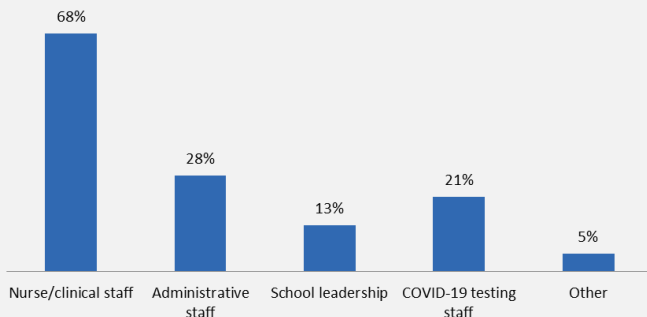


Learn to Return Listening Session Summary

In the summer of 2023, the Learn to Return (L2R) program and the Educational Service District (ESD) partners conducted a **series of 38 listening sessions with school nurses, administrative staff, school leaders, and COVID-19 testing staff** in order to obtain feedback from the schools that participated in L2R, Washington State Department of Health's (DOH) school-based COVID-19 testing program during the 2021-2022 school year. Program partners collected responses from over 150 school staff members throughout these sessions, and DOH conducted an analysis of these data to highlight the key themes that emerged during these sessions.



This graph is a breakdown of the positions held by individuals who participated in the L2R School Listening Sessions. These data were collected via the accompanying exit survey, and may not represent all participants of the listening sessions. Results may include multiple answers from each respondent.

This brief report delves into the critical aspects of the L2R program that was shared through the school partner listening sessions. Overall, the schools communicated the importance of clear communication, accessible resources, unified protocols, and the central role of testing in managing COVID-19 in school settings. Challenges like staffing shortages, changing guidelines and the intersection of politics and public health were acknowledged, along with positive impacts on relationships and areas for improvement in communication and continued support.

Ultimately, respondents emphasized the multifaceted nature of implementing a COVID-19 testing program in school settings, highlighting the significance of clear communication, adequate resources, and robust relationships in the pursuit of effective pandemic management.

Key Themes

Testing Supplies Availability

- Readily available COVID-19 testing supplies and toolkits were seen as very beneficial
- Antigen tests were especially valuable as they were available to use in schools as well as at home

Partner Support

- Support from L2R project partners within DOH, ESDs, Health Commons Project, and the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction was vital in implementing testing
- ESD COVID-19 Response Coordinators were specifically loved by schools, with many calls for maintaining this partnership

Communication

- Schools faced challenges due to changing guidance and difficulties in communicating with families
- There were many requests for better synchronized guidance across the multiple agencies involved with COVID-19 mitigation
- Clear and concise communication was appreciated when available

Community Benefits

- L2R was seen as valuable for the community, helping to get students and staff back in the classroom
- Testing helped build trust and relationships between schools and the community

Staffing

- Staffing was a significant challenge, with some schools struggling to find qualified personnel
- The direct funding schools received from L2R helped alleviate some of the challenges associated with staffing, as it allowed for additional hires

“All the resources they provided, the tests, the information for the tests... I was very pleased with the level of support I got.”



Relationships

The L2R program had both positive and negative impacts on relationships between schools, staff, students, and their communities. Respondents noted that access to COVID-19 testing was a critical resource for schools and communities throughout the pandemic, especially when other testing facilities were not available at that time. The convenience of testing while at school was a game changer for families, however some families were hesitant to participate in school based testing, as they did not want test results reported to DOH.

“[Testing in schools] continued to show we are here for the entire community because we provided testing for everyone, not just students and staff.”

Throughout the pandemic, schools became a trusted source for their community in regard to testing. Respondents noted that L2R helped strengthen relationships with families they normally do not interact with, provided reassurance for staff and parents, and allowed schools to become a hub for testing due to availability of supplies and the trusted staff. Negative viewpoints included parents feeling that the school was pushing a specific agenda, and increased tension and distrust amongst families, community members, and even staff members when testing was mandatory for athletics and school events.

While nurses and COVID-19 staff were seen as a valuable resource by most families, they also faced verbal abuse, harassment, and intimidation. The implementation of testing guidelines and rules was challenging and caused frustration for some staff and families. However, testing also helped build trust and relationships between schools and the community, and provided a multifaceted support system for families.

Program Strengths and Limitations

Listening session respondents reported several strengths in regards to the L2R program. L2R helped ensure the availability of testing supplies, offering critical resources during the pandemic. Support from project partners was readily accessible, providing schools with guidance and assistance in implementing testing protocols. The ability to send tests home increased accessibility and convenience for students and families. Clear communication and equitable access to resources played pivotal roles in program success, facilitating effective implementation.

Despite its strengths, the L2R program faced several limitations. Staffing emerged as a significant challenge, with difficulties in finding qualified personnel. Implementation was time consuming, diverting attention from other essential tasks. Ambiguity in guidance created several challenges, and was consistently the most vocal concern across all of the listening sessions. Reporting test results and supply chain issues added complexity to the program. Personal beliefs and resistance to mandatory testing also presented hurdles. While valuable, the program grappled with these limitations in its mission to support schools during the pandemic.

The Future of School Testing

Listening session respondents suggested that future emergency response planning should include consistent testing protocols and metrics, and that resources should be provided to support any changes in requirements. They also emphasized the importance of maintaining relationships with DOH and other partners, and of having access to free testing supplies and resources. The availability of free tests, additional funding, and access to testing supplies were appreciated and would hopefully remain the same. There were also suggestions for clearer guidance, consistent messaging, and a unified protocol across local health jurisdictions.

