

# NIH Chooses Miller School to Head Project for Its Safe Return to In-person School Initiative

The University of Miami Miller School of Medicine is helping to lead a National Institutes of Health (NIH) COVID-19 testing initiative to safely return children to in-person school.



COVID Testing at the pediatric mobile clinic.

NIH has earmarked \$3 million over two years to five institutions in the country, which includes the Miller School's project "Maximizing Child Health and Learning



Potential: How to Promote a School Culture of Safety in the Era of COVID-19.”

The project’s aim is to partner with the Miami-Dade County School District, the fourth largest school district in the U.S., to develop and test feasibility of a national urban school COVID-19 testing protocol and health education and vaccine confidence initiative.

School districts, including Miami-Dade, do not yet have testing protocols in place that help return children who have been exposed to the virus to the classroom more quickly than the current 10-day quarantine period.

### **New Protocols for Students and Athletes**

“We are going to look at how we can better serve kids in schools regarding COVID-19 testing and create scientifically-proven protocols to get kids back into the classroom and school athletes back on the playing field quicker,” said the project’s principal investigator Lisa Gwynn, D.O., M.B.A., M.S.P.H., associate professor clinical pediatrics and public health sciences, interim division chief, child and adolescent health, program director of Pediatric Mobile Clinic and School Health at the Miller School.



Lisa Gwynn, D.O., M.B.A., M.S.P.H.

Another project aim is to conduct focus groups with parents and students about any hesitation to get vaccinated, as well as provide knowledge about COVID-19, concerns and trusted sources of information.

“We can then utilize that information to create educational strategies to improve COVID-19 vaccination rates in schools,” Dr. Gwynn said.

COVID-19 rapid testing will take place at the Miller School’s nine school-based clinics, located in Overtown, North Miami, and North Miami Beach. The Miller School research team for the project includes Dr. Gwynn; co-investigator Elizabeth Pulgaron, Ph.D., associate professor of pediatrics and clinical psychology; Viviana E. Horigian, M.D., M.H.A., associate professor of public health sciences; and project manager Maria Ferraris.

This funding is part of the NIH’s second installment of the Safe Return to School Diagnostic Testing Initiative, launched



earlier this year as part of the NIH Rapid Acceleration of Diagnostics Underserved Populations (RADx-UP) program. The new awards are for projects in Florida at the Miller School, as well as at UCLA, Arizona State University, University of Nebraska and University of Hawaii.

## **Addressing Barriers to Testing and Learning**

RADx-UP addresses the needs of children with unequal access to COVID testing, as well as those facing barriers to attending school remotely.

“Without in-person schooling, many children will miss out on school-based meals, speech or occupational therapy, and after school programs. Loss of such services disproportionately affects minorities, socially and economically disadvantaged children, children with disabilities and those with medical complexities, such as those with medication-related problems, mental health issues, severe neurologic conditions or other serious health conditions and those who are dependent on medical technology for daily living,” according to NIH.

Dr. Gwynn said she and her Miller School colleagues look forward to working with the local Health Department, School District, partners such as the Children’s Trust and others in the community to create these protocols.

“This is all about working with the community and getting stakeholder engagement and involvement to create a strategy to expedite children’s return to in-person learning in an era of COVID-19,” she said.

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