



## The PACE Study: Navigating the Return to In-person School in Maryland.

### Summary of Findings and Introduction to an Action-Focused Communications Toolkit for School Communities

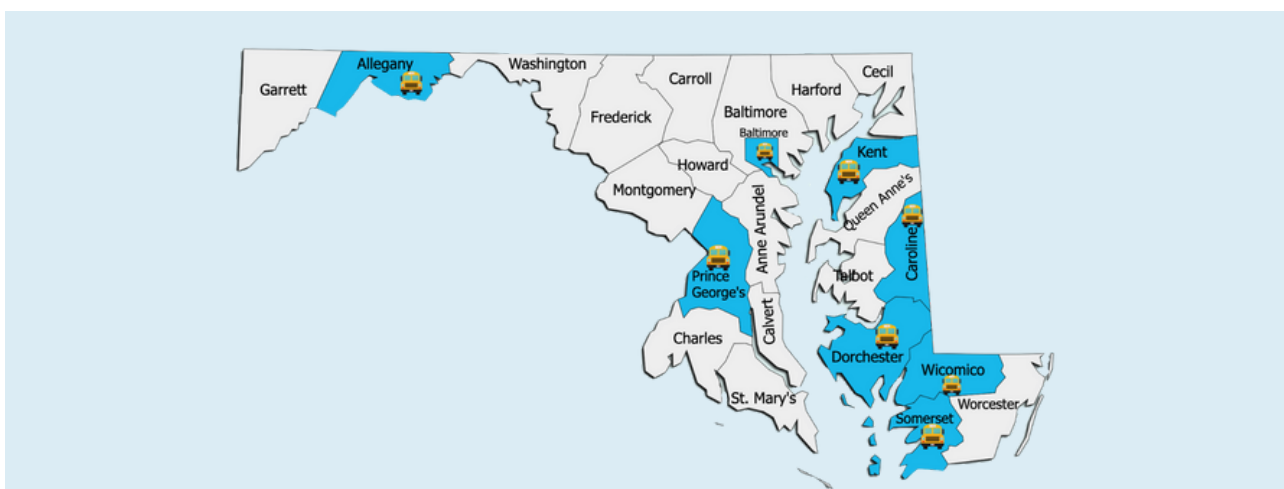
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A collaboration between the Johns Hopkins Schools of Medicine and Public Health, Morgan State University, and the University of Maryland School of Medicine



## INTRODUCTION TO THE PACE STUDY

The **P**arents **A**nd **C**ommunities as **E**xperts (PACE) Study aimed to understand how families and communities in Maryland navigated the return to in-person school in elementary and middle schools during the 2021-22 school year. Researchers from the University of Maryland School of Medicine, Morgan State University, and Johns Hopkins University Schools of Medicine and Public Health worked together with parents and caregivers, teachers and staff, school health personnel, students, and others to understand perceptions of various public health recommendations to prevent COVID-19 spread in schools. We focused on eight school systems in Maryland (see **Figure 1**) with the largest proportion of underserved students.



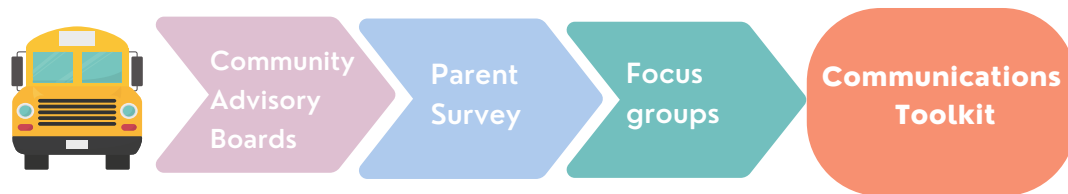
**Figure 1.** Maryland counties included in the PACE study

The PACE study aimed to describe factors associated with parents' willingness to return their children to in-person school and their support for and adherence to their school's COVID-19 prevention strategies. Findings were used to inform the design of a toolkit to help schools and school systems communicate about evolving COVID-19 prevention strategies and support families in taking steps to keep themselves safe based on their household's risk.

### In this report...

We summarize what we learned and introduce a public health communication strategy created to address the concerns of parents, teachers, staff, and students in Maryland. COVID-19 is here to stay; although guidance will continue to change, we hope to provide resources to school systems, schools, and families for assessing COVID-19 risk and making plans for maintaining individual, family, and community health.

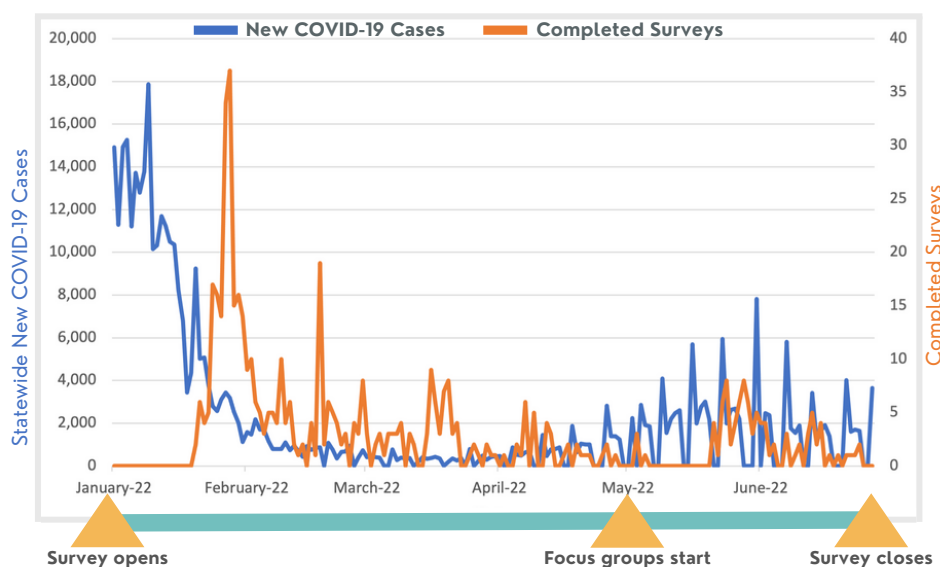
The PACE Study used three strategies to collect community feedback: 1) community advisory board meetings, 2) a parent survey, and 3) parent, teacher, and student focus groups.



**Community Advisory Boards (CABs).** Throughout the project, we worked with CABs that included parents, teachers, school staff, and students from across the eight counties. CAB members provided feedback on survey content and wording, helped interpret results, and pre-tested communication campaign messages.

**Parent Survey.** With the support of our CABs, we created a web- and mail-based survey of parents (or caregivers). It assessed attitudes toward school-based COVID-19 prevention strategies and perceived barriers and facilitators to returning to in-person school. This was mailed to a random sample of homes in the eight target counties (see **Figure 1**); an online version was publicized on social media, via school systems and community organizations, and at community events. The survey was available in English and Spanish from January to July 2022 (**Figure 2**).

**Focus Groups.** We conducted 15 focus groups with parents, students, and school staff members to delve deeper into survey responses. We probed the challenges and benefits of returning to in-person school and feelings about COVID-19 prevention strategies, including in-school viral testing. We also sought parents' input about the best ways to disseminate a communication toolkit about COVID-19 prevention in schools.



**Figure 2:** PACE Study timeline with statewide COVID-19 new cases during survey fielding period. (Note that rates appear lower in July 2022 because of increases in home-based rapid testing and related lack of reporting).

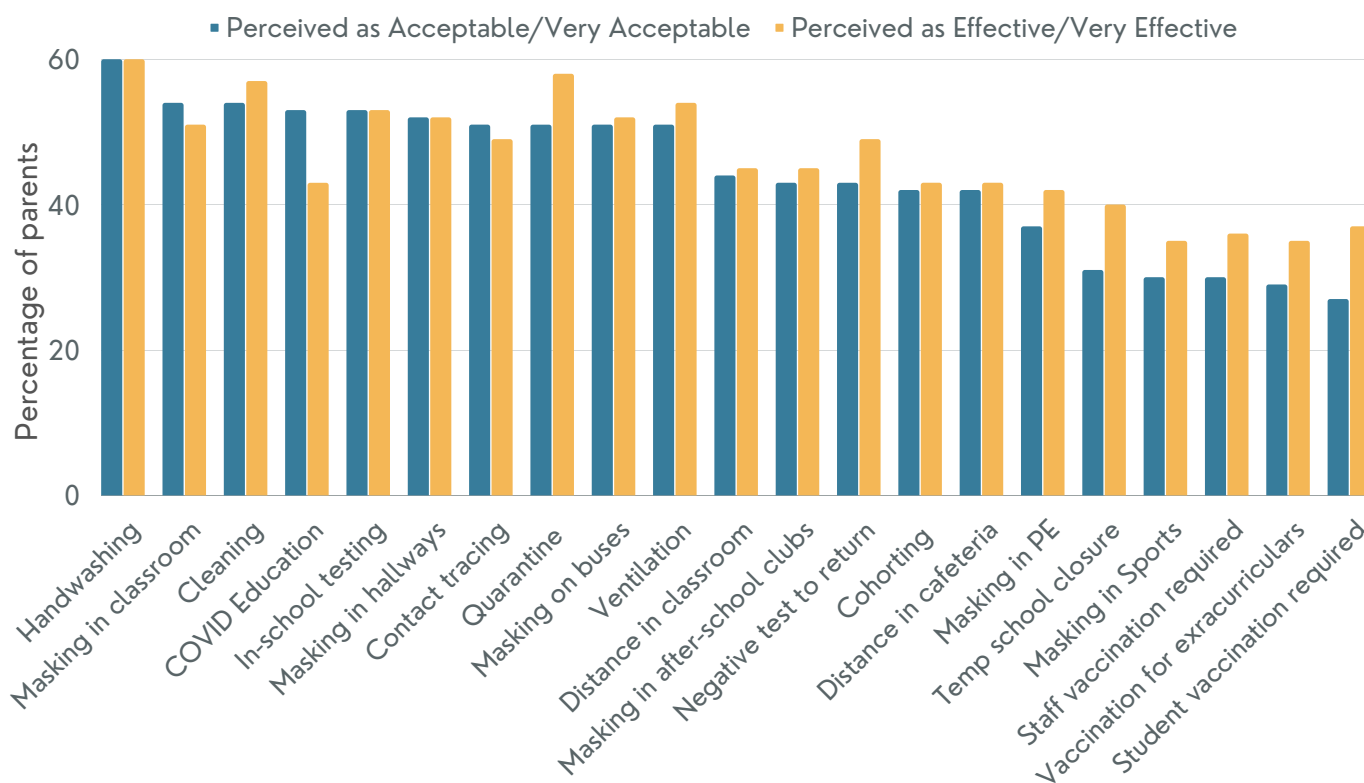
## PARENT SURVEY RESULTS

A total of 567 parents of public elementary and middle school children from the eight target Maryland counties participated. Most respondents participated online (74%), and 26% participated via a survey mailed to their households.

As illustrated in **Figure 2**, the survey was launched in January 2022 (during high Omicron-related transmission) and concluded in July 2022, when case rates were again high due to Omicron subvariants.

**Perceptions of School-Based Prevention Strategies.** A key part of the survey was a series of questions that asked parents about the perceived effectiveness and acceptability of common school-based COVID-19 prevention strategies. We provided parents with a list of 22 prevention strategies currently or previously in place at different institutions across the state. We asked them to rate how effective or ineffective and acceptable or unacceptable they considered these strategies. **Figure 3** shows the prevention strategies included in the survey and the proportion of parents who found each strategy “acceptable or very acceptable” and “effective or very effective.” Key takeaways included:

- Parents perceived handwashing policies as the most effective and acceptable, followed by school-based COVID-19 testing for students with symptoms, ventilation, and cleaning.
- Despite public health officials’ recommendations that age-eligible people be vaccinated against COVID-19, parents perceived vaccine mandates, both for staff and for students, as the least acceptable and least effective strategy.

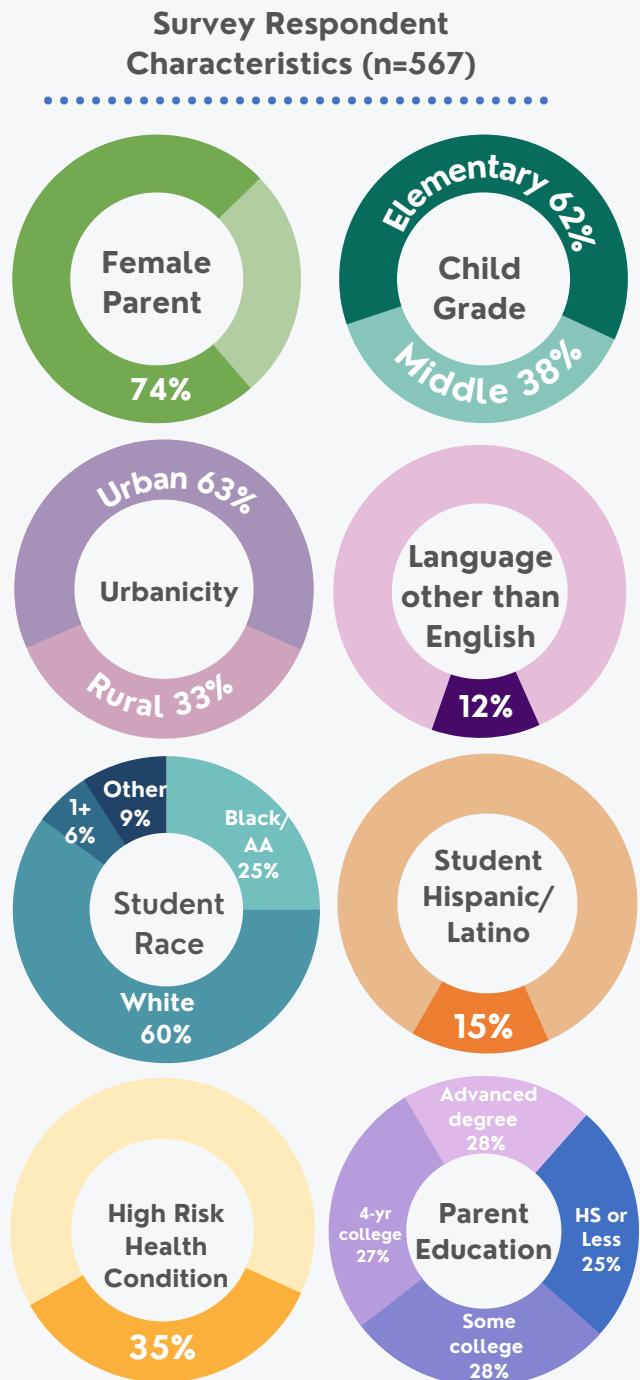


**Figure 3:** Proportion of parents who reported that each COVID-19 prevention strategy was acceptable/very acceptable or effective/very effective to them.

### Trusted Messengers about COVID-

**19.** In the survey, parents rated trustworthiness from 0 (least trusted) to 3 (most trusted). We found that healthcare providers were by far the most trusted source (Mean score=2.65), followed by close friends (Mean score=1.87) and school officials and administrators (Mean score=1.81), who were similarly trustworthy. Social media contacts were seen as least trustworthy (Mean score=1.13).

**Knowledge and Satisfaction with COVID-19 Prevention.** Most (71%), but not all, of parents agreed or strongly agreed they knew what steps their child's school was taking to keep students safe from COVID-19 and that the information they received from their child's school was easy to understand (73%). A smaller proportion (62%) agreed or strongly agreed that they were satisfied with the communication they received about COVID-19 from their child's school.



### Lessons Learned and CABs Feedback

The PACE parent survey illustrated that most families were aware of the COVID-19 prevention strategies in use in their schools. They supported the use of strategies they considered to be effective, including masking and in-school COVID-19 testing. However, many wanted clearer communication about COVID-19 policies. When we reviewed these results with our CABs, they emphasized that changing local, state, and federal guidelines were creating fatigue and confusion; they recognized that this posed a challenge for schools in communicating with families.

## FOCUS GROUPS

We asked focus group participants to describe their current feelings about the pandemic; they consistently shared that they were tired, overwhelmed, and “over it.” They highlighted the benefits of in-person school for students’ learning, mental health, and socialization. They also emphasized that in-person school lessened the burden on working parents. On the other hand, participants also acknowledged the challenges of returning to in-person school including teacher burnout, quarantines, students struggling to adjust to being back in school with their peers, and student behavioral issues after the time students spent learning remotely.

*“There’s just a whole lot of confusing information that needs to try to be sorted out into black and white information. I mean, they call, they email, they text us from school. And there are people who still don’t know what’s going on. So, I guess just the more places that you can have the information the better.”*

– Parent

*“In the county that we live in, the different schools; they go by different policies. And it shouldn’t be ‘different school, different policies’; should be county-wide policy so that it’s not confusing to parents like myself who has school children in two different schools and trying to keep up with the protocols for one school over another one. If it’s the same, then it’s not much to keep up with.”*

– Parent

Participants understood that schools had to implement strategies to prevent the spread of COVID-19 and were learning as they went. However, why and how each strategy was implemented was not always clear; this generated confusion and mistrust.

Participants also expressed frustration with inconsistencies in COVID-19 prevention. Rules changed from place to place, and enforcement varied, as did school staff’s knowledge of the rules. Some teachers and staff pointed out that policies like ventilation or distancing could only be enforced to the extent school facilities would allow, which led to additional variability between schools.

Participants wanted communication from schools and school systems that better met their needs. Some felt they received too much information while others were not sure of their school’s policies or where to find them. Importantly, school superintendents/CEOs and school principals were identified as trusted messengers of school-related information.

## Lessons Learned

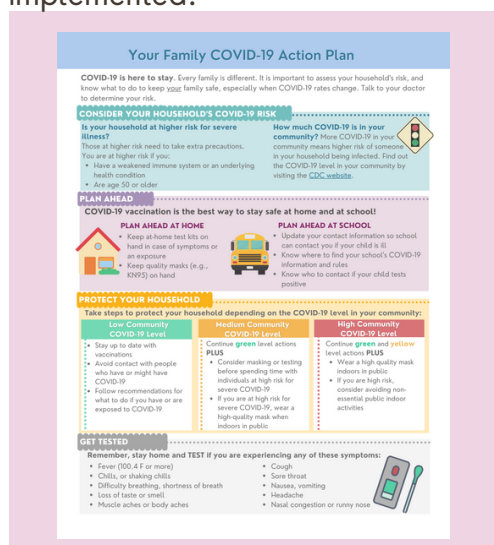
“COVID fatigue” was prevalent. Teachers, staff, and parents recognized the importance of keeping students learning in person and welcomed effective COVID-19 prevention strategies, but they wanted meaningful communication from schools so they could feel like full partners in these efforts. This was particularly true when there was a change in school COVID-19 prevention or COVID-19 rates. They emphasized that prevention strategies must be consistent across schools in the same school system to drive trust and confidence. This was particularly important for families with students in different grades and schools in the same school system.



## COMMUNICATIONS TOOLKIT

The results from the survey and focus groups informed the objectives and messaging of a communications campaign toolkit. Parents, teachers, staff, and students participated in a co-creation meeting to inform message development. Engagement by the users of the communications toolkit and members of the audience that will be impacted is integral to creating a campaign that is both timely and relevant to school communities.

**Toolkit Objectives.** The purpose of this flexible toolkit is to support school communities' understanding of, and participation in, COVID-19 prevention strategies. Prevention strategies vary between school systems and are evolving in response to changing conditions and guidance. Thus, the primary focus of this communications toolkit is not to increase knowledge of or recommend specific prevention strategies, but rather to keep the school community informed about the importance and effectiveness of school systems' chosen COVID-19 prevention strategies and help motivate them to participate in or support the strategies as they are implemented.



This toolkit includes practical, actionable resources and recommendations and campaign materials that can be tailored to local needs. The guidance and materials are grounded in school community input. The content emphasizes collaboration between schools and families to support safe environments for in-person learning. The materials are intended to supplement school systems' current and future communications with the school community.

### Who should use this toolkit?

1. Individuals and teams responsible for providing the school community with up-to-date health and safety information about COVID-19.
2. Other school staff and stakeholders who want to help parents and others in the school community feel supported and informed.



To download the Communications Toolkit go to

[www.schoolhealth.jhu.edu/covid19\\_resources/pace-study/](http://www.schoolhealth.jhu.edu/covid19_resources/pace-study/)

## TOOLKIT COMPONENTS

- **Communication guide and checklists:** The guide includes practical tips for communicating effectively about COVID-19 prevention strategies in schools, based on school community expert feedback. The checklists are tools to support the development and sharing of important information and updates to school communities.

| Communication Checklist   |  |
|---|--|
| <b>Part I: Communication Strategy</b> <p><b>General Communication about COVID-19</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provide COVID-19 updates through multiple communication channels that the school community can access reliably.</li> <li>Be transparent and consistent.</li> <li>Address the school community's current concerns and questions.</li> <li>Correct rumors, myths or misinformation in a manner that is understanding and not accusatory.</li> <li>Provide justification for why and how recommended practices and policies are being implemented.</li> <li>Provide families with resources for assessing their own risk and "action plan."</li> </ul> <p><b>In Response to Changes in COVID-19 Community Transmission or School Case Rates</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Explain what is being done to respond to the change.</li> <li>Clearly communicate what is known and not known at the time.</li> <li>Acknowledge feelings of fear and uncertainty, without elevating either.</li> <li>Clearly indicate when new information is being communicated.</li> <li>Indicate where to find the most up-to-date information on COVID-19 safety guidelines.</li> </ul> | <b>Part II: Message and Materials Review Checklist</b> <p><b>Core Message</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The material contains a main message statement.</li> <li>The main message is at the top, beginning, or front of the material.</li> <li>The message uses an appropriate tone for your primary audience (e.g., serious, empathetic, funny, encouraging).</li> </ul> <p><b>Messenger</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>It is clear who is delivering the message's clear identity is provided (e.g., school name, school logo, administrator name).</li> <li>The messenger is a trusted and credible source among your primary audience.</li> </ul> <p><b>Visuals</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The material uses visuals to help get and maintain the attention of the audience.</li> <li>Use more than one standard template to help ensure the audience recognizes that the information is new.</li> <li>The visuals will avoid terms or being offensive to people who see it.</li> <li>The visuals appropriately reflect the cultures and demographics of the audience.</li> </ul> <p><b>Call to Action</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The material includes at least one clear call to action for the primary audience to take.</li> <li>Use more than one standard template to help ensure the audience recognizes that the information is new.</li> <li>The action you are asking the audience to take is reasonably easy or feasible to do.</li> <li>The material explains why the action or behavioral recommendation is important to the primary audience or the benefits of taking the action.</li> <li>The material clearly indicates how and where to get additional information, if needed.</li> <li>The material includes a date or time frame so that the audience knows the information is still relevant.</li> </ul> <p><b>Risk</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The material explains the nature of the risk.</li> <li>The material addresses both the risks and benefits of the recommended behaviors.</li> </ul> <p><b>Language</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Both the main message and the call to action use the active voice.</li> <li>The material includes only words the primary audience uses.</li> </ul> |



- **Ready-to-use campaign materials:** Materials to emphasize the unique role of schools and collaboration between schools and families in creating a safe and healthy in-person learning environment. Messaging addresses perceptions about COVID-19 susceptibility, benefits of prevention, and barriers and helps build confidence in school community members' ability to maintain preventive behaviors.



- **Guide to creating customizable campaign materials:** Provides guidance on how to customize campaign materials for your school system using the provided templates.



To download the Communications Toolkit go to [www.schoolhealth.jhu.edu/covid19\\_resources/pace-study/](http://www.schoolhealth.jhu.edu/covid19_resources/pace-study/)



## Key Takeaways and Next Steps

PACE study participants emphasized the need for clear, consistent communication from schools and school systems about COVID-19 prevention strategies, particularly when policies and/or COVID-19 rates change. **So, what can schools and districts do next?**

- **Do a COVID-19 communications check-up.**
  - Confirm that your COVID-19 prevention policies and strategies are posted in a place where school community members can access them. Make sure they are up-to-date.
- **Review the PACE Study Communication Toolkit [here](#). Follow the steps to personalize campaign messages for your school community, or use ready-made ones. The toolkit can help when you need to:**
  - Make a plan for communicating about changes in COVID-19 policies or COVID-19 rates in the community if and when they happen. Use the toolkit to craft clear, easy-to-understand messages.
  - Help families evaluate their own risk for COVID-19 illness. Consider distributing the Family COVID-19 Action Plan included in the toolkit so families can take steps to stay healthy based on their household's specific risk.

The PACE Study has had to keep up with the pace of the rapidly-changing pandemic. The toolkit will be updated in response to changes in the pandemic and feedback from school communities in Maryland. **Want to suggest a resource or addition that would be helpful for your school community? Please reach out to us!**



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**Contact Us:** For more information, please contact us at [pacestudymd@jhu.edu](mailto:pacestudymd@jhu.edu)