

Baker spars with teachers union over vaccine access

By Matt Murphy

State House News Service

In an escalating battle over vaccinations and a full-time return to the classroom, Gov. Charlie Baker and the state's largest teachers' unions butted heads Thursday over the unions' request to allow teachers to be vaccinated in schools, with the administration refusing to divert doses away from mass vaccination sites and other clinics.

A war-of-words erupted after a morning meeting between union officials, Health and Human Services Secretary Marylou Sudders and Education Commissioner Jeff Riley to discuss vaccinations.

A day earlier, Massachusetts Teachers Association President Merrie Najimy had said the state's vaccine rollout for teachers had been "poorly timed" with plans to bring elementary students back to the classroom full-time by April 5, followed by middle schoolers on April 28.

The meeting led to a searing condemnation from the administration of the union's request for doses to be redistributed and administered to teachers and staff locally at schools.

"I am not going to be in a position where I take vaccine away from people who are extremely vulnerable, have multiple medical conditions and are over the age of 65 to give it to a targeted population. We're just not going to play that game," Baker said at an afternoon press conference.

The comments from the governor came after the governor's senior advisor Tim Buckley issued a statement saying the administration "implores the unions to do the math," noting

the state receives just 150,000 new first doses a week.

“Diverting hundreds of thousands of vaccines to an exclusive, teacher-only distribution system would deny the most vulnerable and the most disproportionately impacted residents hundreds of thousands of vaccines,” Buckley said.

The unions, including the MTA, the American Federation of Teachers and the Boston Teachers Union, accused the administration of “pitting one vulnerable group against another” after what it described as a “cordial” meeting with Sudders.

“The administration’s mischaracterization of educators as somehow seeking to take vaccines away from the sick and elderly is untrue and defamatory,” said Najimy, AFT-Massachusetts President Beth Kontos, and BTU President Jessica Tang.

The three union leaders said they suggested using doses that had already been designated for teachers at mass vaccination sites and instead deploying them at schools where they could be administered to teachers by firefighters and nurses with minimal disruption to the school schedule.

“The administration is entitled to its opinion on how it has handled the vaccine rollout, but the administration is not entitled to their own facts. From the onset, our unions have advocated for classifying educators as essential workers and for vaccinating them at the same time as others who are eligible within the current phase of the rollout,” Najimy, Kontos and Tang said.

Baker saw the request from the unions differently.

“They were looking for their own vaccine and to not participate in the process that everyone else participates in,” Baker said.

Baker only opened the state's vaccination program to teachers on Thursday after the White House last week urged states to begin vaccinating educators in March and began making doses available to teachers through the federal pharmacy vaccine program.

The administration then announced on Wednesday that it would set aside four weekend days in late March and early April at the state's seven mass vaccinations when teachers exclusively could book vaccine appointments. The governor also said he was encouraging regional vaccine collaboratives to also specify days for educators.

Baker and Sudders both cited vaccine supply constraints as limiting their ability to set aside more vaccines.

"We don't have more doses to give," Sudders said Wednesday. She estimates teachers unable to book an appointment on Thursday through the normal system will have access to about 20,000 to 25,000 doses at mass vaccination sites on March 27, April 3, April 10 and April 11.

The administration noted that 95 percent of teachers are under the age of 65, putting them at reduced risk from COVID-19. The Centers for Disease Control has said vaccinations are not a prerequisite for a return to in-person learning, and Baker said experience in Massachusetts has shown that students, particularly young students, can be taught safely in a classroom.

"Building an entirely new, exclusive, teacher-only, school by school distribution system would make Massachusetts' vaccination system slower, less equitable and far more complicated," Buckley said.

Baker also defended his reliance on mass vaccination sites to distribute vaccine, saying most states were using similar sites, provider organizations, pharmacy chains and community health centers to administer COVID-19 vaccinations.

“The process we’re pursuing in Massachusetts is completely consistent with the process that’s being used in virtually every other state in the country. Why? Because it’s effective, it’s efficient and it gets a lot of shots in people arms in a short period of time,” Baker said.

House Speaker Ron Mariano, who is a former teacher himself, was an early advocate for giving teachers higher priority status for vaccinations.

Asked about the back-and-forth Thursday between the governor and the unions, Mariano said the governor invited it.

“It’s a problem that was created by the administration in setting a date certain to have schools reopen and raising the issue of safety in our schools and not having a plan on how to make sure that they can guarantee that the schools are safe,” he said.