

Ga. community pays price after moving teachers ahead in vaccination line



Credit: HYOSUB SHIN / AJC

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Elbert County High School teacher Tonya Andrews receives her second dose of the COVID-19 vaccine from Tina Mewborne, LPN, at the Medical Center Of Elberton on Wednesday, Jan. 27, 2021. Georgia has not opened COVID-19 vaccination to teachers yet, but a small school district east of Athens still managed to offer shots to any employee who wanted them. Elbert County Superintendent Jon Jarvis told The Atlanta Journal-Constitution that he sees his teachers, bus drivers and other employees as “essential” personnel who should be prioritized for vaccination. (Hyosub Shin / Hyosub.Shin@ajc.com)

ELBERTON — Georgia has stopped shipping COVID-19 vaccine to a northeast Georgia doctors’ office that immunized teachers before others on the state’s high priority list.

The clash between a rural northeast Georgia community on the South Carolina line and the architects of the state’s coronavirus response highlights ongoing tension around school safety during this pandemic.

“If our goal is to keep kids on campus and learning, then strategically I think it’s a good move to have teachers vaccinated first,” said Jason Kouns, the principal of Elbert County High School.

Word of his school district’s actions — [offering doses of the vaccine to any employee](#) who wanted one — had spread among envious superintendents across the state in recent weeks. Finally, on Wednesday, the state cut off the vaccine supply to the community’s main vaccination provider until July 27.

Explore [Georgia DPH rejects appeal by doctor's office in Elbert County that gave COVID vaccines to teachers](#)

The Medical Center of Elberton had [skipped ahead of Georgia's "1A+" vaccination phase](#), violating its agreement with the state, said an email from the Georgia Department of Public Health to The Atlanta Journal-Constitution. Under state guidance teachers in Georgia are not yet eligible for the vaccine, unless they happen to also be health care workers, first responders, nursing home workers or 65 and older.

"It is critical that DPH maintains the highest standards for vaccine accountability to ensure all federal and state requirements are adhered to by all parties," said the email from the agency explaining the six-month sanction.

The decision affects everyone in the community, including the seniors who are in the state's top priority group for vaccination given their death rate.

"I'm not sure what message you intended to send with such an extreme remedial action, but I can assure you that it will, without exception, be that you and the Department of Public Health do not care if Elbert County citizens die," R. Daniel Graves, chairman of the county hospital authority, wrote to state public health Commissioner Kathleen Toomey Thursday.

Graves' Elberton-Elbert County Hospital Authority oversees Elbert Memorial Hospital, which was not involved. The sanction is against the privately operated Medical Center, which has a state contract to vaccinate residents. Graves defended both the private doctors' office and the school district for their decision to expedite the inoculation of school employees.

On Friday, state Rep. Rob Leverett, R-Elberton, announced he was trying to intervene in what he called a "grossly unfair" decision to withhold the vaccine.

The state reaction comes amid [rising tension between educators and Gov. Brian Kemp](#). This week, the AJC obtained a copy of a letter from 11 metro Atlanta superintendents asking the governor to move teachers ahead in the vaccination line. "The longer we delay in vaccinating our teachers and school staff, the more we risk having to close our doors once again," they wrote.

Kemp's communications director responded that the vaccine is in short supply and this is a triage decision: "These superintendents should explain which currently eligible population should be, in their view, sent to the back of the line for vaccination. Seniors? Healthcare workers? First responders and law enforcement?"

Brooke McDowell, the administrator at the Medical Center, said her office made sure health care workers, first responders and nursing home workers had a chance to get vaccinated before inviting teachers to get shots in early January. The only remaining 1A+ group members were residents aged 65 and over, and she said the center was able to simultaneously dose them and teachers. Until this week, the center was inoculating nearly a hundred seniors a day, but that must now end, she said, noting that many seniors will be unable to drive to another county to get shots.



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Tina Mewborne, LPN, opens a freezer containing the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine at the Medical Center of Elberton on Wednesday, January 27, 2021. (Hyosub Shin / Hyosub.Shin@ajc.com)

“Our community is relying on us to vaccinate them,” McDowell said. “We never intentionally defied anybody’s orders.”

The state on Friday denied the center’s appeal of the sanction, but McDowell said they would try to appeal again.

Explore [State denies appeal of vaccine suspension](#)

Lisa Morgan, a DeKalb County teacher and president of the Georgia Association of Educators, said the sanction in Elbert County sends a message to teachers across Georgia that they are “expendable.”

The Professional Association of Georgia Educators said it is essential to vaccinate educators to keep schools open. “We hope state leaders will prioritize teacher vaccination at the absolute first possible opportunity,” a spokeswoman said.

Amid the debate about who should be inoculated first is another concern: skepticism about the new vaccines.

Elbert County School District Superintendent Jon Jarvis told the AJC that only about 40% of his 500 or so employees chose to get the shots.

David Bennett, an art teacher at the high school, was among them, but his wife, an elementary school teacher, was not.

“Unfortunately, she’s going to have to wait until she can get in line somewhere else,” he said. “She’s kicking herself now for not doing it.”



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Elbert County High School teacher David Bennett leaves after he received his second dose of the COVID-19 vaccine at the Medical Center Of Elberton on Wednesday, January 27, 2021. Georgia has not opened COVID-19 vaccination to teachers yet, but a small school district east of Athens still managed to offer shots to any employee who wanted them. Elbert County Superintendent Jon Jarvis told The Atlanta Journal-Constitution that he sees his teachers, bus drivers and other employees as "essential" personnel who should be prioritized for vaccination. (Hyosub Shin / Hyosub.Shin@ajc.com)

Julie Burton, the high school registrar, said she and her husband, a local firefighter, are both 38 and healthy and were so skeptical about the vaccine that they gave up their place at the front of the line.

During the Wednesday lunch hour in Elberton, the seat of this largely white and politically conservative county, opinions were mixed about vaccinating teachers.

"I think they ought to get the old people first," said Joe Scarborough, 74, though he added that he was in no rush to get vaccinated. His girlfriend, Sheila Hill, 59, had been trying to get vaccination appointments for her parents who live in a nearby county, but she sympathized with teachers. People "keep griping because the schools are shut down," she said, "then they absolutely need to make them a priority."

The schools in Elbert County have been operating in-person since the start of the school year, but Jarvis said they had to close for six days prior to Thanksgiving when at least 1 in 10 of the 3,000 students had to quarantine, along with many of the teachers.



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Joe Scarborough and his girl friend Sheila Hill share their thoughts on school employee prioritized for COVID vaccination in downtown Elberton on Wednesday, January 27, 2021. (Hyosub Shin / Hyosub.Shin@ajc.com)

The low vaccination rate among school employees did not surprise Robert Bednarczyk, an assistant professor of global health and epidemiology at Emory University. National surveys show widespread skepticism about the new vaccines, which use genetic technology.

This is the first widespread deployment of mRNA vaccines, but Bednarczyk expressed confidence in them, saying the technology has been under development since after the first SARS virus emerged in 2002.

The pressure on Kemp and Toomey to get teachers vaccinated is likely to grow.

President Joe Biden wants schools open, and this week researchers with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention published an article in a medical journal that said schools can safely operate in-person. There were several caveats, though: Masks and other long-advised safety protocols must be in place and communities must control overall infection rates, even if it hurts the local economy. For instance, leaders must be willing to restrict indoor dining in restaurants.

Too many school districts have refused to mandate masks, and the state has prioritized business over safety, said Morgan, with the Georgia Association of Educators. “I think the pressure’s going to continue mounting as long as we are insisting on prioritizing face-to-face instruction without all the necessary mitigation factors in place.”

Staff writer Kristal Dixon, newsroom data specialist Jennifer Peebles and news applications developer Emily Merwin DiRico contributed to this article.