

Tulsa Public Schools: Prioritizing Physical, Social, and Emotional Safety to Support Reopening and Recovery

Jennifer A. Bland, Adam K. Edgerton, Desiree O’Neal, Naomi Ondrasek

Abstract

Since the COVID-19 pandemic intensified in March 2020, districts nationwide have faced the difficult task of reopening schools safely and keeping them open. Now, districts must accelerate student learning and attend to the trauma and loss experienced by students and families. This brief describes reopening efforts in Tulsa Public Schools, which adopted a nimble and forward-looking recovery strategy encompassing social and emotional, as well as physical, safety. The district laid the groundwork for this strategy even before schools reopened to in-person instruction in late winter 2021, sustained these efforts through a safe and successful spring and summer, and plans to continue them into the fall. This brief is part of a Learning Policy Institute initiative to disseminate key public health research and reopening and recovery strategies to educators and policymakers.

This brief and other school reopening resources can be found at <https://reopening.learningpolicyinstitute.org>.

Acknowledgments

We are grateful to Deanna Marshall, Clinical Research Coordinator, Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia; and Jessica Newman, Senior Researcher, American Institutes for Research, for their insightful feedback and for reviewing this brief for accuracy. This work was supported by the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative, Heising-Simons Foundation, and Silver Giving Foundation. Core operating support for the Learning Policy Institute is provided by the S. D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation, Heising-Simons Foundation, William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, Raikes Foundation, and Sandler Foundation.

Like many districts nationwide, Tulsa closed its schools to in-person instruction for much of the 2020–21 school year. But despite physical site closures, Tulsa Public Schools stands out as a district that developed a nimble reopening strategy to respond to changing conditions. The district deepened innovative partnerships and strategies for both social and emotional well-being and expanded learning time. This profile describes how Tulsa Public Schools managed its COVID-19 recovery process by implementing school-level social and emotional learning and wellness initiatives, opening a new virtual academy, and introducing extensive summer and before- and after-school programming, drawing significant support from [federal COVID-19 relief dollars](#). All these efforts occurred within the context of evidence-based COVID-19 mitigation protocols. Drawing from the district’s documents and websites, as well as media coverage and our own interviews with Tulsa administrators, we describe how the district and its partner organizations accomplished this work. Where applicable, we provide links to resources that may be useful for policymakers and educators navigating their own recovery plans.

The COVID-19 Context in Tulsa

Background on Tulsa Public Schools

Tulsa is the second-largest city in Oklahoma and one of the 50 largest cities in the United States. [Tulsa Public Schools](#) educates nearly 33,000 students across 77 schools and employs nearly 6,000 teachers, administrators, and staff across the district. As of the 2020–21 academic year, 37% of the district’s students were Hispanic/Latinx, 23% were Black, 23% were White, 10% were multiracial, 5% were American Indian, and 2% were Asian or Pacific Islander. The [median household income](#) for the city of Tulsa is \$47,650, 81% of students are economically disadvantaged, and 26% are English learners.

On March 11, 2020, Tulsa Public Schools issued its [first press release](#) addressing COVID-19. The subsequent announcement of districtwide school building closures coincided with Tulsa's already-planned spring break, which was set to begin on March 16, 2020. On March 14, the Oklahoma State Board of Education closed all school buildings across the state effective March 16 through at least April 6; within weeks, the state board moved schools to remote instruction for the rest of the 2019–20 academic year.

Starting in summer 2020, Oklahoma allowed districts to decide whether and when to open in person. The Tulsa Health Department established risk tiers based on community transmission, identifying a 14-day rolling average case rate of 0.34 or greater per 1,000 residents as representing the [highest level of risk](#) for school operations. The district has disaggregated these risk tiers to the ZIP code level, which allows administrators to look at case counts continually in the district's immediate enrollment area as well as throughout the county. The district has incorporated these risk tiers into a monitoring approach that includes early warning indicators from district testing and contact tracing and foundational school system metrics, such as staffing capacity, personal protective equipment (PPE) availability, and the proportion of students or staff in quarantine or isolation. Exceeding thresholds for these indicators triggers discussions with local health officials and recommendations to the cabinet and board. For additional details, see "[Specific COVID-19 Mitigation Strategies in Tulsa Public Schools.](#)"

As cases rose during summer 2020—mirroring the nationwide spike—the district [abandoned plans for an in-person return](#) to school in September. Throughout fall 2020, the district continued to monitor a range of public health indicators to determine when it might be safe to return in person. After a marathon meeting on October 13, the Tulsa School Board [voted](#) to return pre-k–5 students to school starting on November 9, 2020, through a multiphase approach.

Pre-kindergarten and kindergarten students returned to in-person classes 4 days per week on November 9, 2020, and grades 1–3 followed on November 16. Wednesdays continued to be distance learning days for all students. All staff participated in [safety training courses](#) prior to students' return. The [remaining elementary grades were to return by November 30 and the secondary grades by January 4, 2021](#), but a surge in COVID-19 cases consistent with national trends derailed these plans. Ultimately, [rapidly rising cases in the community](#) prompted the district to end in-person instruction on December 1, 2020.

Distance learning continued for all grade levels until February 2021, when a [letter](#) from Superintendent Deborah Gist stated that declining community cases made a safe return to in-person learning possible. Accordingly, all students were permitted to return 4 days per week on either [February 23 or February 25](#), dependent upon grade level. Wednesdays remained a remote learning day for all students so teachers could conduct individual check-ins, especially for students who continued to learn remotely and for those needing tutoring and other supports. In March 2021, district officials participated in a [Reopening Summit](#) hosted by the U.S. Department of Education to discuss their successes and challenges with initial reopening and their focus on safe, healthy, and engaging education.

Students who felt unsafe or preferred [remote learning](#) could either enroll in the Tulsa Virtual Academy or engage in largely asynchronous learning through their home schools, with some direct student–teacher contact on Wednesdays. Students and families also had the continuous option of switching between learning modalities, though the district encouraged that such changes occur during semester and quarter breaks. In 2021–22, students who wish to remain remote will be required to enroll in the Tulsa Virtual Academy.

Tulsa Virtual Academy

In response to the pandemic, Tulsa administrators launched [Tulsa Virtual Academy](#) in the fall of 2020, supported in part by Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act dollars. Tulsa Virtual Academy is the district's first full-time pre-k–12 virtual school. District staff distributed [FAQs](#) to help students decide whether to enroll, and they disseminated further information about [finding the best fit](#) for distance learning when buildings did not reopen in September 2020.

Originally a temporary option for distance learning, the academy's popularity and success led administrators to sustain it as a stand-alone school into 2021–22 and beyond. In addition to promoting the virtual academy as an option for families and students who prefer remote instruction for health and safety reasons, district staff acknowledge that this learning modality has worked especially well for some students and are expanding their advertising of the virtual academy to address features students and families described as especially compelling, such as flexibility and personalization.

Tulsa Virtual Academy students engage in a combination of live and recorded lessons with certified teachers who closely monitor progress and provide regular feedback to students and their families. Teachers host virtual touch points, including whole-group, small-group, and one-on-one meetings during office hours. Students work at their own pace and engage in personalized learning.

Since last year, the district has demonstrated that it can educate children in person safely. District administrators estimate approximately 80% of students returned in person by the end of the 2020–21 academic year. From reopening through the end of the school year, case rates did not exceed 0.058% of Tulsa's in-person students, and the total proportion of students who tested positive or who were identified as potentially exposed through contact tracing did not exceed 0.58%. Contact tracing identified the vast majority of positive cases throughout the year as resulting from out-of-school transmission. During the final week of school in late May, rates remained very low, with positive cases plus contact tracing affecting only 0.04% of students. By June 2021, new COVID-19 cases in Tulsa County [ranged](#) between 160 and 308 per week, down from over 4,000 per week during the pandemic's local peak in December and January and from nearly 1,200 per week when schools reopened in late February.

Consistent with national trends, community cases have since substantially increased with the proliferation of the highly transmissible [Delta variant](#) of the virus. By the second week of August 2021, the county case count had increased to over 2,500 per week. Despite ballooning cases in the community, district-level cases remained very low during summer learning. During the final week of district-led summer learning at the end of July, only 0.10% of participating students (11 out of approximately 11,000) tested positive.

A Methodical, Data-Driven, and Transparent Reopening Approach

From the beginning of the pandemic, Tulsa administrators established a methodical approach to reopening and focused substantial attention on data, communication, and transparency. Establishing this approach up front has allowed the district to be nimble in responding to changing conditions. The district forged partnerships with local and state public health organizations and established numerous systems for tracking internal and external health and safety data to continually inform reopening efforts.

Together with public health officials, a team of Tulsa administrators from across district departments met throughout the spring and summer of 2020 to pull together research and develop guidance for conditions under which the district would return to in-person instruction. Superintendent Deborah Gist highlighted this approach, stating, “Throughout the pandemic, we’ve committed to being data-wise and science-informed, and we’ve been working really closely with medical professionals, reading every study, following every release and report, looking at data coming out locally as well as nationally and internationally.”

District leaders also obtained feedback from and disseminated information through the district’s standing teacher and student cabinets, the teachers union, the principals association, and support professionals’ departments; through social media and direct messaging apps to students and families; and through a parent, student, and community member [survey](#) that received over 15,000 responses. The district also published comprehensive weekly updates ([see example](#)) that were presented to the district school board. These reports included case rates and close-contact quarantine rates in surrounding districts that had fully reopened at the beginning of the academic year, providing context for Tulsa administrators’ decisions.

When publicizing its decision to remain in remote learning at the start of the 2020–21 academic year, the district cited [guidance](#) from the Oklahoma Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics and the Oklahoma Association of Family Physicians, as well as local and state public health officials. The superintendent released a letter on [decision-making in uncertain times](#) and another [citing](#) National Academy of Sciences data demonstrating that “people who are Black, Latinx, Native American/Indigenous, or economically disadvantaged show disproportionate rates of COVID-19 infection.” Given the high proportions of such students in the district, the superintendent concluded, “We simply cannot compound the challenges that these communities already face by creating conditions for COVID-19 exposure.”

To reassure students and families about the quality of remote learning, the district [disseminated comparison documents](#) explaining how 2020–21 remote learning would be more planned and robust compared to the emergency remote learning of spring 2020 (Figure 1). Teachers also had more time to participate in comprehensive [professional development](#) in order to make the necessary shifts to online instruction.

Once buildings reopened in February 2021, district leaders encouraged all students to return in person through efforts that included guides for [pre-k and kindergarten](#), [elementary](#), and [secondary students](#)’ return to in-person learning; [documentation of mitigation measures](#); more general information about Tulsa’s broad commitment to [emotional and physical safety](#); and transparency regarding [changes to distance learning](#).

These efforts have set the district up to be nimble in responding to emerging science and changing conditions. Commenting on evolving guidelines for vaccinated individuals from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Tulsa Public Schools Chief Financial and Operations Officer Jorge Robles said, “We’ve continued to modify as we learn more.... We’re able to look at all the protocols and say continue, modify, or suspend—all with the big caveat that if things change, if a new variant is very aggressive, we can quickly modify again.”

Figure 1
Crisis-Response Learning vs. Planned Distance Learning in Tulsa

Spring 2020 Crisis-Response Learning	School Year 2020–2021 Distance Learning
Our buildings were closed	Our buildings will be open for managed and targeted use
There was little time for educators to create appropriate spaces from which to deliver distance learning	Educators will have time to prepare appropriate, well-designed spaces for distance instruction
Shortened instructional day	Purposeful, full day of school
Wide variety of programs and resources used	Use district-adopted curriculum and digital programs
Grades were “frozen” and could only improve	Assignments will be graded, with a continued focus on specific feedback
No attendance recorded, except for COVID-related absences	Daily attendance requirements, defined by presence and engagement*
Limited program support for students and families	Common dashboard and single log-in; tutorials and help lines for families

* Details about attendance policy revisions will be finalized in late August 2020.



Source: Tulsa Public Schools. (n.d.) <https://resources.finalseite.net/images/v1597342779/tulsaschoolsorg/mvau5gnw1cyilkfavrd2/20202021SchoolYearOverviewENGLISH.pdf> (accessed 06/21/21). (p. 6).

Reimagining Safety to Include Social and Emotional Learning

In addition to the district’s robust response to physical safety concerns brought on by the pandemic, Tulsa administrators quickly recognized the broader needs of the whole child. As Superintendent Gist explained, “We remained committed ... to making sure our students and team members were safe. And when we described safe, we meant, of course, from a COVID perspective, but also emotionally and mentally safe, and safe in many other ways.” She noted that the district recognized how those social and emotional needs would likely increase due to the pandemic. Tulsa’s educators were well positioned to preserve and strengthen relationships with students and families during the pandemic due to Tulsa’s pre-pandemic work in social and emotional learning. As described below, the district built upon this work during the pandemic by leveraging preexisting partnerships, expanding its Wellness Teams, establishing Care and Connect Wednesdays, and extending student advisory periods.

Infusing Social and Emotional Learning Into Practice, Partnerships, and Data Tools

Tulsa has been working for several years to infuse social and emotional learning (SEL) into its in-school practices and out-of-school partnerships. Since 2016, the district has partnered with [Turnaround for Children](#); [the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning \(CASEL\)](#); the [Wallace Foundation](#); and [The Opportunity Project](#) to ground its work in building relationships and routines. The district’s [strategic plan](#) supports SEL inside and outside of school, and report cards reflect descriptors of core SEL competencies.

Over the past several years, the district has prioritized SEL-focused professional learning communities for its teachers. District officials plan to leverage federal funding to add more professional learning, more time to the school day, and more frequent opportunities to infuse SEL into all of Tulsa’s work. As Deputy Superintendent Paula Shannon shared, students “can’t have cognitive work happening without a real focus on social and emotional well-being and skills.”

During the pandemic, the district has followed guidance for remote learning and returning to the classroom from CASEL and Turnaround for Children. In particular, administrators explained how the hardships of the pandemic increased staff and student buy-in to the value of SEL practices. A CASEL staff member who works with the district stated, “People who were maybe sitting on the fence before [the pandemic]—‘What’s this SEL stuff?’—[are] aware of the level of trauma and uncertainty people experienced, and they’re much more receptive because they’re seeing SEL for its healing power.”

In addition to emphasizing SEL practices, the district collects and analyzes SEL-related data to evaluate the effectiveness of its programming. The district uses [Panorama SEL](#) and [Perception surveys](#), which help educators assess students’ social and emotional competencies and perceptions of school—for example, how students process emotions and respond to stress and how students and teachers assess school culture and climate. Based on 2020–21 survey responses, district leaders reported both high rates of student belonging and a strong student sense of connection with adults in their schools, despite the face-to-face learning time lost due to COVID-19.

Wellness Teams

Tulsa has prioritized school community members’ access to services and supports throughout the pandemic. Each school now has a Wellness Team, which includes some combination of an attendance clerk, social worker, nurse, teacher, principal, parent leader, and community partner. These teams existed prior to the pandemic, with a particular focus on student absenteeism, but they expanded during the pandemic to include more people and address additional metrics monitored using a newly developed Wellness Tracker. The Wellness Teams make direct phone calls and administer surveys to identify specific areas of need and mobilize resources, including referrals for mental health services, housing and food assistance, grief support groups, and other social services.

Noting the toll that the pandemic was taking on staff members, Tulsa administrators expanded the scope of the Wellness Teams to include support for adults. In addition to the supports described above, the district partnered with the Food Bank of Eastern Oklahoma to address any food insecurity among district staff, creating drive-through options for food pickup. District administrators also disseminated extensive information to staff through weekly newsletters about wellness and self-care, including who to contact for additional resources, and established a care line for teachers and principals operated through the Family and Student Support Services Office.

The district plans to continue the expanded Wellness Team work into 2021–22 and beyond. Chief Learning Officer Ebony Johnson explained:

One thing I know is going to be super powerful for us moving forward is the Wellness Team work and the tracking of how our families and students are persevering or not. As we’ve been working with these teams, we’ve realized, whoa, teams at our school sites can really help us ... find out what’s truly happening, so we know that’s something we’ll continue to perfect and support at our sites.

Care and Connect Wednesdays

During the 2020–21 school year, the district used Wednesdays as a dedicated time to focus on building relationships, an approach grounded in the [science of learning and development](#). One administrator described this time as “a blessing” for some students to develop stronger interpersonal relationships that were more difficult to form during distance learning. In fall 2020, when instruction for middle and high school students was still entirely virtual, Tulsa [brought some secondary school students back in person](#) on Wednesdays—targeting those who were most in need as well as those who wanted specific supports—through an initiative called [Care and Connect](#). The initiative [expanded to elementary schools](#) in January 2021. Each school opened and staffed a Care and Connect Center where students could go see staff, ask questions, and receive a variety of supports. Once schools opened 4 days per week in February 2021, Care and Connect continued to be offered each Wednesday. Students could proactively sign up for appointments, and staff would actively seek some students out.

Care and Connect Center supports varied by school and included help with academic work, technology assistance, college and career planning with counselors, connections to social services, safe spaces for distance learning, or simply a listening ear. Care and Connect staff included teachers, administrators, support staff, counselors, therapists, social workers, and other school partners.

Care and Connect will look different in 2021–22 as the district returns to 5 days per week of in-person instruction, but district administrators remain committed to continuing it in some form. Chief Learning Officer Ebony Johnson explained that when “going back to 5 days [in person], ... it’s going to be critically important that we continue to set up ways that students have adult mentors who care for them and connect with them. Even if it’s just one adult, we’re going to make sure that’s in place.”

Extended Advisory Time

When students returned to school buildings in February, the district elected to permanently alter its middle school and high school schedules to include 30-minute advisory periods to create a space, in addition to Care and Connect, to build student belonging. Advisory classes, which occur at the end of school each day, also include college- and career-readiness lessons. Advisory classes took place prior to the pandemic but in shorter time increments and only in high school. With help from the Oklahoma State Department of Education, the district is able to provide professional development modules to teachers who facilitate these advisories. Beyond this, the state department also trains school counselors to support teachers in meeting both the academic and the social and emotional needs of students.

District administrators hope to further expand advisory time in upcoming years but are moving cautiously. According to Chief Learning Officer Johnson, “We know it’s critically important, but it has to be done right, so we wanted to make sure we had enough time to put in the strategic planning for it that it really deserves ... so we’re spending some more time getting it grounded in what we really want it to be. Quite a bit of Care and Connect folds right in.”

Innovating Beyond the School Day: Expanded Learning and Community Partnerships for Learning Acceleration

Tulsa administrators were able to use the conditions created by the pandemic to develop and expand out-of-school time and community partnerships to address unfinished learning. The district operates under a strategic, multiyear plan for [expanding learning time](#) that now includes expanded summer learning activities, Operation Graduation, and before- and after-school care and tutoring. These efforts carry the focus on physical, social, and emotional safety beyond the school day to include all touch points with students. As Deputy Superintendent Paula Shannon explained, “We want our kids to have safe places to come; we want them to reconnect, engage with peers, [and] really address social-emotional wellness needs; and we’re going to create enriching experiences that give them access to accelerate their learning and also intervention to help recover some of the skills that were unfinished from this academic year.”

The district has dedicated approximately a third of its [Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund \(ESSER\) II and American Recovery Plan Act](#) dollars to help create more comprehensive before- and after-school and summer enrichment opportunities via Tulsa’s out-of-school-time intermediary, the [Opportunity Project](#). These federal funds will support programming through 2021–22, and district officials aim to use the current efforts as proof of concept to help secure future philanthropic and government support. These efforts to address unfinished learning, described in the subsections that follow, have focused on meeting the needs of all students in order to avoid segregating students into remedial courses and to build alignment and measure outcomes across learning opportunities.

Operation Graduation

Tulsa implemented Operation Graduation to assist high school students in danger of not graduating. Operation Graduation provides credit recovery and social and emotional support through one-on-one teacher and guidance counselor support for juniors and seniors to ensure they are on track to graduate. District officials described Operation Graduation as an analog to Care and Connect aimed specifically at these students.

As part of Operation Graduation, [Twilight Academy](#) provides flexible learning options for juniors and seniors, particularly those who had to seek employment during the pandemic. Students take classes in the evening and after school to recover credits and work with teachers and counselors on logistical, social, and emotional challenges that may prevent them from graduating on time. Additionally, senior bootcamps are offered as 4-week intensive tutoring sessions to give seniors who were unable to meet graduation requirements on time another chance to earn necessary credits. Like the Twilight Academy, senior bootcamps include counseling as well as credit recovery.

Ready. Set. Summer!

District officials worked extensively during the 2020–21 academic year to establish engaging summer learning opportunities for students from all grade levels. The district used federal stimulus funds to augment the typical stipend for summer school instructors by 33% to encourage teacher participation. [Summer learning](#) has been designed for students to build strong relationships with caring adults and with their peers and to engage in developmentally appropriate, hands-on enrichment activities, all while employing COVID-19 mitigation strategies. According to Deputy Superintendent Shannon, summer is meant to be part of a “new vision ... of

what the learning experience can be if we step back and understand that learning happens as much outside of the four walls of the classroom as inside.”

Each school offered its own monthlong programming throughout July—camps at elementary schools and academies at middle and high schools—and a large group of local organizations offered wraparound learning opportunities in the months of June and August. This suite of **summer learning** opportunities (called “Ready. Set. Summer!”) aimed to enroll between 10,000 and 16,000 students. As of early July 2021, more than 11,000 students had signed up to participate. The summer programming offered directly by schools in July (Figure 2) included free transportation to school sites and access to nutritious meals for every student and featured community-centered, culturally affirming, and celebratory enrichment activities driven by youth voice and choice.

Figure 2
Summer Programming in Tulsa Public Schools

READY. SET. SUMMER!

General enrollment is open now. If you pre-registered, check your email for more information. Visit the [Ready. Set. Summer!](#) page for more information and schedules.


- June - August: supporting community partners offering summer enrichment activities
- July 6 - July 30: summer programs at all elementary and secondary schools free of charge
- June - August: Summer Cafe providing meals to summer program students and children 18 and under free of charge

For elementary, middle school, and junior high students students, programming will create meaningful, fun-filled, and engaging days that include:

- Daily time devoted to connecting and building relationships (amongst students, adults, and community)
- Experiential learning through Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Math (STEAM) projects
- Opportunities for arts, physical activity, recreation, and enrichment activities
- Academic acceleration and intervention in literacy and math, as well as necessary credit recovery for middle school and junior high students

For high school students, programming will create meaningful, fun-filled, and engaging time that includes:

- Opportunity to engage in wraparound services inclusive of wellness, mentoring/relationship-building, career and academic exploration
- Credit recovery opportunities
- Opportunities for arts, physical activity, recreation, and enrichment activities
- Service learning projects and internships with district programming, community organizations and local businesses



READY. SET. SUMMER!
REGISTRATION WILL OPEN MAY 5

PARTNER INTEREST FORM

Questions?

For Ready. Set. Summer! camp and/or academy questions, please reach out to your **school's contact**.

If they are not able to answer any district-wide questions, please contact LaTina Busby at busbyla@tulsaschools.org. For talent questions, please reach out to our Talent Management department directly.

Source: Tulsa Public Schools. (n.d.). <https://www.tulsaschools.org/student-and-family-support/expanded-learning> (accessed 06/20/21).

The Opportunity Project coordinated more than 80 community and faith-based partners that provided a range of opportunities and experiences in the months of June and August. Students and families could learn about and sign up for these opportunities through a [new website, TulsaCityofLearning.org](#). Through a request-for-proposals process coordinated by the Opportunity Project, the district has used a [portion of its federal stimulus funding](#) to expand these partnership opportunities to serve more students and provide more in-depth programming.

Coordination by the Opportunity Project also allows for data and outcomes tracking, as well as stipulations to ensure that community partners adhere to [the same health and safety requirements as the district-led summer programs](#). With the conclusion of summer learning, several metrics—including attendance, student satisfaction, sense of belonging, school climate indicators on the fall Panorama survey, and spring-to-fall reading and math growth—will help the district examine the impact of students’ summer experiences. CASEL has also worked with the Opportunity Project, and the Opportunity Project in turn worked with its community partners, on ensuring that students have a seamless SEL experience with aligned practices, protocols, and expectations.

2021–22 and Beyond: Universal Tutoring and “After Learning”

Throughout the 2021–22 school year, the district will continue addressing unfinished learning through [two stimulus-funded expanded learning initiatives](#): small-group and one-on-one tutoring provided for free to all students districtwide and extended before- and after-care hours at every elementary school, which the district is referring to as “after learning.” The district’s after learning initiative is part of an effort to “bring before and after care from child care to expanded learning,” according to Deputy Superintendent Shannon.

Through SEL, expanded learning time, and before- and after-school partnerships, Tulsa Public Schools has combined ambitious long-term recovery plans with effective mitigation strategies to protect against and recover from COVID-19. Districts across the country can learn from Tulsa’s approach to bringing students back to the classroom, which prioritizes acceleration and recovery while attending to the needs of the whole child.

Specific COVID-19 Mitigation Strategies in Tulsa Public Schools

The district has developed thorough [COVID-19 resources](#), including a detailed [dashboard](#) and an [FAQ](#) with drop-down menus that detail many of the mitigation strategies discussed below. District administrators estimate approximately 30% of ESSER funding was applied to various mitigation initiatives.

Vaccines

The district began operating [vaccine clinics](#) at two middle schools in January 2021, originally for vulnerable populations, including staff over 65 and health professionals such as school nurses. As of early February 2021, over 400 such staff had received their vaccines through these school-site clinics, representing over 75% of those eligible. By the time students returned to in-person instruction in late February, enough time had passed for the highest-risk teachers and staff to be fully vaccinated.

Superintendent Deborah Gist received her vaccine on March 10, 2021, in a [well-publicized event](#) to encourage vaccinations. Once vaccination eligibility was expanded to all teachers and school staff, the district elected not to maintain its own clinics because so many other clinics had become widely accessible, sponsored by a mix of hospitals, tribal systems, and corporate entities like drugstores. The

district disseminated information about where to obtain the vaccine; encouraged staff to get vaccinated; and provided staff supports, such as substitute teachers during vaccine appointments and dedicated transportation to vaccine sites. These supports were also available for early-learning partners, such as Head Start programs. In June 2021, Tulsa Public Schools partnered with Saint Francis Hospital to host free vaccination clinics for students ages 12 and older and their families at two school sites. In preparation for the 2021–22 school year, the district is strongly encouraging families to ensure all children ages 12 and above are vaccinated.

While the district does not have precise counts of how many staff received vaccines at outside clinics, and staff are not required to be vaccinated, administrators are estimating vaccination rates by attaching a question about vaccine status to contract paperwork for 2021–22.

Hygiene and Mask Use

When schools reopened in February 2021, the district made hand sanitizer and wipes widely available in each classroom and throughout each building, installed touchless water bottle fillers, and built time into the day for handwashing. Masking was required for all individuals in school buildings—including staff and all students at all grade levels—whenever another individual was present, with exceptions for when students were eating, when they were outside and distanced, and during brief mask breaks. The district’s website provided tips for families to encourage mask use among students, such as practicing wearing masks during playtime, talking about their importance, and using superhero analogies. Parents were notified when students did not follow masking policy; students were referred to distance learning for the remainder of the quarter after three such incidents.

When the city of Tulsa lifted its own mask mandate in spring 2021, district officials made clear that their mask mandate would remain in effect, citing that the majority of students were not vaccinated and emphasizing the urgency with which the district takes responsibility for child health and safety.

Effective July 1, 2021, state legislation banned school districts from issuing formal mask mandates unless the governor declares a state of emergency. On August 2—citing CDC guidance, the spread of the highly transmissible Delta variant of the virus, and the age ineligibility of approximately half the district’s students for vaccination—Tulsa announced that for fall 2021 it would expect masking for all students and staff indoors and outdoors when around others. The district makes masks available for students and staff who need them. In alignment with federal orders, the district is requiring masks on all Tulsa Public School buses.

Ventilation

The district invested in improved air filtration and ventilation strategies at each school to minimize the potential airborne transmission of the virus, including a combination of open windows, HEPA-level air scrubbers for windowless rooms, installation of MERV 13 filters in every building, and installation of an on-demand energy management system with capabilities for forced air. Staff inspected and repaired windows in all classrooms to ensure that at least one is operable in every room, and they inspected every HVAC unit. Pre-2009 HVAC systems were replaced. Filter sensors alert staff when air filters need to be changed.

Testing and Tracing

The district provides detailed weekly COVID-19 case counts on its [website](#), including test positivity rates and school-by-school counts. These are updated every Friday and disaggregated by school into reports of confirmed cases and “close contact” exposures for staff and students. A [close contact](#), as defined by the CDC, is someone who was within 6 feet of an infected individual for 15-plus cumulative minutes within 2 days before illness onset.

Surveillance testing is supported by [a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation](#), which has developed [resources](#) to help schools design and implement COVID-19 testing programs. There is [weekly testing](#) of a randomly selected sample of staff and secondary school students. Opting in to the rapid testing program is completely optional, with the number of tests dependent upon school population size. District administrators estimate that approximately 2,000 staff and 500 students opted in during spring 2021, and administrators are working to increase student participation in 2021–22 and will be including elementary students. Surveillance testing results, along with results from positive cases identified by symptomatic students and staff, are shared with agencies for public health purposes only, including the Oklahoma Department of Education, the Oklahoma State Department of Health, and the Tulsa Health Department. This information is used to help with contact tracing and notification. Assigned seating for students assists with contact tracing.

Quarantine Procedures

The district provides a [fact sheet](#) for families to determine when students should quarantine. It states that children do not need to quarantine if they have been vaccinated, unless they experience symptoms or test positive. Unvaccinated students are expected to quarantine if any member of the household tests positive for COVID-19, if any member of the household is experiencing symptoms, or if they have had a close-contact exposure to a confirmed case.

There are two [quarantine timelines](#), which have been updated to remain consistent with CDC guidance. Students can return on Day 11 after exposure to COVID-19, or they can return on Day 8 if they have a negative test result on or after Day 5. Students cannot participate in sports or in any activity that would require them to remove their masks until Day 14.

Symptom Screening

[Safety protocols](#) include daily self-administered health [questionnaires](#) for students and daily temperature screening before entering buildings for staff. In addition, all staff use the [Screen and Go](#) health screening application to complete a self-administered health screening before entering school buildings.

If staff members develop COVID-19 symptoms during the day, they are sent home to quarantine, and the immediate areas where they had been working are closed for disinfection. If students develop symptoms, they are sent to a specially designated room to await pickup, and disinfection procedures are initiated in that room plus the area where they were before becoming symptomatic. Shortly after school reopened for all students in February 2021, the district made rapid tests available at each school.

Cohorting and Scheduling

Elementary students remain with their classmates throughout the day. [Manipulatives](#) and other shared supplies are limited to [stable pods](#) of about four students each, and elementary students remain in these pods in the cafeteria, at recess, and during bathroom breaks. Pre-k students also remain in three- to four-person pods throughout the day. Cohorting and creation of pods will continue in 2021–22 to the extent possible.

At the secondary level, students are on a block schedule during which they attend courses from their even-numbered and odd-numbered class periods on alternating days. This schedule limits the number of interactions that students have throughout a given day. The passing period has been lengthened, and lockers have been removed from use to further limit the number of students in a hallway at any given time.

Physical Distancing

The district has endeavored to maintain 3 or more feet between students. Tables and desks [face the same direction whenever possible](#) and are spread across the room as much as feasible. Desk shields have also been made available to classrooms across the district. Signage throughout buildings alerts students of information about social distancing, hygiene, and other safe and healthy behaviors.

Meals

All k–12 students eat breakfast in classrooms, and they eat lunch in the cafeteria with staggered lunchtimes to allow for adequate distancing, while pre-k students remain in their classrooms.

Students do not face one another while they eat, and grab-and-go meals remain available for distance-learning students. Elementary students eat meals with their assigned pods from within their classrooms. Students have extra time during the day for handwashing and sanitizing, including before and after meals.

Sanitation

Per the district's [safety information sheet](#), shared spaces, materials, and equipment are cleaned and disinfected between uses. High-touch areas, such as doorknobs, handrails, sinks, and playground equipment, are sanitized throughout the day, and buildings are disinfected and sanitized at the end of each day. There are [hospital-level cleaning protocols](#) in all buildings. In addition, every classroom has hand sanitizer, wipes, and antiviral spray. Custodians use handheld electrostatic sprayers and BioSpray tanks to increase effectiveness and efficiency in disinfecting procedures.

Transportation

Students who take the bus must wear a mask that covers their nose and mouth before boarding and on board, and disposable masks are available for students who do not bring a mask with them. All windows are open when feasible, based upon weather. Students are seated “as far apart as possible,” according to district guidance. Families are strongly encouraged to drive their children to school whenever possible to allow those students who do ride buses to further spread out.

Recreation and Extracurriculars

The district is encouraging greater use of playground and outdoor equipment, with spaces disinfected between different student groups. Enrichment has continued to happen during in-person learning—and, to the extent possible, during remote learning—including arts, music, physical education, and use of library spaces. Students are spaced apart during gym and music, and athletic conditioning occurs outdoors whenever possible.

Students were able to participate on sports teams sponsored by the Oklahoma Secondary School Activities Association throughout the 2020–21 academic year. Stringent health and safety guidelines were put in place, including daily temperature checks as well as health surveys for all participating students, combined with limited surveillance testing. Sports-related positive cases and contact tracing were listed on the [district dashboard](#). On several occasions, one or more students from a sports team or activity tested positive, requiring entire teams or activity groups to undergo quarantine and leading to cancellation of some activities ([see example here](#)).

Rules for Moving Between School Closure and Reopening

Officials consider [three categories of metrics](#) to determine whether schools need to be closed. School administrators and public health officials monitor these metrics weekly, and data are released to the public in detail. Data include:

- early-warning indicators from district testing and contact tracing, including [rapid testing results and the number of students and staff affected by contact tracing](#);
- foundational school system metrics, including the availability of PPE, the percentage of students or staff in quarantine or isolation, and the sufficiency of staff for building operations and instruction; and
- county metrics, including the [7-day rolling average of new cases per 100,000](#), as well as the 14-day rolling average per 1,000 for both all Tulsans and the 5–17 age group.

These indicators trigger evaluation and discussion once they reach certain thresholds, which can lead to a districtwide closure, as last occurred in November 2020.