



HERO School Testing: March – April 2021 Update

published April 15, 2021

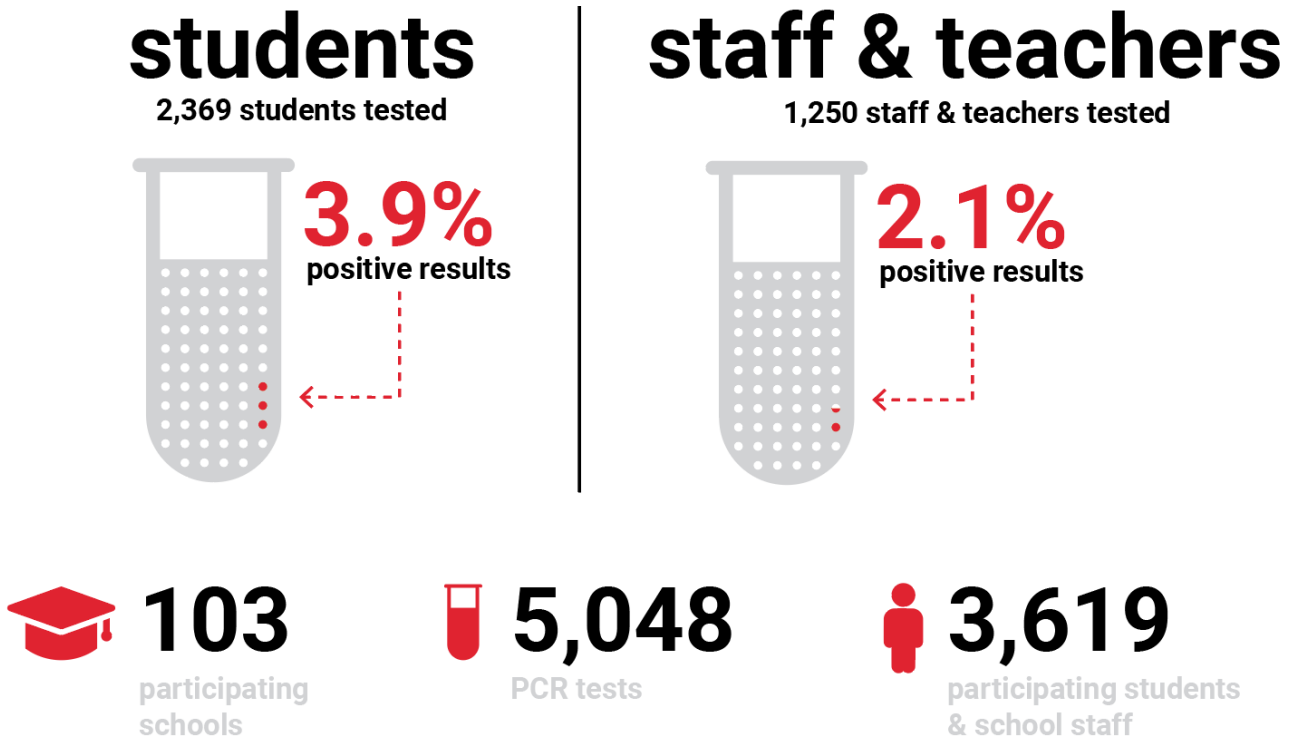
The [Utah Health and Economic Recovery Outreach \(HERO\) Project](#) began in May 2020 as a collaborative statewide testing and analysis project to understand the community-based spread of Covid-19. The goal of the HERO Project is to collect and utilize high-quality local data to help inform decision-makers seeking to guide Utah’s citizens and economy through a safe return to normalcy. Beginning in March 2021, the project team is publishing update reports on community testing, impacts of Covid-19 on Utah businesses and consumers, school testing, work in long-term care facilities, and vaccine uptake, impact, and implications. This report focuses on the [HERO Project’s work in K-12 schools](#) and serves as an update to the [Key Findings in School Testing Report published March 23, 2021](#).

Background on School Testing

The HERO Project began school testing in October 2020 and has continued through early April 2021, conducting tests for over 3,500 participants representing over 100 schools. The primary goal of school-based testing is to provide convenient access to Covid-19 testing to students, faculty, and staff to enhance safety in school communities by reducing transmission. By increasing testing, schools can better identify both symptomatic and asymptomatic cases, reducing the occurrence of school outbreaks that prevent in-person learning.

Testing Results

From October 2020 through April 5, 2021, students had a higher rate of positive tests than did staff and teachers, but both groups were relatively low.

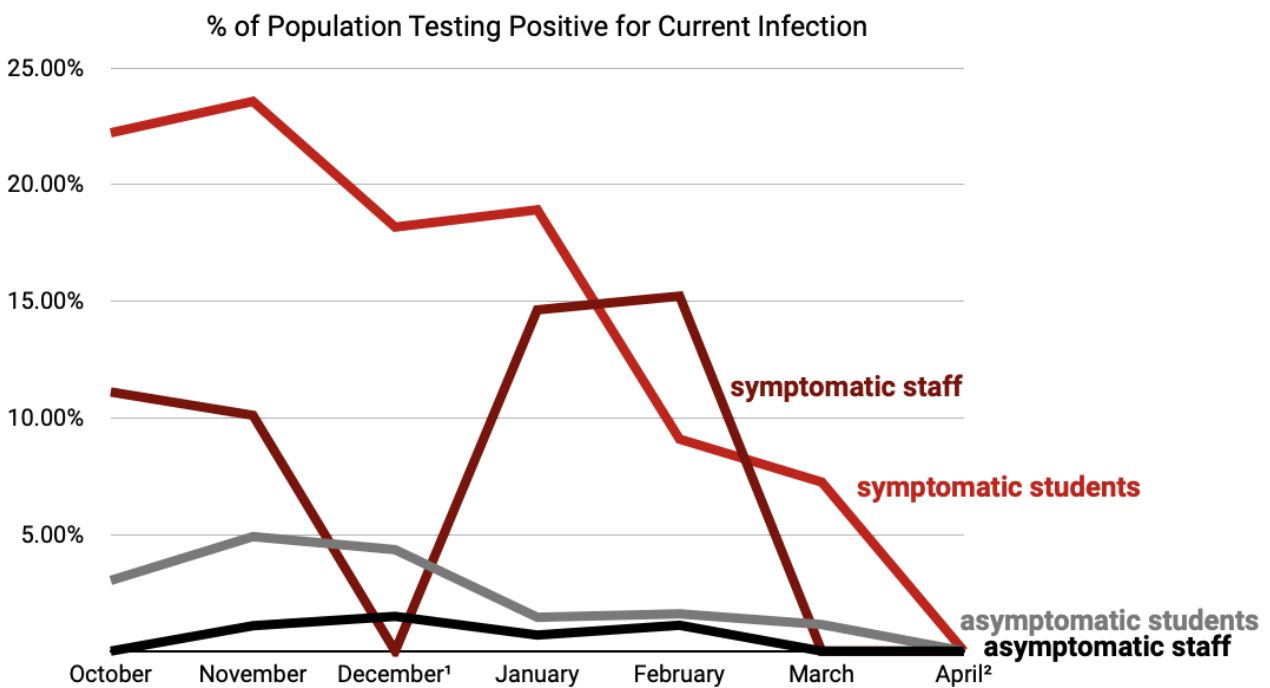


March – April 2021 Testing Results

Between March 1st and April 5th, the HERO project performed 996 tests at 81 schools, on both students and staff, with students receiving 80% of the tests. No staff members tested positive during this reporting period. Overall, students had a 1.5% positivity rate, and symptomatic students continued to test positive at higher rates (6.3%) than asymptomatic students (1.0%).

Rates of Infection Across Time

Intensive testing has taken place every month since October, with the exception of December due to the winter break limiting the amount of time students and staff were at their schools. Positivity rates have generally decreased since testing began, a trend that has continued to hold into Spring 2021. This applies for both students and staff, and both those with and without symptoms, as shown in the figure below.



¹ December testing included only the first two weeks due to Winter Break, decreasing the sample size as compared to other months.

² Testing data for April is as of the first round of in-school testing on April 5, 2021.

Additional School-Based Projects and Findings

Spread in Elementary Schools

After publishing an initial [study](#) in collaboration with researchers from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in March 2021—in which the team found that in-school transmission for elementary schools is low, especially when schools utilize methods like universal mask-wearing, and including settings in which community-wide transmission is high and when students are spaced 3 feet apart—HERO and CDC published a [follow-up study](#) focused on understanding the value of on-site school-based testing as a strategy to help reach underserved populations. In this study of school-based testing in elementary schools, students identifying as members of a racial or ethnic minority group and those living in zip codes with higher Covid incidence were the most likely to participate in testing, underscoring the potential effectiveness of this strategy.

Surveying High School Students

In previous reporting, the HERO Project described findings from a collaboration with the Utah Department of Health and Salt Lake County Health Department about the higher rates of Covid-19 infection among high school students learning in-person as compared to in remote learning. To better understand a potential factor underlying this difference—the types of out-of-school social activities high school students participate in when learning in-person—the HERO team is conducting a survey of high school students in Salt Lake City and Granite School Districts, along with one private high school in the area. To date, over 1,300 students have completed this survey representing 12 high schools. Information on survey results will be included in future reporting.

Analysis of Covid-19 Testing Policy

Along with colleagues from the Utah Department of Health, United States Public Health Service, and Utah State Board of Education, the HERO team is evaluating two state testing policies for schools: [Test to Stay](#) and [Test to Play](#). These programs were designed to help sustain in-person learning and extracurricular activities in Utah schools by guiding school testing strategies and responses. More information about the findings from this evaluation will be provided in future reports.

Next Steps

Throughout the next several months, the HERO Project will continue working to understand and inform on Covid-19 transmission in K-12 schools across the state. Specifically, future initiatives and reporting will include:

- continued staff and student testing results
- discussion and results from the high school student survey
- discussion and results from the Test to Stay and Test to Play policy evaluations
- collaboration with local districts and the Utah Department of Health to begin planning for fall 2021 school policies
- investigation of student vaccination plans and potential barriers and factors associated with hesitation

Acknowledgments

Leading the HERO Project are Stephen C. Alder, PhD; Adam Looney, PhD; and Matt Samore, MD. The project is funded by the State of Utah in coordination with the Governor's Office of Management and Budget and the Utah Department of Health.

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The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints generously contributed the use of their parking lots and buildings to support mobile testing for this project. In addition, we thank the HERO Project's field team that has staffed and supported countless testing events across the state. We also appreciate the support of the National Center for Advancing Translational Sciences of the National Institutes of Health under Award Number UL1TR002538. HERO school testing work could not have happened without the support of the Utah Department of Health; Salt Lake County Health Department; Granite, Salt Lake City, and Davis School Districts; McGillis School; and Rowland Hall School.

This report was developed by the Sorenson Impact Center at the University of Utah's David Eccles School of Business in partnership with the HERO Project leadership. Sorenson Impact works with public, nonprofit, and private sector stakeholders to develop, structure, and mobilize capital for innovative and data-driven approaches to difficult social and public health challenges. This report was created by Austin Hendrickson and Allison Nicholson and designed by Alicia Pangman.

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