



Vaccine Attitudes Focus Groups: High School Students

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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](#).

Thirteen high school students from Utah schools participated in two focus groups, one with six students and one with seven students, with each focus group lasting approximately an hour. The focus groups took place in 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

Students had a variety of experiences during the pandemic and equally broad thoughts on the Covid-19 vaccine. Overall, participants were impressed with their schools' hard work to make the rapid transition (e.g., safety protocols, online learning) as successful as possible.

Student Experience

- By the end of the school year, many students felt that school had begun to feel "normal" again, and some rules and guidelines were perceived as stricter at the beginning of the school year.
- Having to quarantine frequently was mentioned as the biggest challenge, as it forced students to make a difficult shift between in-person and remote learning when exposed to Covid-19 (which occurred regularly).
- Online learning proved successful for some students, who found that it allowed them to take more classes and learn how to manage their schedules. Others preferred in-person learning, which helped them maintain motivation.

Vaccine Attitudes

- The high school student cohort did not exhibit strong hesitations towards the Covid-19 vaccines and cited a higher perception of benefits than risks.
- Some benefits mentioned by participants included: providing peace of mind, the ability to resume travel, not having to wear masks as often, protecting family members, and resuming social gatherings.
- The risks students identified were mainly focused on the side effects of receiving the vaccine—and not wanting to take the time to manage them—and reported blood clots from the Johnson & Johnson vaccine.
- Participants trusted healthcare professionals and credible organizations like the CDC, but did not trust social or large corporate media.

Student Experience with Schooling During the Pandemic

Students expressed mixed feelings towards both remote and in-person learning. Participants expressed difficulties with remaining social despite a lack of in-person activities, extracurricular activities, group assignments, and school football games or dances.

"I'm one of those people that can't do online. I have to be in person because I just won't do my school work. Not very motivated. So I give props to you guys that did the whole year, even more than two weeks because I struggled. I definitely got behind in those two weeks. And it's hard to come back from that. And after a few times that we shut down or we had quarantines, that's when I really got into it, but I can't imagine what it was like for you guys."

Other students preferred and thrived in online learning. Some participants felt that communication and assistance from their teachers improved, and one student discussed becoming more comfortable seeking out their teachers for help after being quarantined multiple times.

"I really liked remote learning, which I know is kind of shocking to some kids because they want to be there in the classroom. But it allowed me a lot more time because I wasn't always in the Zooms or I wasn't always in the class, I could kind of set my own schedule in the sense that I could work more on the classes I was struggling in and spend less time in the ones I felt more confident in. And I had enough time, so now I'm taking a course at the U on Wednesdays, so that also gave me sort of the flexibility to kind of pursue my other interests at different schools."

In addition, many participants cited having to quarantine frequently as a challenge, describing the difficulty of constantly shifting between in-person and remote learning. Further, some felt that it was a challenge to protect their family members, especially those at high risk.

"I think the biggest challenge, especially towards the beginning, was everyone getting quarantined because sometimes you wouldn't even have it. It's just someone that sat two seats away from you got it, and then you're out for two weeks. So it was kind of hard to balance people getting quarantined and then having to go online if you're in person. That kind of stuff was a little different."

Generally, the participants felt that their schools adapted quickly when the pandemic began, were grateful to the hard work put in by staff and the school board to maintain their education and safety, and believed that the schools did their best to make life feel "normal."

Student Perceptions of the Vaccine

Students were asked about their perceptions of the benefits and risks of the vaccine, their sources of vaccine information, and the logistics of receiving the vaccine. Eight of the thirteen students were vaccinated, with a few more planning to get vaccinated eventually. Two were uncertain about whether they would receive the vaccine.

Receiving the Vaccine

Many participants said that the vaccine distribution has been easy and accessible, and a few appreciated the incentives they had heard about.

"Mine was actually super easy because my school had— I can't remember who it was, but it was some college that came in, and they were doing it. Their medical program came in, and they were doing it all. So they just sent out an email, and you just had to sign up. After school, you just went in line, and they gave it to you."

Two of the participants who had not been vaccinated said they had been too busy. However, they also felt that it was not a priority for them because they had contracted Covid-19 previously. Other unvaccinated participants said they would likely sign up for a vaccine eventually, while others did not have strong feelings towards vaccination. Additionally, two participants did not care about the type of vaccine they would eventually get, while only one expressed a preference against one of the vaccines—Moderna—because they had heard of sickness as a side effect.

"There's a couple of things for me. I'm a competitive cheerleader, and so I have 6 to 10 hours of practice every week after school. And when I'm not at practice, I'm either doing homework, or I'm at my job. And so I don't have a lot of time to get one. And I also already had coronavirus earlier in the year or last year, I guess, and it didn't really affect me that bad. And so I haven't really felt like I needed to go and get it."

Some participants discussed their initial hesitation to receiving the vaccines, yet for some, their hesitation changed after having done their own research. Two participants felt more comfortable with the vaccines after discussing them with their parents—who were healthcare workers.

"At first, I was like I really wanted to get it, but it wasn't available for me. And now that I see that things are opening more and that you don't need one as much, then I'm kind of less wanting to get it."

Attitudes on Vaccine Benefits and Risks

Overall, most participants felt that the COVID-19 vaccine prevented serious illness or death, but did not believe the vaccines provided 100% protection. Some were pleased that mask restrictions beginning to be lifted, while others were excited for the possibility to visit other vaccinated individuals. Several also expressed a general feeling of being more comfortable outside of their homes.

"I've been able to start slowly hanging out with other vaccinated people, which is nice, because I've been cooped up all year. And then, on top of that, I think it also gave me peace of mind, because when I would go out, even just to the grocery store, I'd get nervous that I'd bring it home and give it to one of my parents, and they'd get super sick. Or give it to my sister, and it would be— there's kind of a psychological factor behind that too. You never want to be the person to bring it home, like a deadly virus."

Participants described a "peace of mind" that came from being vaccinated and decreasing worries about bringing the virus home to their family or accidentally spreading it to others. In addition, some discussed the ability to travel as a benefit of life returning to "normal."

"... a lot of places are opening up, but they're strict about, like, "Oh, you should be vaccinated," or you have to get tested before. And then if you're not vaccinated, you have to get tested when you arrive. And so that was, honestly, one of the main reasons for me just because it would make that a little bit easier."

Most of the participants' beliefs about perceived risks regarded blood clots (from the Johnson & Johnson vaccine), as well as the potential for getting sick or experiencing other negative side effects. One

participant was unsure of—and wanted to know—how the vaccine would affect them considering a certain medication they were taking.

“Getting sick. Because I know sometimes people will show symptoms just because they got it, and I just never felt like I had the time that I was able to take off if I got sick.”

“So I’m on a really common medication for people around my age, I think a lot of people are on. And it has a much higher chance of giving people blood clots. But just because of how the media portrayed it, I think it scared a lot of people and stuff.”

Vaccine Information

The participants discussed the influx of information regarding the Covid-19 vaccines: some said they have been seeing local Covid-19 case numbers decrease as vaccinations have increased; some found it difficult to find trustworthy information due to the high amount of misinformation on social media. Two students described information they saw on TikTok: that the vaccines contain microchips, magnets, or cause infertility.

“I’ve also seen a lot of videos on TikTok of misleading information about the vaccine, and I think that’s hard because some of those videos can get millions of views, and that can also change people’s point of view. I saw the one about the magnet. And I also had it, and I was like, “Oh, wait a second.” But, yeah. So I think that can scare people. It definitely scared me a little bit when I saw that. It got my attention.”

Many participants trust doctors and reputable websites like the CDC, but do not trust social media or major news stations (e.g., CNN). Additionally, a number of participants discussed conversations with their family and friends about the vaccines.

“I mean, those big news companies, I mean, they can really just kind of say what they want because they have so many people following them. And sometimes it can be kind of hard to trust, like, ‘Okay, am I really getting accurate information here, or am I just getting something to please the public?’ type of deal.”

Some students mentioned additional information they would like to receive, particularly regarding the development of the vaccines, their quick distribution, and the Johnson & Johnson response to reports of blood clots caused by their vaccine.

“Yeah, one thing I really want to know is how they just developed it so fast. At least, how it seems to me is it just like came out all of a sudden. And then all these different companies and all these different brands, they all started coming out with their own vaccines just all at the same time and super fast. And I’d kind of like to know just how they were just able to do it so quickly with such an extreme virus.”

Next Steps

In the coming weeks, the HERO Project will publish additional summaries of focus groups held with nurses, long-term care facility staff, people from rural areas, and multiple demographic groups. 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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