

# Alamo Heights ISD rolls back remaining COVID precautions

## Cases have plummeted, but parent reaction to change in protocol is mixed

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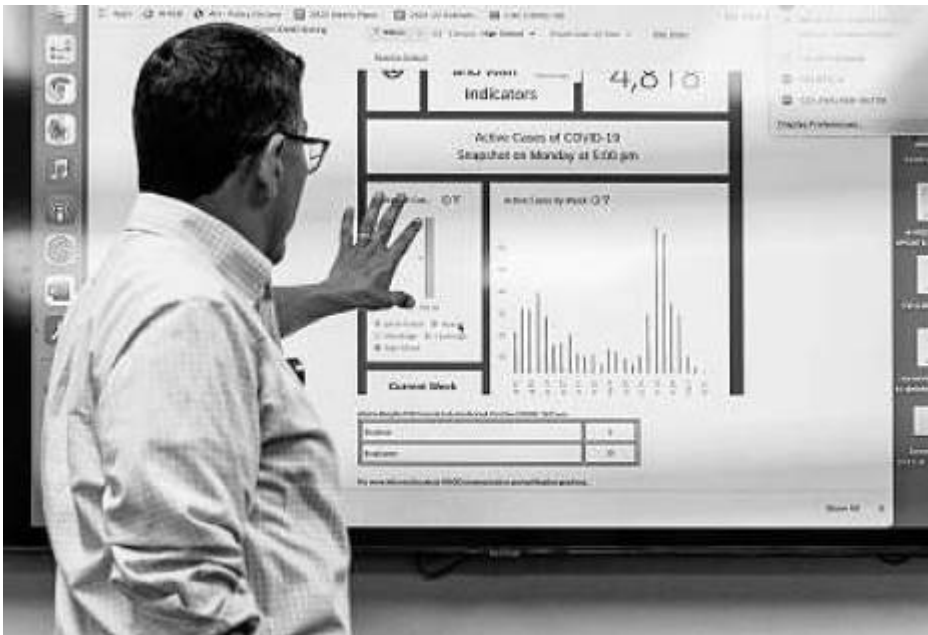


Photos by Sam Owens / Staff photographer

Students spread out outside during their lunch break at Alamo Heights High School on Thursday.



**Frank Alfaro, assistant superintendent for administrative services, said officials felt it was time to start making changes.**





**Frank Alfaro, assistant superintendent for administrative services, shows COVID-19 data included in weekly emails.**



**Photos by Sam Owens / Staff photographer**

**Students leave the cafeteria and walk to their classes at Alamo Heights High School on Thursday. The high school still allows outdoor lunches in its courtyard.**

Alamo Heights ISD has rolled back many of its remaining COVID-19 safety precautions as positive cases at the district plummet.

The change comes as other area school districts have also relaxed COVID protocols as cases plunge across the country.

For a couple of weeks in January, there were more than 70 students and staff across the district with COVID-19, according to the district COVID-19 dashboard, but the most recent numbers from the week of Feb. 28 showed that had dropped to two cases on one campus. The district has about 4,800 students enrolled.

Though many Alamo Heights ISD parents say they are excited to return to a more normal campus atmosphere, some are worried about the changed regulations, which went into effect the week of Feb. 28, the week before the district closed for spring break.

Changes included reopening water fountains, adjusting how some campuses social distance during lunch, and included the discontinuation of mass COVID notifications and the option of “remote conferencing.” Remote conferencing allows students who have a temporary medical condition to access school remotely for up to 20 days and still be counted present. Frank Alfaro, assistant superintendent for administrative services, said this option requires extra teachers, though, and now that cases have dropped significantly it is no longer economically feasible to offer, so students who contract COVID-19 are counted absent.

Now that there is a lower risk as COVID-19 cases drop, Alfaro said officials felt it was time to start making changes.

“I’ve heard positive feedback from both staff and parents,” he said. “Prior to making this move, we were hearing lots of demand from parents saying, ‘Please make these moves,’ going all the way back to November.”

The school will continue posting positive cases on its COVID-19 dashboard, using HEPA filters — which remove airborne particles — in cafeterias, providing hand sanitizer throughout its campuses, and requiring students and staff to stay home if they are sick.

Alfaro said that all campuses closed off the spout of water fountains where students put their mouths near to drink, but junior high and high schools left open the part on some machines where people can refill water bottles.

Cambridge and Woodridge elementary schools had plexiglass at lunch tables and spread students across auditoriums and lunchrooms to social distance. The Junior School also allowed students to eat outside. Bringing students back to the cafeteria will make using auditoriums for fine arts performances at the elementary schools possible again, Alfaro said. Having students in fewer areas for lunch is also easier on teachers who have to staff every location where students ate, he added.

But he said there have been some parents at the Junior School who want outdoor lunches back because students enjoyed it, so Alfaro said the school is looking into it.

The high school removed plexiglass during the summer once vaccines were available to that age group. The high school still allows outdoor lunches in its courtyard.

Ending outdoor lunches at the Junior School has been the change that seems to have the most impact on the children, said Ann David, who has one child at Woodridge Elementary and two at the Junior School.

David, 44, is a member of the Alamo Heights Community Alliance, a parents group with about 15 core members who throughout the pandemic have advocated for mask mandates and other measures like getting HEPA filters into classrooms.

David said that her kids and kids of other Alliance members faced several challenges when the Junior School went back to having students eat in the cafeteria only, from struggling to find places to sit to being bothered by the much higher noise level in the room.

Since August, David said, the Alliance had been pushing for outdoor lunches at every campus in part because it reduces chances of COVID infection but also because it's beneficial for students to have outdoor time during the day.

"We know it's good for students to go outside during the day and have that time," David said. "Suddenly not being able to felt like they were being punished but they weren't sure why."

She said group members also are disappointed that the school is discontinuing its mass COVID notifications. The school would inform every parent and staff member when someone tested positive for COVID and had been on campus within two days of that test. David said that the Alliance had been tracking daily cases of COVID on campus based on those notices, but it cannot now since the school dashboard only tracks by week.

David said that Alliance members likely will voice their concerns at the next school board meeting March 24.

Jennifer Emerson, Cambridge Elementary PTO president, said many parents with whom she has spoken recently have been excited about the changes.

## Emerson has twin boys at Cambridge.

Emerson said that since many people in the community have had COVID “we’re kind of moving beyond it” and that vaccines are widely available to anyone who wants to vaccinate their child.

“I’m just thrilled that we’re getting kind of quote unquote, back to how it used to be,” said Emerson, 39. “I’ve heard a lot of jabber amongst the children that they’re just excited that they get to sit with their friends.”

Woodridge PTO President Jill Peavy expressed similar sentiments in an email, saying that she feels like most families in the community are “very happy for ‘normal.’”

“Our children desperately need it ... socially, emotionally and mentally,” she wrote. “I have only gotten very positive feedback about the changes and have experienced a sense of energy back in the school amongst teachers, children, staff and parents.”

Junior School PTO President Jenny Cummings, 43, also said she has noticed that kids are excited about the changes.

Cummings has children at three campuses — one at Cambridge, one at the junior high and another at the high school.

“The more normal that life gets for our kids, the happier I am,” she said.  
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