

## LESSONS LEARNED - EMERGING STRATEGIES TO CONTINUE TO SUPPORT SCHOOLS DURING THE PANDEMIC

### **Ensuring medical and public health information is tailored for educators.**

School leaders have taken on a new role this year and have been tasked with interpreting public health information to make medical based decisions. To support school leaders in this role, LDOE engaged a superintendent workgroup to develop the [Strong Start 2020](#) guidance for safely reopening schools. The workgroup increased buy-in and helped support local implementation of mitigation strategies by ensuring the guidance could be operationalized by school leaders.

*It is critical to engage educators in the development of materials for schools. In addition, LDOE should serve as the primary communication lead when sharing COVID-19 information with schools and school systems.*

### **Regular and coordinated communication with schools is essential to control outbreaks.**

State agencies and partners have implemented a variety of communication strategies to streamline dissemination of information. This includes shared email accounts, weekly calls for school staff, weekly superintendent roundtables, [bi-weekly town halls](#), weekly newsletters and dedicated webpages for resources.

*A clear communication strategy is critical. Community partners should work to reinforce and connect schools and school systems with the existing tools and platforms to receive up-to-date information about COVID-19.*

### **Working to provide a unified message among local medical and public health professionals.**

Local medical and public health leaders have played a critical role in supporting schools while maintaining their existing work load. Since guidance is often shared with schools on a regional or local basis, many medical providers are making efforts to connect with colleagues across different regions of the state to align messaging. For example, the [LDH Regional Medical Directors](#) meet on a weekly basis to ensure guidance is consistent across the nine LDH regions.

*Efforts should be made to facilitate and encourage interregional collaboration among medical and public health professionals working with schools to ensure unified messaging and guidance.*

### **Building trust with local school systems to implement state guidance.**

Given the variation in community outbreaks and the unique needs of school communities, tailored technical assistance is critical. State agencies and partners have found success in building relationships with school systems through personal phone calls or weekly meetings. LDH hired and deployed local Community Health Workers to support their communities during the pandemic. In addition, the LDH ensured regional epidemiologists were able to assist school systems.

*Deploying public health staff and expansion of community-level infrastructure helps build trust given they share similar lived experiences with their neighbors and peers.*

### **Demonstrating resiliency to ensure continuation of programs that provide services to schools.**

Program leads found ways to adapt critical services that provide wrap around support to schools versus halting. For [Project Aware](#), the team identified an emerging need of staff mental health and redirect existing funding. In addition, LDOE work to ensure services continuation with [bus transportation](#). As a results of this support, innovative strategies were discovered and service continued. In some school systems, busses were used as [Wi-Fi hotspots](#) for low connectivity areas.

*Programs should work to pivot work and identify innovative strategies to continue services rather than halting services.*

## LOOKING FORWARD - STRATEGIES TO ADDRESS IN 2021 FOR SCHOOLS DURING THE PANDEMIC

### **Slowing the spread of COVID-19 goes beyond the school bell.**

Louisiana educators and public health leaders have demonstrated success in implementing mitigating strategies in the school building. However, efforts are needed to reinforce personal responsibility to social distance, wear face masks and apply other protocols to mitigate the spread when students and staff are not at school. Efforts should be made to develop peer to peer educational materials.

### **Providing education for teachers and students around vaccination.**

As Louisiana rolls out the first doses of vaccines, educational leaders are requesting that childcare workers and school teachers, staff and bus drivers are prioritized for future vaccines. It is estimated there are 166,000 frontline workers in Louisiana's daycare centers, pre-K programs and K-12 schools who are essential to the functioning of the state. Given the potential for vaccine access for educators, health education around the importance of vaccination will be needed. Community partners and state agencies should prepare to disseminate educational materials to build confidence in COVID-19 vaccines.

### **Recognizing the role of testing accessibility in health equity.**

In December, the LDH adopted updated guidance from the CDC that allows people who may have been exposed to COVID-19 to shorten their quarantine period from 14 days to 10 days, or as few as 7 days with a negative test. Given that the return to work or school can occur faster with a negative test, there is potential for testing accessibility, or lack thereof, to cause an increase in disparities and lead to unintended negative consequences for school communities. Communities should work to ensure equal access to testing and increase awareness of testing sites among vulnerable populations.

### **Enhancing utilization of telehealth services among providers for school-age children.**

During the pandemic, flexibilities for telehealth services were expanded to reach more children in Louisiana. Despite this, many mental health providers and school-based health providers are reporting underutilization of the services among students. The absence of technology, digital literacy, parental consent and reliable internet connectivity are all high barriers to utilization. Research on innovative strategies to increase utilization of telehealth among school-age children is needed.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This information was compiled by the School Re-Entry COVID-19 Advisory Council established in July 2020. Special thanks to Meredith McGovern, Dr. Martha Whyte, and Dr. Tony Gonzales for providing insight into lessons learned at the December 16, 2020 meeting. The advisory council is led by Well-Ahead Louisiana, in partnership with the Louisiana Department of Education. This is part of the [Louisiana Healthy Schools](#) initiative and funded in part by CDC's [Improving Student Health and Academic Achievement through Nutrition, Physical Activity and the Management of Chronic Conditions in Schools](#) (CDC-RFA-DP18-1801 COVID-19 SUPPLEMENT).

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