

# HOW ILLINOIS ADDRESSED A HEALTH CRISIS THROUGH PARTNERSHIP

## KEEPING K-12 SCHOOLS OPEN DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC



### OVERVIEW

The Illinois Department of Public Health, the Chicago Department of Public Health, SHIELD Illinois (a University of Illinois System unit), and the Midwest Coordination Center (backed by Battelle) partnered to rapidly coordinate a COVID-19 PCR testing program for K-12 schools in the state of Illinois - keeping kids at school, parents at work, and the economy working.

### PARTNERS

#### Illinois Department of Public Health

The Illinois Department of Public Health (IDPH) advocates for and partners with the people of Illinois to re-envision health policy and promote health equity, prevent and protect against disease and injury, and prepare for health emergencies. IDPH received federal funding from the Coronavirus Aid Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act and the American Rescue Plan to address the COVID-19 pandemic, establishing and enforcing health policies for Illinois.

#### Chicago Department of Public Health

The Chicago Department of Public Health (CDPH) works with communities and partners to create an equitable, safe, resilient, and healthy Chicago. This includes promoting values of diversity, excellence, informed decision making, and teamwork within all residents and smaller communities within the city. CDPH received federal funding from the CARES Act and the American Rescue Plan.

#### SHIELD Illinois

SHIELD Illinois is a screening and diagnostic testing program that deploys covidSHIELD, the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign's (UIUC) innovative PCR saliva-based test across the state. SHIELD Illinois, a nonprofit unit of the U of I System and example of the university's land-grant mission, works to control the spread of COVID-19 across the state of Illinois, keep schools open, protect workplaces and save lives.

#### Midwest Coordination Center

The Midwest Coordination Center (MCC), operated by Battelle and federally funded under the Health and Human Services (HHS) Operation Expanded testing (OpET) program, provides free COVID-19 testing to public and private K-12 schools, non-healthcare congregate settings, and underserved communities. MCC provides self-collection testing access, site training and support, and free shipping of test samples to labs within the MCC network, including SHIELD Illinois.

### EXECUTION



### RESULTS



## PROBLEMS WE FACED

## HOW WE SOLVED THEM



At the start of the pandemic, schools all over the country pivoted to remote instruction.

UIUC developed covidSHIELD, a non-invasive saliva-based gold-standard PCR test, to enable in-person learning in Fall 2020. This test identifies the virus in both symptomatic and asymptomatic carriers, allowing individuals to isolate before infecting others.



K-12 schools were searching for ways to enable in-person learning during the 2020-21 school year.

The U of I System launched SHIELD Illinois, a nonprofit unit, to offer the covidSHIELD testing program across the state. SHIELD Illinois created a scalable infrastructure that included a network of labs, an integrated reporting system, and wrap-around services to ease the operational burden.



In most cases, school districts didn't have the budget for COVID-19-related expenses.

The federal government allocated testing funds to multiple entities, including IDPH, CDPH, and MCC. These agencies provided free testing through SHIELD Illinois and MCC to every school in the state (outside of Chicago Public Schools, which received its own federal funding).



Due to a lack of staffing, mass testing was difficult for schools to operationalize on their own.

Public and private schools utilizing the SHIELD Illinois program are provided with an operations partner to collect and transport samples, or receive \$8/test to collect and transport samples themselves. MCC provides overnight shipping and supplies, especially to schools who are far from sites or with smaller testing volumes. Patient support operations, doctor's orders, and reporting are also provided.



School decision-makers were unsure of the need for testing and which program to use.

Education was critical. Partners held numerous webinars and meetings with union leaders, superintendents, parents, nurses and other stakeholders to explain the strengths of this program. Strengths include early identification of infection and slowing spread, no cost, high accuracy, quick turn-around time, and HIPAA-compliant reporting.



A majority of K-12 schools did not sign up for testing programs prior to the 2021-22 school year.

In August 2021, IDPH introduced the Test-to-Stay protocol, which allowed close contacts to continue attending school in-person as long as they didn't test positive. Later that month, the Governor's Office issued an executive order requiring unvaccinated K-12 staff members to test weekly in order to work at the school. These combined to create a high demand for testing.



These actions led to more than 1,800 schools signing up for testing in a few short weeks.

SHIELD Illinois ramped up hiring efforts, increased lab capacity, and streamlined the onboarding process. In addition, IDPH enabled schools to use the MCC program directly. These efforts allowed us to provide testing to a majority of the state's K-12 schools.



Many states discontinued K-12 testing for the 2022-23 school year due to lack of funding or interest in testing.

The desire of IDPH and CDPH to protect public health and the low cost of SHIELD Illinois' and MCC's programs enabled free K-12 testing through the entire 2022-23 school year.



TESTIMONIALS



**Dayna Brown | Director of Communications and Community Relations  
McLean County Unit District 5**

"Parents and staff members have been extremely grateful to be able to access this voluntary testing. It is a vital tool in **controlling the spread of COVID in our schools.**"



**Evan M. Glazer, Ph.D. | President and CEO  
Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy**

"We even had **five straight weeks in the fall with zero cases.** This truly remarkable success is duly attributed to our testing program. By detecting the virus early, even before symptoms occur, we were able to send students home **before transmission could spread to our community.**"



**Kevin Suchinski | Superintendent  
Hillside District 93**

"SHIELD testing is one of the most important tools in **achieving equitable educational outcomes for children across Illinois**, particularly those in districts hit hard by the pandemic. It adds an extra layer of protection in enabling schools to identify cases early and minimizes student absences due to exposure."



**Sydney Stigge-Kaufman, MSW | Executive Director of Communications  
East St. Louis District 189**

"Last year, campus-wide testing was a critical step to ensure COVID cases were quickly identified and separated from others. It helped reduce community spread. **We chose to continue SHIELD Illinois testing this year** because it is a free resource, is convenient, and it works to mitigate the spread of COVID in our community."

CONCLUSIONS

Screening in K-12 schools helps reduce the spread of COVID-19 in their respective communities. As risk levels get harder to assess, K-12 schools remain a key population to test in order to gain insight into the extent of the spread.

IDPH, CDPH, SHIELD Illinois and MCC developed an effective testing model that continues to be functional and scalable as of October 2022.

The ease and affordability of the program allowed Illinois to provide testing for the 2022-23 school year, when many other states ceased operations.

Illinois' program stands ready to meet the state's needs, should demand for testing increase.

May 2020

University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign develops covidSHIELD

July 2020

SHIELD Illinois was established by the University of Illinois System

February 2021

covidSHIELD received FDA Emergency Use Authorization

March 2021

IDPH announced free testing for EBF Tier 3 and 4 public K-12 schools

June 2021

CDPH announced free testing for K-12 schools in vulnerable communities in Chicago

Partnership formed between SHIELD Illinois and MCC to provide testing to all private schools in Illinois

Partnership between IDPH and MCC is formed to increase capacity

August 2021

IDPH extended free SHIELD testing to every public K-12 school in the state (outside of Chicago)

CDPH announced free testing to all K-12 school in Chicago (outside of CPS)

Test-to-Stay was implemented

Governor's Executive Order required unvaccinated K-12 staff and faculty to test weekly

2022-23 School Year

Testing continues through the school year

