

Challenge & Solution

Oakland Unified School District was managing COVID-19 health screenings for 35,000 students using paper and Google Forms and needed something more reliable and interactive. Through its Aeries SIS, the district adopted ParentSquare and built a custom screening protocol using the API to automate follow-up emails and contact tracing across 111 schools.

Results

- Automated 'stay home' emails generated instantly for any positive screening, replacing a process impossible to manage manually
- Custom color-coded follow-up system built on ParentSquare data tracks clearance timelines across 35,000 students daily
- Translation capabilities enabled outreach to families speaking Mam and other languages, including oral/robocall formats

Building a custom health screening solution at scale

When the Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) began welcoming students and staff back on campus for the 2021-22 school year, it quickly realized that it needed an advanced health screening process to replace its existing, paper-based approach.

"We wanted something that was more reliable and that required more engagement," said Joanna Powell, OUSD's Staff Attorney, who also wanted a tech-based solution that could potentially be integrated with the district's other applications.

"That's what led us to look for a solution that would allow—via an app or online—everyone to respond to our important and necessary health screening questions," she added.

Asking the right questions

Partnering with ParentSquare through its use of the ParentSquare-powered Aeries Communications module of OUSD's Aeries student information system (SIS), the district began requiring students and staff to complete daily health screenings using ParentSquare. Students only have to complete the screening if they have tested positive for COVID-19, if

there is a potential exposure or if there are COVID-19 symptoms present.

With the help of a new API created by ParentSquare, the district developed a custom COVID-19 health screening protocol based on three questions related to positive COVID-19 status, potential exposure, and symptoms. The district then works with a team of contracted professionals for follow up and contact tracing, and with a ParentSquare liaison who helps field school and parent questions. Any “yes” answers to the screening questions are routed through the school-home communication platform and an automated “stay home” email is generated and sent to the appropriate recipients.

It’s a process that the district couldn’t have effectively managed using paper health screening forms. “We’re sending out dozens of these emails every day,” said Powell. “Without ParentSquare, that would be impossible!”

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[Correcting errors and initiating tracing](#)

The system also prompts users to correct possible errors and initiate contract tracing when necessary. It also tracks the correct exposure dates—a data point that the district added after realizing that it wasn’t able to accurately access backdated entries.

Using Aeries Communications powered by ParentSquare, OUSD was able to whittle down its health screening process and focus only on the most important data points. For the Spring 2021 semester, for example, OUSD required all students to complete a health screening every day. It later realized that the exercise was only necessary for students who answered “yes” to specific questions.

Now, when students have a positive case or COVID-19 symptoms, they stay home for 10 days and then return to class once they’re fever-free and/or the symptoms are gone. If they get a doctor’s note attributing the issue to something other than COVID-19, they can return to

school earlier. Those who have been exposed to COVID-19 can return to school within seven days with a negative test.

Color-Coded follow ups

To manage potential cases and exposures across 35,000 students on a daily basis—and be able to follow up with students after the requisite amount of time to confirm that they had met the clearance conditions—OUSD set up a database of all health screenings that were marked “yes” for any question.

Developed by the district’s IT department and using ParentSquare’s data, the color-coded system alerts the follow-up team when it’s time to reach out to a student or family. This not only ensures that students are cleared to return to school, but it also ensures that they miss as little school as possible.

“We can pull all of the ‘yes’ answers from ParentSquare,” Powell said, “and then basically add seven or 10 days based on the date that the responses were entered.”

Powell said ParentSquare’s translation capabilities have also been invaluable in communicating COVID-19 protocols, requirements and potential exposures to families that may not be fluent in English. “We have a lot of families who speak Mam, which is only an oral language with no written form,” Powell explained. “At one point, we were using ParentSquare to translate messages into an oral/robocall format for them.”

Expansion for a complete communications solution

With the successful health screening program in place, OUSD continued its implementation of the ParentSquare platform as part of its Aeries SIS for all communications in the district. And while the health screening initiative goes on, ParentSquare is also used to send messages to targeted groups of people, which has been helpful throughout the pandemic. For example, if a high school or middle school student who moves between classes during the day tests positive for COVID-19, then all of those other classes have to be notified of their possible exposure.

To manage this, the district sends out a letter containing specific information about the positive person’s last date on campus and the specifics of the quarantine requirements. Those letters are then sent out through ParentSquare, which allows senders to select the

specific classes that it needs to go to and who it applies to.

“It doesn’t have to be a manual pull of every student’s family’s email address,” said Powell. “Sometimes we’re talking about hundreds of kids who are affected, so the online messaging system has helped us pivot to this all-inclusive process that is so much easier to manage.”

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