

How Baltimore City Public Schools is Responding to Covid-19

September 2021





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KEY POINTS

- Baltimore City Public Schools is navigating the Covid-19 pandemic by collaborating with public health officials and local universities via the district's Health Advisory Committee.
- The district prioritized the return of students with special needs and piloted comprehensive mitigation strategies as early as the summer of 2020.
- Partnering with a consortium of four local universities allowed the district to receive reliable individual PCR Covid test results in under 12 hours.
- Baltimore City Public Schools made participation in Covid testing a key component of its efforts to bring students back for in-person learning.
- Pooled testing is one strategy districts can use to lower costs and increase safety for students returning to in-person schooling.

INTRODUCTION

Baltimore City Public Schools (“City Schools” or “the district”) has implemented mitigation strategies, worked to improve indoor air quality, and executed comprehensive Covid-19 testing in response to the pandemic. The district recognized early on the importance of returning students to in-person schooling and piloted efforts to do so in the late spring and early summer of 2020. City Schools then used a phased approach to return students to in-person schooling and constantly improve the district's mitigation strategies. By spring 2021, all public school families in Baltimore had the opportunity to send their children to facilities with updated ventilation systems, comprehensive Covid-19 testing, and procedures designed to keep students and staff safe. This reality would not have been possible without extensive collaboration among district officials, the district's Health Advisory Committee, and local universities.

About Baltimore City Public Schools

- Approximately **77,856 students** attend Baltimore City Public Schools.
- The demographic breakdown of the public school population is approximately **75.7% African-American, 14.2% Hispanic or Latino, and 7.5% White.**
- The district qualifies for the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Community Eligibility Provision for high-poverty districts, meaning **100% of students receive breakfast and lunch at no cost.**
- Approximately **9.6% of students** are classified as **English learners.**

COLLABORATION WITH EXPERTS

As the district's CEO, Dr. Sonja Santelises established a panel of public health experts known as the Health Advisory Committee to help City Schools respond to the pandemic. This committee comprises public health officials; school health officials; epidemiologists; and employees from the Baltimore City Health Department, Johns Hopkins University, Morgan State University, and the University of Maryland. The Health Advisory Committee meets on a bi-weekly basis to make decisions that impact the health and safety of students, staff, and families.

Collaboration with public health officials has been critical to City Schools' mitigation and testing efforts. The Health Advisory Committee helped the district interpret Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) guidelines as they were released to ensure that

all Covid-19 mitigation strategies were evidence based. The committee also helped draft the district's Standard Operating Procedures—an 80-page document outlining best practices and guidelines for keeping students safe as they returned to in-person schooling. This comprehensive document detailed mitigation strategies for school leaders for everything from mask wearing to cleaning electronics.

The expertise and guidance of the Health Advisory Committee allowed the district to update the Standard Operating Procedures in real time as the CDC and other agencies promulgated new guidelines. The Standard Operating Procedures were helpful for school leaders and sent a strong signal to City Schools families that student safety is a top priority.

MITIGATION, CONTACT TRACING, AND VENTILATION

City Schools employed many of the mitigation strategies seen in urban school districts around the country—masking, social distancing, organizing students according to static cohorts, and comprehensive cleaning of high-touch surfaces. Further elevating City Schools' response was its regular communication to families about mitigation and constant refinement of policies. As early as March 2020, City Schools employees were on local news channels detailing mitigation strategies to keep students safe. The district then piloted additional measures in summer 2020 with 200 students who elected to return to in-person schooling. Chief of Staff Alison Perkins-Cohen described that pilot program as critical to refining health screening protocols that the district subsequently used to return additional students to in-person schooling. As the pandemic progressed throughout the 2020-21 school year, City Schools released regular [Mitigation Updates](#) to families and staff.

Robust contact tracing was another critical component of efforts to keep students and staff safe. The district identified existing central office employees to conduct contact tracing that limited the transmission of the virus. These employees contacted any close contacts of a person with a confirmed positive test. As part of these contact tracing efforts, students in Baltimore must sign in electronically every day so that the district has a record

of who is in attendance each day. Similarly, the district keeps a log of all individuals who attend school events and requires all vendors to participate in contact tracing efforts. In part because of these contact tracing efforts, City Schools had a low Covid-19 transmission rate in schools.

Improving ventilation in school facilities was another priority for district officials because the city has the oldest facilities portfolio in the state. Many of its buildings do not have air conditioning. District officials, families, and the teachers union all identified ventilation as a significant concern. In response, City Schools installed MERV-13 filters in all systems across the district that could handle them. City Schools purchased and installed over 8,000 air purifiers in classrooms that did not previously have proper ventilation for schools without air conditioning or for classrooms with older ventilation systems. The district then built and publicized an [In-Person Air Quality Dashboard](#) of every classroom in the district. This dashboard allowed families and community members to view and track every ventilation update made to classrooms.

REGIONAL PARTNERSHIPS AND DIFFERENTIATED STRATEGIES FOR COMPREHENSIVE COVID-19 TESTING

City Schools has employed one of the most rigorous Covid-19 testing programs in the country. The district received a grant from The Rockefeller Foundation to create regional partnerships that allowed for weekly symptomatic and asymptomatic testing of all students and staff in grades K-12.

Younger students participated in an innovative pooled testing program through Ginkgo Bioworks. Pooled testing involves students in entire classes using individual nasal swabs that are then tested together as a group, lowering costs for the district. Pooled tests for each classroom were collected, assigned a unique QR code, and sent by overnight delivery to a lab in Maryland for processing. Each envelope of tests contained unique QR codes, which allowed for expeditious email notification of district and school officials when tests returned positive results. When a pool tested positive, the University of Maryland sent mobile testing vans to conduct individual PCR tests. These PCR tests would then identify the individual student(s) in a class that had tested positive.

Regional collaboration was the cornerstone of the district's high school testing program. In February 2021, four metro-area universities—American, Gallaudet, Catholic, and Marymount—launched a mobile testing lab capable of processing 50,000 tests per week. City Schools partnered with this consortium to offer individual saliva PCR testing to all high school students and staff in the district. This consortium provided multiple benefits to City Schools students. First, the local administration and analysis of the tests allowed the district to receive results in as little as 12 hours, minimizing the amount of time an infected person interacted with their peers. This fast response time limited in-school transmission of Covid-19. Dr. Santelises described the testing program as “the early detection system that we need to assure families and staff that our learning spaces are safe.” Additionally, the consortium provided individual testing of high school students, which was important because high school students routinely rotate among classes rather than remain in static cohorts.

THE IMPORTANCE OF TESTING

District officials knew that some families would be skeptical of the Covid-19 testing program. Some City Schools families were wary of testing because of the controversy surrounding Johns Hopkins University's use of cells derived from Henrietta Lacks¹. Additionally, some families were familiar only with the sometimes painful nasopharyngeal tests commonly used to diagnose Covid-19 positivity in spring 2020. Other families had questions about how testing would disrupt the school day. The district addressed these issues by publishing written guidance on testing procedures, holding open houses to demonstrate a day in the life of a student participating in testing, and [creating a video](#) showing that kindergarteners could complete the non-invasive nasal swab test on their own. That video has now been seen over 6,000 times on the district's YouTube channel.

City Schools ensured that families interested in returning to in-person schooling consented to participate in the district's innovative testing procedures. District

officials obtained written consent by incorporating the testing program into a compact between families and the school district to keep students and staff safe. The district committed to implementing mitigation strategies recommended by the CDC such as masking; social distancing; hand washing; cleaning and disinfecting; and contact tracing. In turn, families agreed to “do their part” by sending their children to school with masks, reporting suspected Covid-19 cases, and participating in the district's asymptomatic testing program. The only way a student attending school in person could opt out of the district's Covid-19 testing program is if their responsible adult provided evidence to the school every week that the student had received a negative Covid-19 test result through another organization.

District officials were initially concerned that comprehensive Covid-19 testing might create opposition or deter people from returning to in-person schooling. This concern was unfounded. Since the district

1 <https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/henrietalacks/frequently-asked-questions.html>

implemented its testing program, the only significant opposition has come from two kindergarten students—both of whom cried when they were not allowed to test because their responsible adults had not yet returned their consent forms. Comprehensive asymptomatic testing soon became a regular part of the school week for City Schools students, and families appreciated knowing that their students were safe.

City Schools served as a model for a safe and collaborative reopening strategy. Dr. Santelises and

her team created critical partnerships with public health experts and local universities. Together, they implemented comprehensive mitigation strategies; modernized decades-old ventilation systems; closely tracked Covid-19 cases to minimize infections; and established a comprehensive asymptomatic testing program for every student attending school in person. The district also informed families and staff of these strategies to build confidence in the return to in-person schooling.

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