From Testing to Vaccines to Equity: Navigating the Remainder of the COVID-19 School Year

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As COVID-19 cases and hospitalizations continue to surge across the U.S., many are feeling apprehensive about sending more of our teachers and youth back into the classroom. Yet, as school testing protocols become more widely available and public health departments and schools prepare for teachers and staff to get the vaccine, there is a greater opportunity to use these tools to get as many students as safely possible back in the classroom this school year. While we have learned there is no “one-size-fits-all” approach for school operations during this pandemic, with support from public health departments, health care institutions, and other community partners, there are preparations and investments all schools can be making now to build confidence in our ability to safely offer in-school education. This will inevitably require establishing trust among teachers and families and addressing the concerns of families and communities disproportionately impacted by the pandemic.

How safe is the vaccine, and how can we best communicate that to teachers and staff? With delays in vaccine distribution, how can we create assurance testing programs to serve as a bridge? What concrete steps can we take to build trust in the vaccine through the school community by targeting hesitancy and mistrust, particularly among communities of color?

On Jan. 22, PolicyLab hosted a virtual conversation titled, “From Testing to Vaccines to Equity: Navigating the Remainder of the COVID-19 School Year,” with infectious disease specialists, public health professionals, vaccine hesitancy experts and education thought leaders who shared their perspectives on these issues.

Panelists included:

- Barbara Bungy, MPH, MBA, MCHES, deputy director of Education Plus Health
- Susan Coffin, MD, MPH, professor of pediatrics in the Division of Infectious Diseases at the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine and attending physician at Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia (CHOP)
- Angélica Infante-Green, Rhode Island commissioner of elementary and secondary education
- Paul Offit, MD, director of the Vaccine Education Center at CHOP and professor of pediatrics in the Division of Infectious Diseases at the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine
- Sindhu Srinivas, MD, MSCE, professor of obstetrics and gynecology and the director of obstetrical services at the Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania
- David Rubin, MD, MSCE, director of PolicyLab *(moderator)*

Authors: Susan Coffin, David Rubin

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