DC Families for Covid Safer Schools, a group of families, community members and educators from all of the District’s Wards, working to improve the safety of students during the ongoing pandemic.

“We were really holding out hope that the Mayor would allow virtual. We didn’t send them to school, and we didn’t submit the homeschool application until we were forced to. We wanted to make it clear that we didn’t feel like there were enough options for families. That backfired spectacularly,” she said.

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