

Rural Pennsylvania COVID-19 School Toolkit



Health Initiative for Rural Pennsylvania

ABOUT THIS TOOLKIT

The COVID-19 pandemic affects Americans in all walks of life. Children and families have been profoundly impacted: socially, physically, mentally and economically.

Funded by the Pennsylvania Department of Health, the Pennsylvania Office of Rural Health (PORH) formed the Health Initiative for Rural Pennsylvania (HIRP) to implement COVID-19 reduction strategies in rural Pennsylvania. Strategies are accomplished by building cross-sector county teams that develop and implement action plans to align public health, healthcare and non-health interventions.

Through a community development process in 20 rural Pennsylvania counties, the HIRP gathered information primarily from superintendents and school nurses. The current politics, relationships, attitudes and behaviors of school boards, parents and students in Pennsylvania make preparation for future surges of COVID-19 especially challenging.

As we face the reality of an ongoing pandemic, this toolkit presents a current and innovative menu of ideas, options and strategies that may assist rural school districts to address COVID-19 in the current climate.

Any questions, recommendations or feedback regarding this toolkit can be directed to Erika Tuller (ekt5249@psu.edu) or Rachel Foster (rcf5257@psu.edu).



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Current public health guidance for K-12 school districts includes:

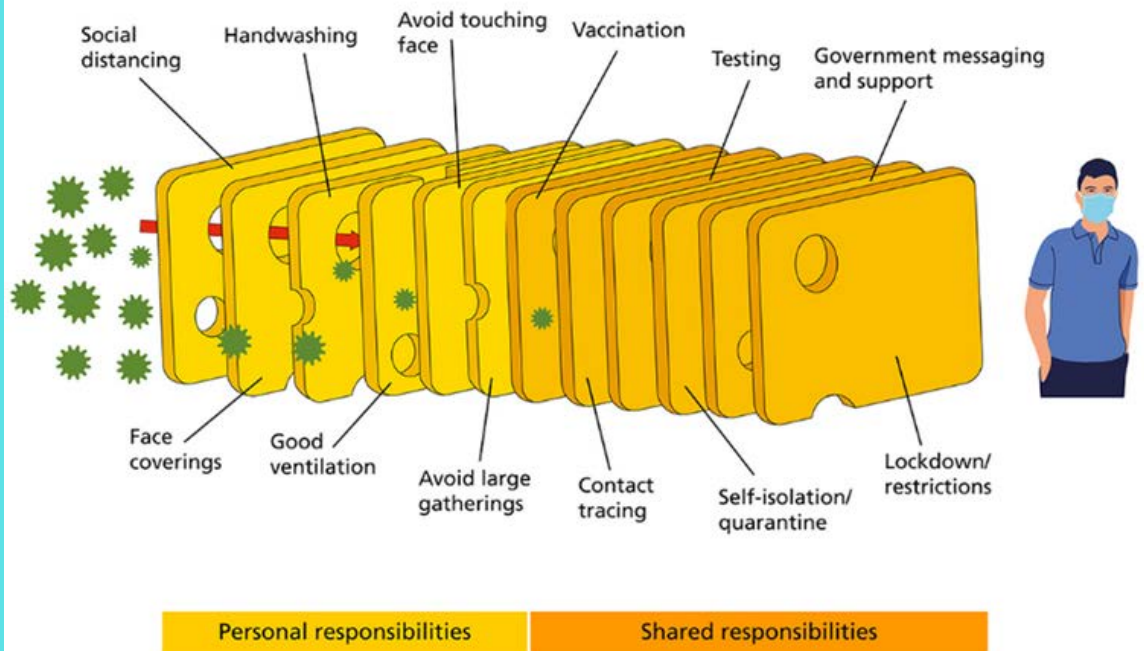
- Center's for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)
- Pennsylvania Department of Education
- Children's Hospital of Pennsylvania PolicyLab

As of June 2022, summary statements:

- CDC's COVID-19 Community Levels provides a county-specific composite score and links current recommendations. The data is based off of hospital beds being used, hospital admissions, and the total number of new COVID-19 cases in an area. During times of medium or high transmission, high quality masks should be used.
- Students benefit from in-person learning. Recent studies indicate that children experienced significant mental health impacts from school closures or remote learning
- Schools should move to voluntary masking, in coordination with local authorities
- Children ages 6 months-17 are eligible for COVID-19 vaccination and are currently the least vaccinated age group in Pennsylvania. Vaccination is the leading public health prevention strategy in response to the COVID-19 pandemic

Vaccination is one mitigation strategy among many outlined below in the Swiss Cheese Model. Multiple layers of protection improve success.

The Swiss Cheese Model of COVID-19 Prevention

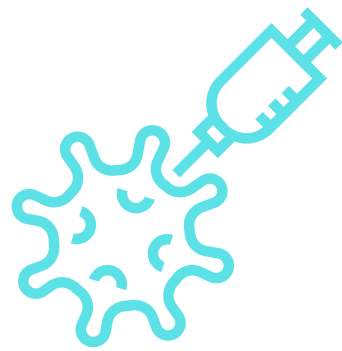


No single intervention can be successful on its own. Multiple steps improve success.

As part of the HIRP Rapid Community Assessment conducted in the fall of 2021 (n=69), the following information was gathered with the most common reasons for vaccine hesitancy in rural Pennsylvania:

- Mis/dis-information
- Perceived immunity from prior COVID-19 infection
- Politics
- Wait and see approach
- Expressions of freedom and personal choice
- Distrust of government
- Urban-only issue
- Lack of reliable, consistent information
- Concerns about ingredients in the vaccines

A snowball sampling method with small sample size should be noted. This information may not be considered evidenced-based or generalizable to all rural Pennsylvania residents.



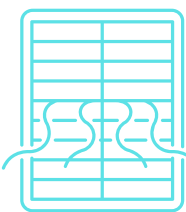
This section summarizes local strategies implemented in rural Pennsylvania counties with a fully vaccinated rate > 65% or from rural counties that experienced a 5% or more increase in their vaccination rate during a short period of time.

- Provide education and outreach that:
 - Is locally focused and includes local storytelling and endorsement from local leadership
 - Addresses mis/disinformation
 - Is stored or marketed through a local information hub
 - Counters negative discourse through staged debates, townhall meetings, listening tours or educational workshops
- Focus on equitable distribution of vaccines, testing and other mitigation strategies:
 - Reinvent clinics and incentivize vaccination opportunities with a focus on pediatrics
 - Serve as a home test kit distributor or testing location
 - Distribute pandemic preparedness kits
 - Focus on less invasive mitigation strategies
- Use tailored programing and toolkits
- Promote pandemic recovery efforts that address mental health or economic impacts of COVID-19
- Share information about long COVID



If masking or vaccination are no longer possible, consider non-invasive mitigation strategies that provide a layered approach to improve success.

- Indoor ventilation systems: Corsi-Rosenthal box (low-cost, DIY option)
- Social distancing
- Handwashing: GloGerm Education workshop
- Routine cleaning and disinfection
- Distribute educational materials
- Promote choice-based messaging with ongoing communication and recommendations based on CDC's COVID-19 by County dashboard
- Serve as a Health and Wellness Resource Center - provide opportunities for parents and staff to voluntarily pick up educational materials, home test kits, hand sanitizer, N-95 masks, thermometers or other resources
- Wastewater surveillance
- Test to Treat Program: Antiviral medications, especially for unvaccinated individuals, started within five (5) days of symptom onset reduce the severity of COVID-19. These medications are only approved at this time for adults.
- Share local resources for testing, test to treat program, vaccination and/or hospital status



9 STUDENT AMBASSADOR PROGRAMS

Vaccine ambassadors train community members to disseminate important health information in their communities. They are most effective when they are trusted community members and share similar beliefs and characteristics with their peers (3).

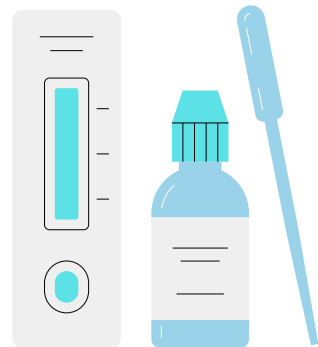
- COVID-19 Vaccine Ambassador Training: How to Talk to Parents
- What is a student ambassador?
 - Student-led, peer-to-peer, education and outreach programs that focus on health and safety related topics. Students have the power to change the culture in school by modeling healthy behaviors, sharing accurate and relevant information and empowering their peers to make informed decisions.
 - The focus of student ambassador programs should be on peer-to-peer education, rather than enforcement.
- Student ambassador programs include:
 - County of Los Angeles Public Health Parent and Student Ambassador Programs
 - Philly Teen Vax Ambassador Program
 - San Francisco Department of Public Health Vaccine Ambassador Training
 - Louisiana Department of Health Teen Vax Campaign



PROCTORED COVID-19 TESTING

Given the accessibility and convenience of at-home testing, schools may consider options for accepting at-home test results. Below are some interventions that schools might consider to help ensure reliability.

- Have the student videotape themselves performing the at-home COVID-19 test. This video can then be sent to a designated individual at the school, such as the school nurse.
- Have a designated individual at the school host virtual calls with individuals to watch them perform their at-home COVID-19 test. This can be done by having specific hours set up in advance to watch COVID-19 tests or by appointment.
- Set specific days/hours when parents can drive students to the school parking lot. From there, a designated individual can perform the COVID-19 test and guide administration.



PROCTORED COVID-19 TESTING

EMED: PROCTORED AT-HOME TESTING AND TEST TO TREAT TELEHEALTH PROGRAM

- This company provides proctored, certified at-home COVID-19 testing and test-to-treat opportunities via telehealth.
- They provide the test, guide the test taker through the process, verify results and, upon a positive result, will connect the individual to a health care provider who can prescribe treatment through a telehealth visit.
- The cost per person is \$18 with a test or \$25 if a test is needed.
- Contact Tara Daley (tara@emed.com) for more information.



COVID-19 TESTING

Testing for COVID-19 is important to help reduce the spread of COVID-19 (4).

People should get tested:

- If they COVID-19 symptoms (fever, cough, shortness of breath, fatigue, new loss of taste or smell, sore throat)
- At least 5 days after known or suspected close contact to COVID-19

- Pennsylvania Department of Health COVID-19 Public Testing Sites
- Search for local testing locations
- Order free at-home test kits delivered to U.S. households at this link
- Become a home test kit distribution location



INNOVATIVE HEALTH AND SAFETY PLANS

Health and Safety Plans address how the local education systems will maintain the health and safety of students, educators and other staff. The Health and Safety Plans listed below are examples from rural Pennsylvania school districts. They recognize the current situation of low COVID-19 positivity and have adapted their plans, while recognizing that there may be another wave of COVID-19 (5).

Information about Health and Safety Plans.

Some innovative examples include:

- State College Area School District
- Oil City Area School District
- Portage Area School District

Any Pennsylvania School District Health and Safety Plan may be viewed [here](#).



The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends everyone ages 5 and up to get a COVID-19 vaccine (8).

To promote vaccination, schools can:

- Encourage teachers, staff, students and families to get vaccinated as soon as they can
- Host information sessions to connect parents and guardians with information about the COVID-19 vaccine
- Share vaccination information as part of the kindergarten transition, sports physicals or enrollment in summer activities
- Start a Student Vaccine Ambassador Program
- Host a vaccination clinic: contact your local Pennsylvania Department of Health Community Health Organizer to coordinate your event
 - Consider partnering with local child-friendly locations like trampoline parks, pools, parks, arcades, sporting events, restaurants or events
- Share information for local vaccination locations or events
- Offer vaccine incentives such as paid time off for staff to receive the vaccine, generic gift cards, grocery store vouchers, gas cards or childcare. Resources for incentives can be found here:
 - United Way of Pennsylvania Live Grant



Many rural school districts have shared concerns about the mental health impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the U.S. Surgeon General, the COVID-19 pandemic caused an unfathomable number of deaths, pervasive sense of fear, economic instability and forced physical distancing from loved ones, friends and communities, which both exacerbated and created unprecedented mental health impacts on children. This fall, a coalition of the nation's leading experts in pediatric health declared a national emergency for youth mental health and the establishment of the Surgeon General's Advisory on Protecting Youth Mental Health.

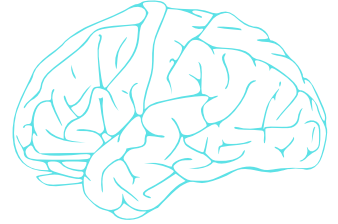
Recent studies suggest that more than a third (37%) of high school students reported they experienced poor mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic, and 44% reported they persistently felt sad or hopeless during the past year. Some challenges youth experienced during the pandemic include:

- 55% reported they experienced emotional abuse by a parent or other adult at home
- 11% experienced physical abuse by a parent or other adult in the home
- 29% reported a parent or other adult in the home lost a job



Schools districts may want to bolster existing efforts or add some additional mental health activities. The Health Initiative for Rural Pennsylvania can support local education or outreach opportunities focused on mental health in rural school districts such as educational workshops or support groups that may focus on the following topics:

- Stress management
- Anxiety
- Depression
- Isolation
- Problem solving/coping skills
- Overall health and wellness
- Other mental health topics



In addition to these efforts, rural school districts may pursue additional mental health support programs for students including the following options:

- Sources of Strength: A best practice youth suicide prevention project designed to harness the power of peer social networks to change unhealthy norms and culture, ultimately preventing suicide, bullying and substance abuse.
- Student Assistance Program: The Pennsylvania Student Assistance Program (SAP) is a systematic team process used to mobilize school resources to remove barriers to learning. SAP is designed to assist in identifying issues including alcohol, tobacco, other drugs and mental health issues which pose a barrier to a student's success.
- Mental Health Screening Tool: Screening tools can be useful for schools to understand how to identify and address the mental health needs of the children and adolescents they serve. Screening is termed "universal" when it is provided to an entire student population (i.e., a grade, school, district or state) to identify students' strengths and needs.
 - Pearson Review360®: A comprehensive web-based behavior improvement system that provides educators with the data-driven training, recommendations and resources they need to help improve student behavior and academic success.

MENTAL HEALTH

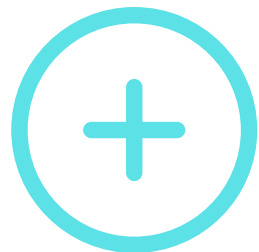
- Youth Mental Health First Aid: Youth Mental Health First Aid is designed to teach parents, family members, caregivers, teachers, school staff, peers, neighbors, health and human services workers, and other caring citizens how to help an adolescent (age 12-18) who is experiencing a mental health or addictions challenge or is in crisis.
- Stopbullying.gov: Parents, school staff and other adults in the community can help kids prevent bullying by talking about it, building a safe school environment, and creating a community-wide bullying prevention strategy.
- Safe Schools/ Healthy Students: The Safe Schools/Healthy Students (SS/HS) Framework tool helps you and your partners understand and plan a comprehensive approach to mental health promotion and youth violence prevention.
- School-Based Behavioral Health: The Children's Bureau and the Department of Education work together to ensure that schools are caring and supportive places that maximize learning as well as social, emotional and behavioral development. SBBH will bring together schools, county mental health programs, and community resources to develop a continuum of services that enable children to have their educational and mental health needs met within their school districts.
- Behavioral Health Treatment Services Locator: A confidential and anonymous source of information for persons seeking treatment facilities in the United States or U.S. Territories for substance use/addiction and/or mental health problems.



PROMOTING POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many school districts have experienced deterioration in relationships with parents, students and school board members. This section focuses on restoring relationships.

- Provide timely communication when it is most likely to resonate with the community. Most people are currently experiencing COVID-19 fatigue
 - Example message about masking change
 - Example message about open communication
 - Example message about increase in cases
- As fall approaches, consider adding regular communication about the status of COVID-19 in the school district
- Counter negative discourse through listening tours, question and answer sessions, educational workshops or open meetings
- Focus on non-invasive COVID-19 mitigation strategies or school-specific (as opposed to district-wide) strategies
- Shift focus from COVID-19 to ongoing health and wellness



PROMOTING POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS

- Promote opportunities for pandemic preparedness:
 - Provide pandemic preparedness kits (home test kits, N-95 masks, hand sanitizer, thermometer, educational materials, etc.)
 - Adapt health and safety plans that clearly outline steps the school will take in the event of another surge in cases
 - Consider proctored testing options
 - Share local resources for testing, test to treat program, vaccination and/or hospital status
- Develop programs that focus on pandemic recovery efforts such a mental health or economic supports. The HIRP program may be able to assist through grant funding in the following ways:
 - Development and dissemination of educational workshops or supports groups that focus on stress management, anxiety, depression, isolation, problem solving/coping skills, substance use or other mental health topics
 - \$50 meal card vouchers for students who do not qualify for the free and reduced lunch program but cannot afford the cost of school meals
 - \$50 child care vouchers per student whose parent is returning to work
 - Contact Rachel Foster (rcf5257@psu.edu) or Erika Tuller (ekt5249@psu.edu) for more information



Below are some educational materials. These range from written messages to print materials.

Option 1: The Vax Aced the Test.

- Pediatricians recommend that kids 6 months and older get the vaccine. COVID vaccines are as safe as many over-the-counter medications. Talk to your child's doctor and get the facts. You have the power to protect your family. Find a vaccine for your child at [PA.GOV/COVID](https://pa.gov/covid).

Option 2: The Vax Made the Grade.

- Pediatricians recommend that children 6 months and older get the COVID vaccine. Why? It's proven to prevent nearly 100% of infections in kids. And it's safe. Talk to your child's doctor and get the facts on the vax. You have the power to be informed. Find a vaccine for your child at [PA.GOV/COVID](https://pa.gov/covid).

Option 3: Already got your COVID-19 vaccine? Awesome! Make sure your friends and family get their COVID-19 vaccines, too. Encourage them to find their own reason to get vaccinated and help make their vaccination happen. For more information, see vaccines.gov

Option 4: It looks like COVID-19 may be with us for a while. So, let's keep doing the simple things to slow the spread. Vax. Mask. Test. (PA Unites Against COVID)

Access sample education materials at this [link](#)



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