Reducing COVID-19 Transmission in Schools Through Testing and Vaccine Uptake

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.

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

- Provided saliva-based COVID-19 testing developed at Washington University in select schools in North County, St. Louis
- Increased the accessibility of COVID-19 testing in historically underserved areas in North St. Louis County
- Helped track COVID-19 transmission through large scale testing
- Conducted motivational interviewing to promote vaccinations and increase knowledge of COVID-19 transmission
- Reduced cost barriers to COVID-19 testing by providing no-cost testing to participants

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Find out more:
Visit the full case study
Learn more about the Safe Return to Schools Study

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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