Are you ready? We’re Ready!
A communications strategy on returning to in-person instruction in a pandemic.

Welcome Back to School!

Dallas Independent School District
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Summary

Dallas ISD is a “majority-minority” district serving predominately Hispanic and Black communities. The district is the second-largest public school district in the state and the 16th-largest in the nation.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought unprecedented changes for Dallas ISD and school districts across the nation. The structure for education as we know it has quickly changed. After one and a half years of distance learning, it became evident that students engage and perform better in academic settings, where their physical, social, and emotional needs are met.

Despite the challenges faced due to COVID-19, we were ready to welcome our students back into the classroom, where we could continue to maximize efforts to address students’ unfinished learning. One of many mitigating steps our leadership team came up with was the development of two alternative school calendar options that would provide additional instructional days for students.

Communications Services was tasked with delivering effective and continuous communication to ensure that our families and staff members were confident about safely bringing students back to the classroom through the implementation of additional safety resources.

Dallas ISD by the Numbers

- Enrollment: 142,000
- Staff: 21,000
- Schools: 238
- District size: 384 sq. miles
- Hispanic: 70%
- African American: 20%
Research: Unfinished Learning

The district conducted qualitative and quantitative research when bringing students back to campus. Dallas ISD monitored student performance during the pandemic through the state-administered Measure of Academic Progress assessment, also known as the MAP test. However, the MAP tests were administered in person, and not all students participated. As a result, we were not able to receive an accurate measure of student performance.

When comparing the MAP test results from the 2019-20 and 2020-21 school years, data showed that 37% of students who tested lost learning in math, while 33% of students lost learning in reading. More than 55,000 students did not pass or take at least one of their standardized tests last school year. Students who did not participate would be students who would also show evidence of learning loss, likely to a higher degree.

With this data, getting students back inside the classroom as quickly and safely as possible became a crucial effort to minimize long-lasting negative impacts, particularly among Black and Latino students. Research shows that providing more time through an extended school year can have positive effects for students and teachers.
Planning & Objectives

1. Utilize various communications channels to inform parents on the return to school plan and highlight how Dallas ISD plans to operate schools to ensure a safe and healthy learning environment.

2. Generate at least $1 million in earned media placements to help influence the desired outcomes/buy-in on how to safely return to in-person learning.
   *Target audience: all Dallas ISD families, teachers, students, local broadcast, print and online news media and community partners.

Strategies

- In an effort to help the district know how many employees and students are fully vaccinated and to better facilitate the contact tracing and quarantine processes, Dallas ISD offered a one-time COVID-19 Vaccine Incentive of $500 to district employees who are fully vaccinated and a $50 incentive for students.

- Dallas ISD partnered with various providers in the community to offer vaccination clinics for staff and students 12 and older to receive their first and second doses of the COVID-19 vaccine.

- To mitigate on-campus spread, every Dallas ISD campus had rapid COVID-19 tests available to school staff and students (with parent consent) to provide results in 15 minutes.

- Districtwide masking protocol was implemented in August 2021 to help ease concerns and reduce the spread within each campus.

- The district will continue the daily cleaning of all facilities with attention to high touchpoint areas. We will utilize safe and effective products that comply with recommendations from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

Implementation

1. Our first step to effectively reach our families was to create a one-stop webpage where they could access information on students’ return to school. Here, parents could browse all reopening plans and communications.
To demonstrate how Dallas ISD planned to keep schools a safe learning environment, we curated a series of videos demonstrating how “We’re Ready” to continue unfinished learning and welcome students back to school:

- Safety comes first in Dallas ISD: [English & Spanish](#)
- We’re Ready! School safety video: [English & Spanish](#)

Another key channel we used was the Communications Call Center. Parents with questions regarding back-to-school topics were able to reach our call center for the latest information. In an additional effort to reach families who had not yet registered an enrollment status, the call center and Communications team proactively called parents to inform them about the upcoming in-person school year and to provide and gather information on their return.

2. We responded to media inquiries regarding, but not limited to, the various listed strategic initiatives to boost safety measures. We also pitched and secured placement coverage on implemented strategies to continue reaching the targeted audience on the return to in-person instruction.

**Evaluation**

While we recognize the perils of the pandemic are far reaching, declining enrollment is an ongoing challenge large, urban school districts must continue to sharpen. The district had been closely monitoring enrollment and projected to serve about 146,000 students this year. Leading up to the start of the 2021 school year, the district dedicated multiple outreach efforts to help engage students, staff, and families on safely returning to in-person learning under the “We’re Ready” campaign. Those strategies allowed our enrollment numbers to slowly increase over time as schools opened with three different start dates this year, as small cohorts of campuses rolled out an extended calendar model aimed at combating learning loss on Aug. 2. By late Aug. more than 80% of students had returned, and by mid-September an additional 4,500 started attending class. We were able to reach 97% of the projected attendance for the year.