

# Considerations for Reopening K-12 Schools during COVID-19



A Resource for Improving Measurable Impact  
October 20, 2021

## Background:

In response to COVID-19, most K-12 schools cancelled in-person classes starting in mid-March.<sup>1</sup> On March 19, 2020, Governor Abbott issued an executive order closing all Texas schools; schools completed the 2019-2020 school year through remote learning.<sup>3</sup> In July 2020, the Texas Education Agency released [school reopening guidance](#) that included flexibility at the local level to delay start dates and optional online-only delivery for the first several weeks of the 2020-2021 academic year.

Evidence is mixed regarding the role children play in transmission of COVID-19 and in the severity of illness among children. Early research has found that COVID-19 affects children less than adults, and among children affected, illness appears less severe.<sup>4,5</sup> However, there is also research indicating that children aged 10-19 years transmit COVID-19 at rates similar to adults.<sup>6</sup> One study reported a 40% increase in child cases in the two-week period ending July 30, 2020, while another study reported that viral load in children under the age of 5 is significantly greater than in adults and children over the age of 5.<sup>7,8</sup>

## Education in Texas<sup>2</sup>

In 2020-2021,

- over 5.3 million students were enrolled in Texas public schools
- 60.2% of students were identified as economically disadvantaged and eligible for free or reduced-price meals
- 20.6% were identified as English language learners
- 11.3% of students were served in special education programs

## At Issue:

### Concerns about in-person instruction:

- Without comprehensive national and/or state testing and contact tracing systems, and with COVID-19 cases increasing across the U.S. between early June and mid-July, school administrators and staff, parents, policy makers, and public health professionals are concerned about the unknown health consequences of resuming in-person instruction at the start of 2020-21 school year.<sup>9,10</sup> Schools include adult teachers and staff, along with children, and re-opening schools could open a new vector for transmission that currently does not exist.
- Roughly 30% of U.S. teachers are over the age of 49, putting them at higher risk of COVID-19 illness and complications.<sup>11</sup>
- Flu-like activity increases in the fall among children and adults, which can further burden the healthcare system in areas with high rates of COVID-19 infection.

### Concerns about remote instruction:

- Time away from school interrupts vital services including school nutrition programs, special education and language support services, physical education, mental health and educational



counseling, and consistent hands-on instruction that are especially critical for under-privileged students who have fewer educational opportunities outside of the classroom.<sup>12,13,14</sup>

- Distance learning creates practical and economic challenges for parents, as working parents, particularly essential workers, need to either miss work or find childcare alternatives when schools are closed for in-person instruction. In May 2020, roughly 34% of U.S. adults were considered essential workers who were working outside of the home.<sup>15</sup>
- Approximately 1.8 million (34%) public school students in Texas do not have reliable access to the Internet at home, and roughly 25% of Texas public school students do not have a suitable device for distance learning.<sup>16</sup> These data indicate that distance learning is not a viable option for these students unless these resources are made available.

## 2021 Update:

### Responding to COVID-19 cases in schools:

- In October 2021, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) provided a resource for school administrators to use to respond to COVID-19 cases in K-12 schools or at school events.<sup>17</sup>
- The CDC resource provides a step by step instructions for responding to COVID-19 cases through contact tracing, testing, and isolating.
- Additionally, the released guidelines include links to resources and tools that can be adapted for local use and shared with students, their families, and school staff.

### Importance of mask-wearing in school settings:

- To prevent the spread of the highly contagious COVID-19 Delta variant in K-12 settings, the CDC recommends that all eligible students and staff members receive the COVID-19 vaccine and that schools require all students, staff members, and visitors to wear a mask indoors.<sup>18,19</sup>
- Two recent studies released by the CDC provide strong support that masks significantly reduce the spread of COVID-19 in schools.<sup>18,19</sup>
  - The first study, conducted from June to September 2021, found that increases in COVID-19 case rates among children and adolescents (<18 years old) during the start of the 2021-22 school year were significantly larger in U.S. counties **without** school mask requirements (34.9 cases per 100,000 per day) compared to U.S. counties with school mask requirements (16.3 cases per 100,000 per day).<sup>18</sup>
  - The second study, conducted from July to August 2021, found that the odds of a school-associated COVID-19 outbreak in schools **without** mask requirements was 3.5 times greater than the odds of an outbreak in schools with mask requirements, after controlling for school county, enrollment size, grade levels present, Title I status, and 7-day COVID-19 case rate in the school's zip code.<sup>19</sup>

## Summary and Guidance:

While many schools are planning to begin the school year remotely, most schools will likely resume in-person instruction at some point during the 2020-21 school year. The benefits of in-person instruction are significant, however, reopening schools during the COVID-19 pandemic may result in serious health consequences for school staff, students, and families. In summer 2020, the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) released guidelines for reopening schools and the [Texas Education Agency](#) issued its own public health planning guidance for reopening Texas schools. Using the CDC guidelines as a framework, public health experts at UTHealth School of Public Health developed a comprehensive list of considerations before reopening schools for in-person instruction.<sup>20</sup> While these recommendations were developed to provide guidance to school administrators and staff, they offer helpful guidance in COVID-19 mitigation and prevention measures.

### 5 Planning Rules for Opening Schools:

Until the COVID-19 vaccine is approved for children of all ages, prevention mitigation is necessary:

1. **Rule of Law:** watch for federal-, state-, and county-level executive orders and proclamations
2. **Rule of Science:** Reductions in 7-day moving average in deaths and new cases per 1,000/day consistently for a 14-day period
3. **Rule of Place:** limit or prevent exposure
  - a. Super-spreading people
  - b. Super-spreading environments, ventilation

Planned response for school exposure/outbreaks that address closures, cleaning, disinfection

4. **Rule of People:** train students, teachers, and staff by training to protect themselves and reduce risk
  - c. Encourage adequate sleep
  - d. Decrease anxiety/stress with physical activity (outdoors is safest)
  - e. Strengthen immune system with proper nutrition
  - f. Symptom tracking prior to coming to school
  - g. Ensure up-to-date vaccinations, including an annual flu shot
  - h. Facilitate 6-foot physical distancing with floor markings, desk arrangements
  - i. Handwashing and sanitizer stations in all rooms; bathrooms should be stocked with soap and towels
  - j. Up-to-date PPE\* for staff; masks for all children
5. **Rule of Policy:** controls must be designed, implemented, monitored, and adapted
  - a. Distance learning and non-punitive sick/stay-home policies
  - b. Coordination of testing results and care between campus, health care, and public health systems in the community
  - c. Regular and consistent communication between parents, faculty and staff, health care providers, and public health experts

*\*PPE refers to personal protective equipment and includes items such as face masks and shields, gloves, and goggles.*

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