

San Diego County: Mobilizing Technical Assistance, Partnerships, and Data to Support School Reopening

Melanie Leung, Desiree O'Neal, Naomi Ondrasek, Hanna Melnick

Abstract

Since the COVID-19 pandemic emerged in the United States in March 2020, districts across the nation have faced the difficult task of reopening schools safely and keeping them open. It is useful to learn from the successes of districts that have used multilayered mitigation strategies to reduce the risk of in-school transmission. This brief describes reopening efforts in San Diego County, CA, where 98% of districts had reopened for in-person learning as of May 2021. The San Diego County Office of Education has mobilized technical assistance, leveraged partnerships, and gathered data to support districts as they have navigated initial school closure, distance learning, and planning for reopening. The brief also describes how the county supported the reopening of child care programs and highlights the reopening strategies adopted by Cajon Valley Union School District, the largest district in the county to resume in-person learning in fall 2020. It is part of a series of reopening profiles produced by the Learning Policy Institute to disseminate key public health research and reopening strategies to educators and policymakers.

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

Acknowledgments

We are grateful to the following individuals for their insightful feedback and for reviewing this brief for accuracy: Sara Johnson, Associate Professor of Pediatrics, Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health; and, from the California Collaborative for Educational Excellence, Tom Armelino, Executive Director; Sujie Shin, Deputy Executive Director; and Michelle Magyar, Assistant Director, Business Operations and Strategic Engagement.

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 other counties in California, San Diego County closed its schools in March 2020 during the state's first wave of COVID-19 cases. But, unlike many counties in California, San Diego County was able to support school reopening in many of its districts beginning in the summer of 2020. Though the county suffered among the highest number of COVID-19 cases per capita in the nation, it nonetheless was able to move swiftly to reopen schools. By May 2021, 98% of school districts in San Diego County were providing hybrid or full-time in-person learning for a total of 55% of the county's public, non-charter school students. One district, Cajon Valley Union School District, has been open since September 8, 2020, and was the largest California school district to reopen beginning in fall 2020. Since reopening, the district has reported only three suspected cases of in-school transmission. This brief describes how San Diego County and Cajon Valley Union School District have been able to reopen schools.

Drawing from county and district documents and websites, as well as media coverage and interviews with staff at the San Diego County Office of Education and Cajon Valley Union School District, this brief describes how the county supported reopening: It mobilized technical assistance to help districts implement federal and state guidance, leveraged partnerships with local agencies to secure resources for reopening, and gathered data to inform the reopening process. This brief also highlights the county's efforts to support the safe reopening of child care programs. Where applicable, we provide links to resources that may be useful for policymakers and educators navigating their own school reopening plans.

The COVID-19 Context in California and San Diego County

Federal guidance and California state COVID-19 policies have informed San Diego County's approach to reopening schools. Since August 2020, California has assigned every county to one of four tiers (purple for widespread transmission, red for substantial, orange for moderate, and yellow for minimal) based on each county's test positivity and case rates, with rates adjusted for a county's testing volume. Tier status dictates which sectors (e.g., businesses, schools) must be closed in a county, and it establishes the conditions for reopening.

Background on San Diego County

San Diego County is located in southwestern California and contains a mix of urban and rural school districts. As California's second-most-populous county, it has over 3.3 million residents and a median household income of \$79,000. The San Diego County Office of Education supports 42 school districts with a total enrollment in 2019–20 of over 423,000 students (not including charter school students) in about 630 schools. There are 23 elementary school districts, 6 high school districts, and 13 unified school districts in the county. In 2019–20, 48.3% of students enrolled in districts across the county identified as Hispanic or Latino, 29.5% as White, 6.2% as Asian, 6.1% as two or more races, 4.3% as Black or African American, 3.7% as Filipino, 0.5% as American Indian or Alaska Native, and 0.4% as Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander; 1% of students had no reported ethnicity. Across the county, 18.7% of students were English learners and 50.1% of students were eligible for free or reduced-price meals.

As of June 4, 2021, the least restrictive yellow tier corresponded to case rates below 2 cases per 100,000 people. The most restrictive purple tier corresponded to case rates exceeding 10 cases per 100,000. California raised tier thresholds in early April, following progress the state made on equitable vaccinations.

State guidance permits schools to remain open if they had been providing in-person instruction prior to a county's shift to purple—as occurred in San Diego County—or prior to case rates exceeding 25 per 100,000 people. When schools in San Diego County were first beginning to reopen in fall 2020, the state required school districts in purple-tier counties to receive an Elementary Education Waiver from their county public health offices before reopening elementary grades (transitional kindergarten through grade 6). Waivers did not allow districts in purple-tier counties to reopen upper grades. In January 2021, the state released an updated guidance framework that replaced the Elementary Education Waiver, although waivers approved prior to January 14, 2021, remain valid. The updated guidance allows all grades to reopen in all tiers, including the purple tier, if county case rates are below 25 per 100,000 people and if districts complete and post a COVID-19 Safety Plan. Districts in all tiers must post their plans on their home pages; districts in purple-tier counties must also concurrently submit their plans to their local health officers and the State Safe Schools for All team.

By mid-August 2020, four districts in San Diego County, including Cajon Valley Union School District, had received Elementary School Waivers to resume in-person instruction. (See “Implementing Mitigation Strategies in Cajon Valley Union School District.”) Around the same time, the county was placed into the red tier and officially authorized to open schools on September 1, 2020. Each district was responsible for developing and implementing its own reopening plan, in accordance with state guidance. Although many of the county's

[districts](#) reopened in fall 2020, some did not and instead provided in-person instruction only to small groups of high-need students, such as students with disabilities, under the state's [cohorting guidance](#). In October 2020, San Diego Unified School District, the county's largest district, remained closed but began to provide [appointment-based, in-person instruction](#) to elementary students with the greatest needs.

In early November, the number of COVID-19 outbreaks surged again, and San Diego County moved back to the purple tier. As of [November 10, 2020](#), 6% of the county's k–12 students (including private and charter school students) were learning in person full time, 26% were engaged in hybrid learning, and 68% were attending classes online only. As COVID-19 cases in the community continued to rise over the next several weeks, a number of districts paused in-person instruction and switched back to distance learning. Several districts faced acute [staffing shortages](#) due to increased personnel needs and instances in which staff needed to quarantine following possible COVID-19 exposure. Staffing shortages were compounded by a lack of substitute teachers, [who were often retirees and had greater health concerns](#). By December 15, 2020, the percentage of students receiving hybrid instruction had decreased to 19%, while the percentage of students participating in distance learning increased to over three quarters of k–12 students (76%). However, some districts were able to remain open, including Cajon Valley Union School District, which hired an additional 80 teachers and 100 classified employees—including special education classroom assistants, extended day staff, and office support staff—to enable smaller class sizes and facilitate implementation of mitigation measures. In early January, when San Diego County had the [fourth-highest number](#) of COVID-19 cases in the nation, the county [reported](#) that out of 936 total outbreaks identified across the county, only 19 (2%) had occurred at k–12 schools.¹

After the COVID-19 peak in early January 2021, cases began declining. By the third week of February 2021, the county's case rate [fell below the 25 per 100,000 threshold](#), and on February 19, 2021, the county launched an online portal for accepting school reopening applications. On March 5, 2021, California policymakers [passed](#) a \$6.6 billion school reopening package, which included \$2 billion to support school reopening and \$4.6 million for expanded learning opportunities such as tutoring and summer learning programs. (For an example of a summer learning program, see “Extended Learning Opportunities in Cajon Valley Union School District.”) Many districts resumed in-person instruction on April 12, including [San Diego Unified](#), which serves nearly a quarter of the county's public school students.

By June 1, 2021, San Diego County's [adjusted case rate](#) was 1.7 per 100,000 residents, with a positive test rate of 1.3%, placing the county in the orange tier. During this period of decreasing COVID-19 cases, the number of students receiving in-person instruction increased. As of [May 28, 2021](#), 98% of districts in San Diego County were reopened, providing in-person learning to a total of 232,040 students (55%), either via full in-person or hybrid instruction. Of the county's 42 districts, 21 were providing in-person instruction full time and only one remained closed to in-person learning.

Extended Learning Opportunities in Cajon Valley Union School District

In summer 2020, the Cajon Valley Union School District used federal CARES Act funds to create a free, optional [summer enrichment program](#) for the district's students. About a third of the district's 17,000 students participated in the program, which was offered in all of Cajon Valley's 27 schools. The program's activities—which were designed by teachers and implemented with significant support from the district's classified employees—included small groups, personalized instruction, hands-on

science activities, sports, and field trips. The summer program allowed the district to road-test various COVID-19 mitigation strategies and familiarize staff, students, and families with safety protocols in preparation for resuming in-person instruction in fall 2020. During the summer program, one cohort of students had to [quarantine](#) for 14 days after a parent tested positive for COVID-19, but the virus did not spread to any student or teacher in the school.

For summer 2021, the district planned to provide two sessions of summer learning programs using funds from the federal American Rescue Plan Act. It planned to run [Camp Cajon](#) 5 days a week from 9 a.m. to noon for 3 weeks and focus on providing personalized math and English language arts instruction for students, as well as hands-on activities and field trips delivered in partnership with community organizations. Families in the district had the option of in-person or distance learning programs, and sessions were made available for both elementary and middle school students. As a part of Camp Cajon, the district also planned to provide free before- and after-hours child care through its extended-day program for families, from 6:30 a.m. through 6 p.m.

Cajon Valley has also been able to use federal funds to help create more engaging and enriching learning opportunities for students during the school day. Upon reopening for in-person instruction in September 2020, Cajon Valley began implementing various programs across its school sites to help reengage students in learning. For example, students at one elementary school have had the opportunity to engage in an [outdoor immersion program](#), which was designed to link classroom learning to the world around them.

Mobilizing Technical Assistance to Help Districts Navigate School Closure and Reopening

When schools closed in March 2020, San Diego County Office of Education (SDCOE) quickly mobilized efforts to provide technical assistance to help schools switch to distance learning and begin planning for school reopening. Such assistance included creating a [website](#) to consolidate COVID-19 and distance learning resources and information, developing actionable tools to help districts comply with state and federal guidelines, and providing on-the-ground examples of implementing mitigation strategies in schools.

On March 16, 2020—the day schools in San Diego County closed—SDCOE hosted a [webinar](#) to provide guidance to districts on completing SDCOE’s [pandemic response plan template](#). The template is an optional tool, designed to help districts and school communities understand the roles and responsibilities of key local agencies, including SDCOE and the San Diego County Health and Human Services Agency; develop response plans that minimize the on-campus spread of COVID-19 and disruptions to instruction; and communicate updates to relevant stakeholders.

In addition, SDCOE officials assumed from the onset of the pandemic that COVID-19 might have long-term implications for schools. In April 2020, SDCOE released a [Planning Assumptions and Recommendations document](#) that covered six areas: public health, school operation, economic impact, educational impact, social-emotional impact, and community. In the document, SDCOE stated that it did not expect a vaccine would be

available for the next 12 to 18 months and that conditions were not likely to improve quickly enough for schools to resume pre-pandemic operations for the rest of the 2019–20 school year. However, it noted that long-term school closures should not be necessary and that schools might be able to reopen with modified operations, including smaller group sizes, proactive screening of students, and physical distancing in all settings.

SDCOE also anticipated an increase in parent demand for distance learning programs, a greater need for school nutrition programs, the probability that the most underserved students would experience the greatest learning disruptions, and the potential for significant and lasting mental health impacts on students. For each set of assumptions, SDCOE laid out a list of recommendations, which included:

- developing a broad range of distance learning options;
- planning for hybrid learning;
- creating plans to restore school operations in phases;
- identifying strategies, policies, and plans to implement safety measures such as distancing in schools;
- making work accommodations to protect employees in high-risk groups; and
- developing plans to support the mental health of students, families, and staff.

SDCOE also recommended that schools and districts consider parent and student voices and collaborate with employee associations when making decisions. On March 30, 2020, SDCOE modeled this recommendation when it entered into a [memorandum of understanding](#) (MOU) with the teachers union for SDCOE, the San Diego County Association of Educators, to provide supports for schools and teachers for the shift to distance learning. The MOU stipulated that teachers should not be subject to discipline for issues related to distance learning and committed to providing technological infrastructure and technical support, as well as 2 days of professional learning for educators before beginning distance learning. In addition, SDCOE [negotiated contracts](#) with local internet providers to reduce costs and streamline the sign-up and installation processes for students and families. According to SDCOE, over 100,000 students in the county lacked broadband connectivity and over 300,000 students lacked mobile computing devices prior to the pandemic. By January 2021, SDCOE was able to provide internet and computing devices to about 80% of these students.

On June 17, 2020, SDCOE [launched](#) a [comprehensive framework](#) for reopening campuses in the fall. (See Figure 1.) The framework, which was developed after consulting district leaders, teachers unions, parent representatives, and experts in special education and transportation, provided a wide range of practical tools based on CDC guidelines. Targeting issues such as hybrid learning, food insecurity, and mental health impacts of the pandemic, the county's framework included a wide range of resources, including planning materials for reopening; considerations for personnel and student policies; and resources on facility sanitizing, campus capacity, meal programs, busing, arrival and symptom screening procedures, and scheduling. In addition, the framework addressed instruction and learning, including lesson plans for prevention practices, as well as measures for special education and providing social-emotional supports for students and staff. SDCOE's reopening framework served as an exemplar for the development of the initial reopening [guidance](#) that California released in July 2020.

Figure 1 San Diego County Office of Education COVID-19 Recovery and Reopening Plan

COVID-19 Recovery and Reopening Plan

Reopening campuses will require a great deal of planning and preparation, and many expenses that would not have been necessary under normal circumstances. School leaders are anxious to bring students and staff back to school, but we must do it in a safe way.

The San Diego County Office of Education's Recovery and Reopening Plan provides districts and schools with detailed, practical instructions on how to prepare schools for reopening after the closures resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. After identifying specific planning assumptions and recommendations based on current health guidelines, SDCOE's subject-matter experts, in consultation with public health officials and other key stakeholders, developed these resources to guide leaders through the reopening process.

We encourage each of the nearly 800 public schools and 230 private schools in the county to consider this guidance, as well as guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), California Department of Education (CDE), California Department of Public Health (CDPH), and local public health orders, as part of their planning process. The plan is presented in six focus areas to allow stakeholders to quickly access information most relevant to them and customize their plan to meet the needs of their school community.

Table of Contents

1. Reopening Planning Materials
2. Policies
3. Facilities, Operations, and Logistics
4. Enrollment and Scheduling Procedures
5. Instruction and Learning
6. Special Education
7. Social-Emotional Supports



Source: San Diego County Office of Education. (n.d.). <https://covid-19.sdcoe.net/Reopening-Plan> (accessed 04/11/21).

After California released its reopening guidance, SDCOE shifted its focus to supporting schools and districts per the state's guidance by developing tools to support implementation and sharing on-the-ground examples. One SDCOE leader said that in doing so they hoped to make "something that seemed impossible, possible." These tools included a template for schools' reopening plans, which SDCOE later modified and renamed the [COVID-19 Prevention Plan for Schools](#). It also added a [checklist](#) for schools to evaluate whether they had addressed all of the elements that the California Department of Public Health described. In addition, SDCOE provided a [sample block schedule](#) that incorporates physical distancing and limits student mixing, as well as a [decision tree](#) to help schools decide what steps to take under different scenarios if a student or a staff member develops any COVID-19 symptoms. The decision tree was created in partnership with local public health officials and is offered in both English and Spanish, as are several other tools provided by SDCOE.

Leveraging Partnerships to Support Reopening

SDCOE's partnerships with local agencies, including local public health officials, supported its ability to procure reopening resources for districts. Early in the pandemic, SDCOE worked with a dedicated public health team from San Diego County's Health and Human Services Agency on COVID-19-related school issues. Together, they developed a range of actionable tools for districts, including the [decision tree](#) and [implementation checklist](#) described above. When schools began to reopen in fall 2020, the public health team—which specialized in contact tracing—issued guidance on tracking attendance and provided after-hours contacts for school leaders.

SDCOE also worked with San Diego County to secure funding for testing and tracing. While surveillance testing was not required for reopening schools, the California Department of Public Health [suggested](#) that school districts test all staff every 2 months. In fall 2020, San Diego County allocated \$5 million in CARES Act funding to support COVID-19 contact tracing and testing, [opening 41 community sites for free testing](#). Four testing centers were reserved exclusively for the county's over 80,000 school employees and operated through January 3, 2021 (as of March 2021, free testing remained available to school staff at county-operated testing sites).

On February 24, 2021, San Diego County, SDCOE, and the California Schools Voluntary Employees Benefits Association (VEBA) [announced](#) that school employees in the region would begin receiving vaccines on February 27. This regional agreement allowed San Diego Unified School District, the county's largest district, to [launch hybrid instruction](#) for all grades on April 12. SDCOE and VEBA prioritized employees of school sites in neighborhoods on the bottom quartile of the state's [Healthy Places Index](#) (HPI). These neighborhoods have the lowest scores on policy action areas that shape health, including health care access, income, housing, transportation, education, and more. The county initially [reserved](#) 20% of vaccines for educators, prioritizing those working in neighborhoods with the lowest HPI, and quickly opened up vaccinations to all educators, regardless of the neighborhood they worked in. According to the [San Diego Union-Tribune](#), as of March 18, 2021, 90,000 of the county's school staff members had received email invitations to book a vaccination appointment. By April 2021, 27,000 had been vaccinated through VEBA. SDCOE officials posited that many educators had received their vaccinations through other providers, but they do not know for certain due to health privacy laws.

Leveraging Partnerships to Support Safe Child Care Reopening: San Diego County's Child Care Disaster Council

As the k-12 sector grappled with issues related to school reopening, the child care and preschool sector faced similar challenges. In San Diego, the County Office of Education has worked closely with partners to share resources and facilitate safe reopening of early childhood and school-age child care programs. Within 3 weeks after schools closed in mid-March 2020, SDCOE began working closely with other leaders in the child care sector to support the safe reopening of child care programs in San Diego. Together with the YMCA Child Care Resource Service, the county's Child Care Resource and Referral Agency, and First 5 San Diego, SDCOE helped reactivate the county's Child Care Disaster Council, which had been inoperative prior to the pandemic. By early April, they were organizing weekly sector calls during which local health officers, staff from the Community Care Licensing department, and education officers gave the latest relevant updates to child care providers and offered a space for their questions to be answered.

By April 15, 2020, when the state [required Local Child Care and Development Planning Councils](#) to create emergency COVID-19 plans, SDCOE and its partners had already been implementing various pandemic response measures. The Child Care Disaster Council also created tools that are specific to the early childhood education setting. This included a [reopening checklist](#), which addressed topics such as staff training, screening, social distancing, routine sanitation, diapering, washing and holding a child, hygiene, food preparation, and security. Another tool that the Child Care Disaster Council adapted for non-school-based child care settings was the [COVID-19 Symptom Decision Tree](#), which gave child care providers clear instructions on what to do if a child or staff member develops symptoms of COVID-19. By April 2021, a [survey](#) conducted by the YMCA Child Care Resource Service found that out of 511 respondents (12% of all licensed child care centers and family child care homes in San Diego County), over 80% of licensed child care centers and 90% of family child care homes in the district had reopened.

In addition to providing practical tools, the Child Care Disaster Council also collaborated on gathering data to better understand the child care needs of the county. To facilitate an efficient use of resources, SDCOE and its partners launched a [survey](#) for essential workers to determine the type of care, age groups, hours, and locations needed for their children. In May 2020, San Diego allocated \$10 million of CARES Act funding to provide emergency child care vouchers for local families. From July to December 2020, 2,454 children from 1,561 families benefited from the vouchers. About 60% of households receiving the vouchers earned less than \$65,000, and about a quarter earned less than \$35,000.

SDCOE's Child Care Disaster Council partners also played an important role in ensuring that child care workers had priority access to vaccines. With the help of First 5 San Diego, YMCA Child Care Resource Service, and Child Development Associates, SDCOE helped develop and distribute [guidance and templates](#) to assist child care workers, especially those in the private sector, with confirming their occupational eligibility for vaccination. These were also widely shared by SDCOE's partners to ensure that the information reached as many child care workers as possible. In addition, the YMCA opened several weekend vaccination sites that were reserved exclusively for child care workers. These sites were designed to accommodate the schedules of child care providers, who were often working on weekdays.

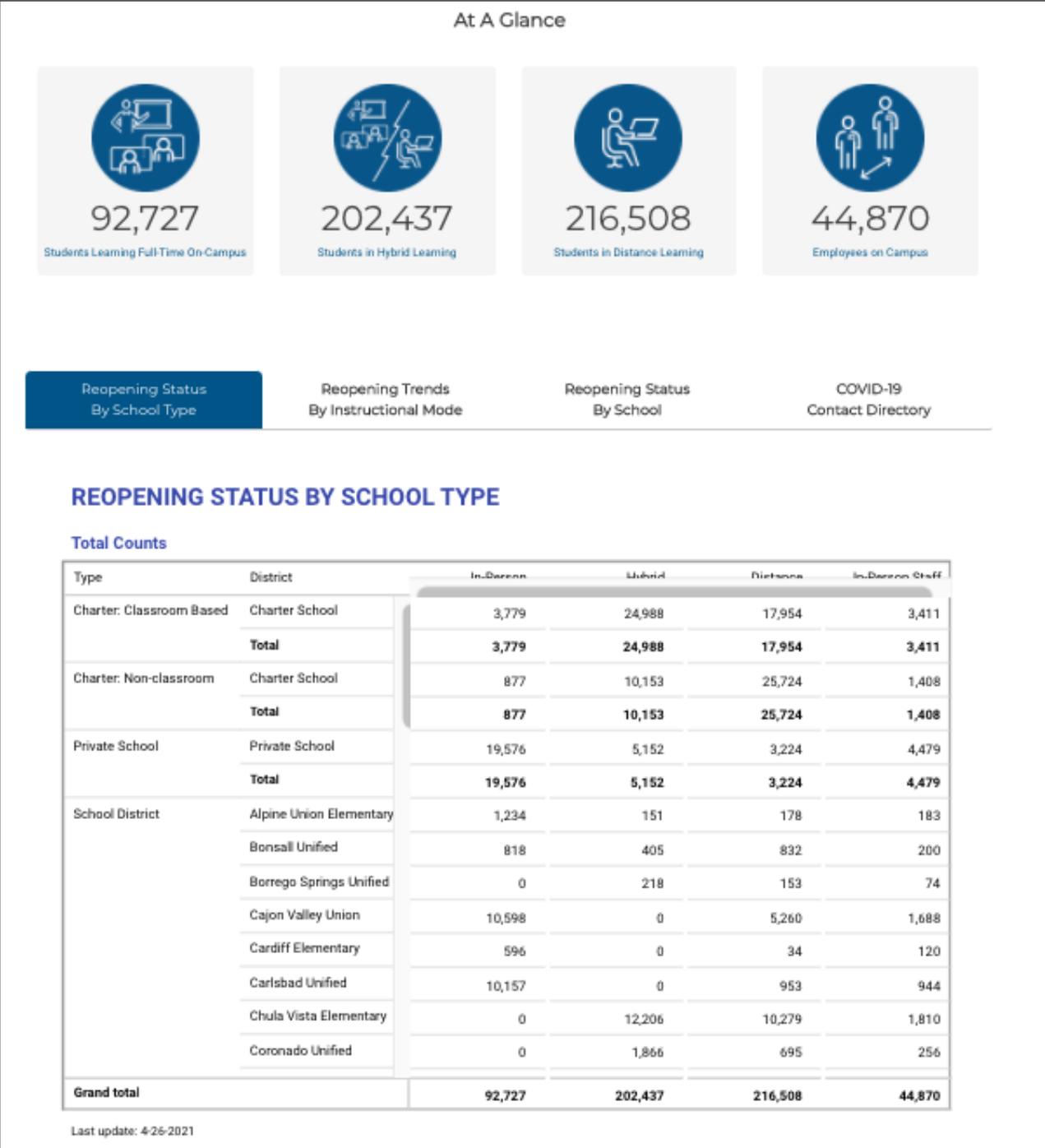
Gathering Data to Inform the Reopening Process

When some schools began to resume in-person instruction in fall 2020, San Diego was one of the few counties that had established a data reporting system to track the number of students who were participating in distance learning, hybrid learning, or full-time in-person learning, as well as the number of employees who were working in person on campuses. SDCOE started collecting these data from districts in October 2020. While SDCOE staff shared that this method had several limitations, such as not being able to capture details about the situation of underserved students, the data offer a picture of the circumstances under which students were learning.

Initially, the reporting system was voluntary, and data was collected through phone calls and surveys, a process that SDCOE found onerous and labor intensive. Consequently, SDCOE worked with San Diego County to establish a [health order](#) to require all school districts, charter schools, and private schools serving students in transitional kindergarten through 12th grade to report the relevant data twice monthly through Google Forms. Since November 9, 2020,

SDCOE has been receiving regular data reports from districts, which it publishes on its [School Reopening Dashboard](#) (see Figure 2). The compliance rate for data reporting as of March 2021 was 100% for all public schools in the county, including charter schools, as well as 75% of private schools. The county’s data collection process and data dashboard served as a model for the state of California’s data collection efforts.

Figure 2
San Diego County Office of Education School Reopening Dashboard



Source: San Diego County Office of Education. (n.d.). <https://covid-19.sdcoe.net/Reopening-Plan/School-Reopening-Dashboard> (accessed 05/05/21).

In addition to gathering data from districts, SDCOE played an important role in providing schools and districts with relevant data to inform their decisions on school reopening. Because San Diego is a large and diverse county, there was a large degree of within-county variation in transmission rates, and school districts in some parts of the county were impacted more severely by COVID-19 than others. In summer 2020, school leaders approached SDCOE to request data on COVID-19 transmission rates by zip code. To provide districts with more granular information to better inform school reopening policies, SDCOE analyzed publicly available data and provided zip code case rates to districts. These data were also shared publicly, enabling both districts and employees to have a more accurate picture of the COVID-19 situation in their schools' neighborhoods.

SDCOE's proactive approach in mobilizing technical assistance, partnerships, and data enabled the county to provide timely and actionable support for districts to resume in-person instruction. The county was quick to develop several comprehensive, actionable resources, which later became exemplars for the state. While San Diego faced a number of challenges in its reopening process, the county's example shows how close collaboration with educators and public health workers can contribute to safe school reopening.

Implementing Mitigation Strategies in Cajon Valley Union School District

On September 8, 2020, [Cajon Valley Union School District](#) opened for hybrid instruction and in-person instruction, making Cajon Valley the [largest school district in the state](#) to reopen using an Elementary Education Waiver during fall 2020. In addition, all Cajon Valley preschools and Early Start programs also opened for in-person instruction 5 days per week. As of April 2021, Cajon Valley was one out of only six districts in San Diego County to fully reopen following the pandemic. According to the district, since reopening in September, Cajon Valley has had [738 COVID-19 cases](#), of which three were suspected to be in-school transmission (two cases of staff-to-staff and one case of student-to-staff transmission).² As of June 7, 2021, the COVID-19 [positivity rate](#) was 0.02% for students and 0.004% for staff.

Cajon Valley Union School District is an urban district serving transitional kindergarten (TK) through grade 8. The district has 21 elementary schools, most of which each serve 500–800 students in transitional kindergarten through 5th grade, and 6 middle schools, each serving 800–1,500 students in grades 6–8. Cajon Valley also currently offers free and fee-based preschool programs for families within the district. These preschool programs, which include the [California State Preschool Program](#) and special education preschool, serve children between the ages of 3 and 5. The district currently has 20 state-funded part-day preschool classes across 11 elementary sites and 20 part-day special education preschool classes at 10 sites.

In 2019–20, Cajon Valley had an enrollment of [17,342 students](#), with 44.5% of students identifying as White, 37.5% as Hispanic or Latino, 5.9% as Black or African American, 3.2% as Asian, 2.5% as two or more races, 0.7% as Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, 0.4% as Filipino, and 0.3% as American Indian or Alaska Native; 4.9% of students had no reported ethnicity. Across the district, 33.3% of students are classified as English learners and 69.7% of students are eligible for free or reduced-price meals.

Community Outreach

Since March 2020, Cajon Valley has held over 100 virtual town hall meetings for educators, families, and other community stakeholders in an effort to hear the community's concerns and to better meet their needs in the midst of the pandemic. In learning that there was a need for child care, the district

opened a limited number of schools to provide [free child care to the community's essential workers](#) in May 2020 using funds allocated by the state through [emergency legislation](#). In December 2020, Cajon Valley began recording the [virtual town hall meetings](#) and posting them on the district's website to share the discussions with community members who were unable to attend. Feedback from these meetings informed the development of Cajon Valley's reopening plan.

In addition to the town hall meetings, Cajon Valley conducted a live expert panel virtual event in October 2020 for families and educators. The event was designed to help address community concerns about COVID-19 and the safety of returning to in-person learning. This event allowed community members to share questions and concerns with public health professionals. Moderated by a local news anchor, the event included doctors and officials from Rady Children's Hospital and the University of California at San Diego.

Rules for Moving Between School Closure and Reopening

To make decisions about reopening and closure, Cajon Valley uses a [phased plan](#), developed based on the [state's reopening guidance](#), [CDC guidance](#), and [SDCOE's COVID-19 Recovery and Reopening Plan](#). For cases occurring at a single school site, students and staff in affected cohorts are required to switch to distance learning for 14 days. School sites may close to in-person learning if multiple cohorts are affected by COVID-19 cases. If COVID-19 cases emerge at multiple schools in the district, district leadership may close multiple school sites or the entire district based on community health needs.

Attendance Policy

When Cajon Valley first reopened for in-person learning, families in the district were able to choose from [three instructional models](#): traditional, blended, or distance learning. The traditional model provided 100% in-school instruction, 5 days per week; the blended model provided 2–3 days of in-person instruction, plus 2–3 days of distance learning, per week; and the distance learning model provided all instruction, 5 days per week, through virtual, at-home instruction. For pre-k students, only the instructional models of in-school and distance learning were offered. Families were able to switch learning models at specified times throughout the year or sooner depending on need. Families received information on schedules for each of the instructional models through the district's reopening plan on Cajon Valley's website. The district also organized and facilitated multiple virtual [parent stakeholder meetings](#).

On April 12, 2021, to bring more students back to school for [in-person, full-day learning](#), Cajon Valley stopped offering its blended learning instructional model. However, the district continues to allow families to opt in to distance learning. Students who have chosen in-person learning will continue to attend school 5 days per week, from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. each day. As of June 7, 2021, 11,251 students in the district (65%) were enrolled in full-day, in-person learning. According to the district, the majority of the families that are still opting for remote learning in Cajon Valley are families of color and/or families living in low-income areas. To help these families feel safe and supported with returning to school, the district has explored various strategies, including hosting [parent stakeholder meetings](#), co-hosting panels with vaccine experts, and making sure that families have access to and are informed about all COVID-19 health and safety measures.

Cohorts and Scheduling

According to the district's [reopening plan](#), a cohort is a stable group of students who stay together for all courses and activities (e.g., lunch, recess) and avoid contact with individuals in other cohorts. Students are grouped into cohorts to reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission and allow for contact tracing.

Cohorts also function as “advisories,” in which student groups are assigned a credentialed teacher who guides their progress and helps develop students’ strengths and interests. Advisories are also intended to help connect students to a stable peer group for support and collaboration. In middle schools, teachers rotate to different classes during passing periods to minimize mixing of cohorts.

[Cohort sizes](#) were determined by considering the maximum capacity for each cohort’s learning space, with the goal of maintaining 3-foot physical distancing to the maximum extent possible. Currently, Cajon Valley has an average cohort size of 22 students per classroom advisory group. To the extent possible, extended-day and after-school programs keep students in the same cohorts they are in during the school day.

Preschool students and their teachers also stay in stable cohorts. However, unlike teachers in TK–8th grade, state preschool teachers teach part-day classes, so teachers have either a morning or afternoon cohort of students. Sixteen of the district’s 20 state preschool classes (morning and afternoon) are in person, with each class comprising 13 students, 1 teacher, and 2 assistants. For special education preschool, most teachers are responsible for both morning and afternoon in-person classes, though some teach one in-person and one distance learning session. The number of distance learning classes has decreased as increasing numbers of parents have chosen to have their children return to in-person learning.

Symptom Screening

Per Cajon Valley’s [2021 COVID-19 School Guidance Checklist](#), all employees, students, and visitors are required to have daily symptom screenings and temperature checks prior to being admitted to any district offices or school sites. The screening is a series of questions used to help determine if individuals have been experiencing symptoms associated with COVID-19. To expedite the screening process, the district has also created the [Cajon Valley Union School District Safety Health Questions card](#), which parents or guardians can complete for students and place on the dashboard of their vehicle.

Temperature checks are conducted using a non-contact thermometer. If an individual has a temperature of 100 degrees Fahrenheit or above, then a temperature recheck is done using an oral thermometer. If it is confirmed that an individual’s temperature is at or above 100 degrees, then the individual is sent home until they are able to meet the criteria to return. The district provides employee COVID-19 self-check stations at each school site. The stations include a [symptoms questionnaire and supplies](#) for employees to screen themselves.

State preschool staff use a family engagement app called Learning Genie to enable efficient health screening. The app, originally used as a tool to track students’ academic progress, has an electronic sign-in/sign-out system. Before bringing students to school, parents complete a health screening questionnaire on the app. When parents arrive at school, they scan a QR code on their phone to sign their child in or out. This system allows families to communicate with teachers about their children’s symptoms prior to their arrival on campus, which has greatly simplified the on-site symptom screening process and sign-in/sign-out process.

Quarantine Procedures

Students and staff **must self-isolate for 10 days** from symptom onset or from the date of a positive test. As soon as the district becomes aware of a student or staff member with a positive test result, all individuals identified as close contacts are immediately notified and provided instructions to quarantine for 14 days. A close contact is defined as someone who was within 6 feet of an infected person for a cumulative total of 15 minutes or more over a 24-hour period, starting from 2 days before illness onset (or for asymptomatic patients, 2 days prior to test specimen collection) until the time the patient is isolated.

Students who have been ill, tested positive, or been exposed **may return to school** if 10 days have passed since symptoms first appeared, they have been fever-free for at least 24 hours without needing fever-reducing medication, and symptoms have improved. Alternatively, students may return if they can provide proof of a negative molecular test, which detects viral genetic material, and have been symptom-free for 3 days. To attend school, students with chronic health conditions that produce COVID-19-like symptoms must provide a signed note from a medical professional.

Testing and Tracing

Students and staff can access free COVID-19 testing through the county's community testing sites. The school district receives notification of positive COVID-19 cases through self-reporting by students or staff and through the County Public Health notification system.

Cajon Valley's IT department, HR department, COVID-19 leads, and district administrators have been heavily involved in tracing the spread of the virus. If a student or staff member tests positive for COVID-19, the district notifies the San Diego County Health and Human Services Agency and assists local health officials in conducting contact tracing to identify potentially exposed individuals.

Ventilation

Prior to the pandemic, Cajon Valley worked to create greener and more environmentally friendly facilities through the **Green Cajon Valley** initiative. This initiative allowed the district to replace older, inefficient heating, ventilation, and air conditioning units with newer, more energy-efficient units at school sites across the district. As part of the district's **COVID-19 Prevention Plan**, Cajon Valley also conducted a site-by-site analysis with its facilities team to identify mitigation measures that were needed to reopen safely. As a result of the site inspections, Cajon Valley updated ventilation systems and installed HEPA and MERV 11 filters at all of the school sites in the district with compatible air conditioning units. Cajon Valley also recommends that schools keep windows and doors open and use fans as frequently as weather, temperature, and air quality conditions allow.

Physical Distancing

Individuals are required to maintain at least **3 feet of physical distancing**. To facilitate effective physical distancing among students, the district advises that schools maximize spacing between seating and desks. To reduce transmission risk in situations where 3 feet of distancing may be difficult to maintain, the district highlights its use of multilayered mitigation measures, including limiting the number of individuals in a space, limiting the amount of time individuals spend in a space, and ensuring that spaces are well ventilated.

Preschool students in the district sit apart but can be placed into groups of two to four within their cohorts when in learning centers. Circle time at the preschool level has also been modified. Some preschool classes place chairs or poly spots around the carpet to support physical distancing, while other centers have opted not to have circle time at all, or to bring the “circle” to the students so they can participate at their tables. Some staff use hula hoops for each student to stand or sit in when engaging in music and movement activities outside.

Sanitation

Under the district’s [reopening plan](#), both custodial and general staff assist with sanitation of school buildings. General staff clean frequently touched surfaces such as doorknobs, tables, chairs, shared equipment like laptops, and other common areas within their classrooms or work areas, while custodial staff at each site provide enhanced disinfecting for all school and district facilities. School facilities, buses, and shared equipment such as desks, tables, sports and playground equipment, computers, door handles, light switches, and other frequently used equipment and supplies are cleaned and disinfected daily.

Hygiene and Mask Use

Cajon Valley encourages students and staff to practice good hygiene, such as appropriate covering of coughs and sneezes and regular handwashing for at least 20 seconds before eating and after coughing or sneezing. The district provides dedicated times for students to wash their hands throughout the day. School sites use videos and print resources to help educate students on handwashing and hygiene practices. Touchless hand sanitizer dispensers are provided in every classroom.

In accordance with [state guidance](#), Cajon Valley requires students, staff, and visitors to wear face coverings while on school grounds. The district provides face coverings for students and staff who do not bring their own. However, the district allows face covering exemptions for individuals who are under age 2 or have a medical condition or disability that would impede them from properly wearing or handling a face covering. If students, including those with special needs, are unable to wear a cloth facial covering, the district encourages staff to use a plastic face shield and drape. Similarly, mask use is required for preschool students, although teachers are encouraged to use additional layers of protection when preschoolers are unable to wear masks.

Transportation

Cajon Valley’s Transportation Department implemented new [rules](#) for students riding buses. All school buses are sanitized regularly and must maintain air circulation by keeping windows open and ensuring that bus ventilation systems are drawing in as much outdoor air as possible. The district has also added new transportation [boarding and seating guidelines](#) based on [guidance](#) from the San Diego Health and Human Services Agency and SDCOE. Under these guidelines, students are required to sit in assigned seats.

Temperature checks and symptom screenings must be conducted prior to students boarding the bus. To accomplish this, the district trained transportation staff on conducting checks and screenings, performing sanitation, and implementing safety protocols to reduce the risk of transmission. Similar to screening at school sites, staff take students’ temperatures using non-contact thermometers, and students answer a series of questions to determine if they have experienced COVID-19 symptoms. Students displaying

symptoms, including a temperature at or above 100 degrees Fahrenheit, are not permitted to ride the bus. Students riding the bus must wear masks and are not required to undergo additional screening once reaching school sites.

Recreation and Extracurriculars

Large gatherings, such as assemblies, rallies, field trips, and athletic events, were [suspended](#) when Cajon Valley first resumed in-person instruction in September 2020. However, school board policy permits exceptions if activities can be modified to protect participants' health and safety. For example, field trips and certain extracurricular activities, like outdoor singing and band practice, are permitted provided that precautions such as physical distancing and mask wearing are implemented to the fullest extent possible.

To reduce the risk of exposure while students are playing in outdoor spaces and recreational areas, both staff and students are required to wear masks. The district has also marked campus playgrounds to help students and adults maintain adequate physical distancing. If more than one cohort of students is utilizing an outdoor playground area at the same time, cohorts are expected to maintain separation and avoid mixing by staying in separate areas of the playground. An adult must be present to actively supervise students during their outdoor play to ensure that outdoor playground protocols are being adhered to. Students and staff are required to wash or sanitize their hands before and after playground visits. In accordance with [county guidance](#), outdoor playgrounds and natural play areas must also undergo routine cleaning and disinfecting.

Educator Health and Safety

On March 23, 2020, Cajon Valley Union School District and the Cajon Valley Education Association entered into an MOU, which specified the district's responsibility for ensuring that all work locations were sanitized in accordance with CDC guidelines before staff returned and that hand sanitizer be provided in every classroom, bathroom, workroom, workstation, office, cafeteria, and outdoor campus area. Employees were also provided a minimum of two paid workdays to prepare for the return to work.

In June 2020, the district hosted a Decision Making and Strategic Planning Summit with the Cajon Valley Education Association, the California School Employees Association, the Cajon Valley Administrators Association, and the district's governing board and cabinet members. Cajon Valley also organized town halls with teachers to understand their safety concerns.

Since reopening, Cajon Valley has [hired](#) approximately 80 additional certified teachers and 100 additional classified staff, which brings the number of full-time school employees in Cajon Valley up to about 2,400. With a larger workforce, the district hopes to maintain reduced class sizes, provide additional care for students, and ensure that the district has the capacity to properly adhere to safety guidelines from the California Department of Public Health.

Vaccines

Currently, any staff working at k-12 public school sites or early learning care sites are eligible to receive the COVID-19 vaccination. VEBA and the San Diego County Health and Human Services Agency have prioritized school employees who work in person at school sites for vaccination.

On Friday, March 12, 2021, in a [video update](#), Cajon Valley announced that all district employees who had chosen to receive the vaccination would be fully vaccinated by April 3, 2021. The following day, the district hosted a COVID-19 [vaccination clinic](#) for all school employees. The clinic, with the help of community partner and local health care clinic [Sycuan](#), was able to administer 570 doses of the vaccine to school staff.

Meals

According to the [Cajon Valley Union School District's Plan for Reopening](#), students receiving in-person instruction can bring their own meals, with snacks and lunches packed in clearly marked containers. School meals are also available daily and provided to students in their respective classrooms. Students are instructed not to share food.

Endnotes

1. An [outbreak](#) in a school setting is defined as having at least three probable or confirmed COVID-19 cases within a 14-day period in people who are epidemiologically linked in the school, are from different households, and are not identified as close contacts of each other outside of the school. Comprehensive [COVID-19 screening tests](#), which were not widely implemented across San Diego County's school districts, can identify asymptomatic cases that might otherwise go unreported.
2. The Cajon Valley [dashboard](#) displays the number of active COVID-19 cases in the district but does not track in-school transmission.