

The Safe Return to School Study evaluated strategies for reducing COVID-19 transmission in underserved school communities in North St. Louis County. Strategies included providing free COVID-19 testing and conducting motivational interviewing and text message interventions to share pandemic-related information and promote vaccination.

The Challenge

During the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, there was limited information on how to prevent the spread of disease in school settings. Public health officials recommended using testing and vaccines to contain the virus, but tests were hard to find and many people chose not to vaccinate. Communities with lower socioeconomic status and predominantly black neighborhoods were disproportionately impacted by the virus.

The Approach

The Safe Return to Schools Study aimed to **improve the health and safety of underserved school communities** by evaluating strategies for reducing COVID-19 transmission and increasing vaccination uptake. Specifically, this study:

- Conducted a randomized trial to determine if weekly screening testing combined with symptomatic testing was more effective in reducing COVID-19 transmission compared to symptomatic testing alone.
- Implemented an additional randomized trial to assess the effectiveness of two different vaccine promotion strategies: (1) motivational interviewing or (2) receiving text messages with a link to educational videos.

The Impact

This study provided nearly 12,000 COVID-19 tests to underserved schools. Participants also received up-to-date pandemic information, including guidance on masking and vaccination, quarantine protocols, and resource access. Throughout the study, the research team worked closely with school and community partners to identify, understand, and respond to pandemic-related concerns. The team also collaborated with community partners to provide equitable access to resources. These partnerships ensured interventions were tailored to meet community needs and allowed the research team to develop trusting relationships with study participants.

The team:

Jason G. Newland, Stephanie Fritz, Sara Malone, Summer M. Reyes, Sydney A. Reyes, Brittany Bonty, Christina Evans, Samantha Hayes, Jamee Shelley, Tremayne Watterson, Jasmine Prater, Humza Agha, Ana Torres, Grace Yuan, Sewuese Akuse, Brock Montgomery

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RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

The Safe Return to Schools Study:

- Provided **free COVID-19** testing to students, staff, and their family members in 5 school districts in underserved communities in St. Louis
- Performed **11,927** COVID-19 tests, saving communities over **\$417,445** in testing costs
- Identified **367** positive COVID-19 tests and provided follow-up calls for every positive result
- **1** research team member of color is in medical residency, **2** have earned or are working towards advanced clinical degrees, and **5** team members started medical school

Key Benefits

The Safe Return to School Study resulted in **clinical**, **community**, and **economic** benefits.



CLINICAL

Provided saliva-based COVID-19 testing developed at Washington University in select schools in North County, St. Louis



COMMUNITY

Increased the accessibility of COVID-19 testing in historically underserved areas in North St. Louis County



COMMUNITY

Helped track COVID-19 transmission through large scale testing



COMMUNITY

Conducted motivational interviewing to promote vaccinations and increase knowledge of COVID-19 transmission



ECONOMIC

Reduced cost barriers to COVID-19 testing by providing no-cost testing to participants

Find out more:

[Visit the full case study](#)

[Learn more about the Safe Return to Schools Study](#)

Contact:

Jason G. Newland, MD, MEd jnewland@wustl.edu
Edward Mallinckrodt Department of Pediatrics
Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis