



Tracking Staff Vaccinations in Hamilton County Schools

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KEY POINTS

- Tracking staff vaccination rates can help schools limit the need for quarantines and maximize in-person instruction.
- Hamilton County Schools' process for tracking staff vaccination rates is straightforward. It involves two important components: access to the statewide vaccine database and consent from the state health department.
- Depending on a system's approach, it may wish to inform employees that the district will only know its overall staff vaccination rate—not the vaccination status of individual employees.
- Tracking vaccination rates using state databases can help schools determine whether additional outreach is needed to combat vaccine hesitancy.
- In the absence of data, schools have no way of knowing what the vaccination rate is for their teachers and staff, and the rate may be lower than assumed.

INTRODUCTION

The effort to vaccinate school staff in districts across the country is far from uniform. Some systems held mass vaccination events, while others relied on vaccination campaigns led by public health entities. Most states prioritized educators as essential workers early on in their vaccination campaigns, but timelines for inoculating staff have varied, beginning in February 2021 and extending to the present day.

The uneven rollout of the vaccination effort in the United States continues to affect school systems. Most districts—even those that held vaccination events for staff—do not have a clear picture of how many staff members have been vaccinated. Staff members may have been vaccinated at a school-based event or at a local pharmacy—or they may have traveled across county or state lines to get their shot sooner. The speed, complexity, and urgency of the vaccine rollout in states

nationwide meant that vaccinations were not always tracked. With a lack of clear information on vaccinations, schools may be quarantining staff unnecessarily or wasting valuable time and effort conducting contact tracing on vaccinated individuals.

School systems have had limited success in determining how many of their staff members have been vaccinated. Districts have offered surveys, and, in some cases, incentives to fill them out. Even so, staff often do not respond to surveys for a variety of reasons, which can lead to an incomplete picture of vaccination rates throughout a district.

Hamilton County Schools (HCS) in Chattanooga, Tennessee, offers a simple solution for determining the actual vaccination rate for staff and a way for school systems to maximize in-person instruction.

About Hamilton County Schools

- Hamilton County Schools serves roughly **45,000 students** in the greater Chattanooga, Tennessee, area.
- The racial breakdown of the student body is **49% White, 31% Black, 16% Hispanic, and 3% Asian-American**.
- **33.7%** of students are considered **economically disadvantaged**.
- **6.9%** of students are **English language learners**.

COVID-19 RESPONSE

Superintendent Bryan Johnson named Chief of Staff Jennifer Bronson as the district's primary point of contact to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. HCS also benefited from the work of Shannon Moody, director of accountability and research, and the extra capacity provided by COVID-19 Fellow Ryan Ledford, a master's degree student in public health from the University of Tennessee-Chattanooga. Under Johnson's leadership, Bronson and Ledford helped establish symptomatic and asymptomatic testing for students and educators, coordinate vaccination events for staff, and safely reopen schools in the fall of 2020.

Similar to many urban school districts in the country, a significant percentage of HCS teachers and staff received their COVID-19 vaccinations at district-sponsored events. Some staff members did not participate because they had already been vaccinated elsewhere, while others were hesitant to receive the vaccine or were uninterested. In some instances, people were spreading misinformation about the vaccine among HCS employees.

AN EXISTING TOOL FOR A NEW PROBLEM

In light of the fact that the district did not know its staff vaccination rate, the HCS leadership team realized that the Tennessee Department of Health could provide a more complete picture than the information gleaned from responses to optional surveys. Like many states, Tennessee employs a statewide immunization information system, known as TennIIS, that contains immunization information for all residents, including those who have been vaccinated for COVID-19.



The district built an app to better understand how many staff members wanted the vaccine as well as the actual vaccination rate. Yet many employees chose not to use the app. For a variety of reasons, HCS decided not to mandate that staff members use the app and focused instead on encouraging them to use it to self-report data.

HCS had already used TennIIS to access child immunization records. After the COVID-19 vaccine rollout nationally, HCS medical officials recognized that they could use the Electronic Data Exchange with TennIIS to determine the vaccination rate for teachers and staff. The Hamilton County and Tennessee Departments of Health confirmed this. HCS then developed procedures to receive regular updates on employee vaccinations.

VACCINATION DATA FROM THE STATE DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH



It has been a challenge for school systems across the country to determine their vaccination rate for employees. This has led to inaccurate and often overly optimistic estimates. As HCS found, the solution to this problem is quite simple when the right conditions are in place.

To obtain staff vaccination information from TennIIS, HCS took the following steps:

1. Established a strong relationship with the Tennessee Department of Health via ongoing and regular check-ins;
2. Received approval for HCS medical personnel to take part in the Electronic Data Exchange and access the TennIIS database; and
3. Provided the Tennessee Department of Health with a spreadsheet that lists the names, birthdates, genders, employment classifications (*e.g.*, teacher or non-instructional staff); and other identifying information for all HCS employees. Note that this information is used by the state to determine the district's overall vaccination rate; however, the district does not receive information about each individual employee's vaccination status.

After taking these steps and providing the necessary information, HCS now receives an update on staff vaccinations from the Tennessee Health Department every Tuesday.

ACCURATE VACCINATION RATE

Many districts estimate that their employee vaccination rate is significantly higher than the rate for the general population due to both the nature of teaching and the fact that educators have had access to the vaccine for a longer period of time. Yet the results from HCS indicate that districts may not be correct in their assumption.

As of the end of April, just 64 percent of teachers and less than 60 percent of other staff members had received their first dose of the COVID-19 vaccine. This number,

while higher than the approximately 40 percent of Hamilton County residents who had received their first dose, indicates that HCS leadership has additional work to do to combat vaccine hesitancy within the district. In addition, knowing how many teachers and staff have been vaccinated can inform HCS' decisions about staff quarantines and contact tracing. This can help educators stay focused on providing high-quality instruction.

LESSONS FROM HCS

- If a state department of health has already established an immunization database, the process for obtaining actual vaccination rates is quite simple. To receive the vaccination data for its staff on a weekly basis, HCS simply exports the required information from its own employee management software and then sends that information to the health department.
- District leaders should coordinate with the system's legal counsel to ensure that the district is following all relevant laws and policies before it submits information to the department of health. Depending on a district's approach, it may wish to clearly communicate that they will know only the total staff vaccination rate, not the individual vaccination status of a single staff person.
- Teacher vaccination rates are likely significantly lower than districts assume. This could have significant staffing implications and reinforces the importance of asymptomatic COVID-19 testing in the fall of 2022.



RESOURCES FOR TRACKING STAFF VACCINATIONS

The following resources may be useful for school systems that want to work with their local and state health departments to determine actual staff vaccination rates: [HCS spreadsheet template](#) and a [directory of state immunization information systems](#).