Jackson Public Schools (JPS) is the second-largest public school district in Mississippi and the largest urban school district in Mississippi.

2nd
LARGEST SCHOOL DISTRICT

53
TOTAL SCHOOLS

20,400
STUDENTS IN PRE-KINDergarten THROUGH 12TH GRADE

The district is made up of 7 high schools, 10 middle schools, 32 elementary schools, and 4 special program schools. JPS holds a “D” accountability grade and serves approximately 20,400 pre-kindergarten-12th grade students, representing roughly 80% of the school-aged population in the capital city. As shown in Figure 2, the Jackson Public School District is a predominantly Black school district with 95% of its students identifying as African American. Jackson Public Schools is also nearly evenly split between male and female students with 50.7 percent of students being male and 49.3 percent of students female.

**FIGURE 2. JACKSON PUBLIC SCHOOLS RACE AND ETHNICITY DEMOGRAPHICS**

- African American/Black: 95%
- Hispanic or Latino: 2.4%
- White/Caucasian: 1.2%
- Two or more ethnicities or races: 1.3%
Communications
The Context and Barriers

Jackson Public Schools has always needed a complex communications strategy because of the size and academic diversity of the school district. JPS is also located in an urban setting, making it unique among Mississippi districts. These factors alone mean the district has to use a variety of communications channels and tactics in order to ensure they are reaching every stakeholder.

Obvious barriers for Jackson Public Schools include size, location, and frequent leadership change. These barriers have made it harder to create a consistent districtwide communications strategy that can be tailored to individual audiences. As a result, the district believes it must lean on each school site to serve as primary messengers.

Even though JPS faces many communications obstacles, the fact that Jackson is a major urban center in the state means the district benefits from having access to more communications channels, such as multiple local television and radio stations. However, in the past, JPS has not always maintained a collaborative relationship with local media, leading to local outlets spreading misinformation.

In addition to the global pandemic, Jackson has also faced multiple local crises in recent history. The most common crisis concerns the city’s broken water infrastructure, which has caused multiple school closures after winter storms froze city pipes, most recently in 2018 and 2021. In both 2018 and 2021, the city was without water for a few weeks, which meant the public schools also had to close for a period of time without warning. Because JPS has had to navigate school closings and disaster response in ways other districts have not, they developed some lessons learned before the pandemic that helped them prepare.
Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Jackson Public School District relied on fewer and less frequently updated communication tools to share important information with families and students. These tools included newsletters, local news media, and regularly scheduled district meetings. Filmed events such as football games, board meetings, or promotional school videos were uploaded to JPS’s YouTube Channel.

Facebook has been a primary communication tool for JPS since August 6, 2012. The JPS Facebook page, which boasts a large following, is a community space for sharing everything from urgent information to updates on student achievement. JPS has found Facebook to be an inviting place for parents and families to get their information.

The JPS website had also become an important part of JPS communications efforts pre-pandemic. When Superintendent Errick Green arrived in the district in October 2018, updating the usability of JPS’s website was one of his first priorities and the website has significantly improved under his direction. At the start of January 2019, the district began publishing regular updates which include notable achievements by students, celebrations for educators and administrators, and upcoming community events for families.

Due to its large size, JPS is able to employ two full-time communications staffers. As of 2020, these staffers are Executive Director of Public Engagement, Mr. Sherwin Johnson, and Communications Specialist, Georgette Keeler.

As the coronavirus pandemic unfolded and schools began to close in March 2020, parents and families looked to districts for the next step for their students. Like many districts, the Jackson Public School District faced considerable challenges that came with the COVID-19 pandemic. With very little information available for schools from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), district leaders relied on data trends in their community, advice for businesses from the CDC, and prior experience with crisis management.

The Jackson Public School District began implementing strategies to engage students in distance learning following the end of spring break on March 13, 2020, when Governor Tate Reeves first implemented a stay-at-home order for schools. Teachers and principals throughout the district provided instructional assistance to students via Zoom conferencing, held office hours for one-on-one help, assigned lessons using Google Classroom and/or the Canvas platform, and utilized other digital programs such as iReady, Moby Max, or Education Galaxy.

For families who could not access online instruction, JPS created instructional packets for students in grades K-12 that families could download and print from the “Learn-at-Home” page on the JPS website or collect from one of the 12 Grab and Go locations, which primarily served as pick-up spots for lunch, dinner, and fresh produce packages for students and their families. Instructional Television (ITV), a local access television channel, also broadcasted some instructional content.
Despite JPS's efforts, families experienced considerable disruption to their children's education. Confusion also reigned, as early communications efforts struggled due to the unpredictable and day-to-day nature of the unfolding crisis. As a result, JPS made the decision not to hold students accountable for either grades or attendance for the last nine weeks of the 2020-2021 school year. Ultimately, this meant families felt there was little, if any, structure to the district's operations.

When the 2019-2020 school year concluded, Jackson Public School District began thinking through what the 2020-2021 school year would be like. Based on issues that arose in spring 2020, JPS had several concerns about reopening, including, but not limited to, the transition to virtual learning for every student in the district, parents taking on the role of educator, educators taking on double or triple the workload in order to teach in a format that many were unfamiliar with, and the issue of grading due to the lack of access to traditional instruction.

Jackson Public Schools began developing its reopening plan by consulting with a committee made up of JPS executive leadership, including the superintendent and his cabinet (chief of staff, assistant superintendent for each division, chief of academics, chief of operations, and chief of finance), as well as parents, students, teachers, administrators, doctors, and community members, including the governor, mayor, healthcare experts, and local news media. JPS dispatched surveys to parents and other stakeholders, held press conferences, had interviews with local news media, emailed communications to staff and employees, and consulted with healthcare providers, experts, and public administrators. The surveys to stakeholders indicated that

- Many students had found virtual instruction inaccessible during the spring 2020 semester.
- Many students had no computers or devices, and many had no connectivity, irrespective of device ownership.
- Teachers felt unprepared for virtual instruction and anxious about the safety of in-person instruction.
- Parents were overwhelmed with their newfound role in education.
- Students became Zoom-fatigued, and participation and attendance declined over the last nine weeks in 2020.
- The spread of the novel coronavirus was escalating throughout the Jackson area, raising concerns for all stakeholders.

THE JPS 2020–2021 SCHOOL REOPENING PLAN

After much consideration and taking into account the challenges from the spring 2020 semester, Superintendent Errick L. Greene announced on July 24, 2020, in a special meeting of the Board of Trustees, that Jackson Public Schools would reopen with a fully virtual model for the first semester. School would begin on August 12, 2020, two days after the original start date, to allow teachers to prepare to teach in the virtual model. JPS was one of a handful of districts statewide that decided to only offer virtual learning for the entire first semester of 2020-2021. According to district staff, they were concerned by the “exponential increase of COVID-19 cases in Mississippi and in Hinds County, and, more specifically, the increased pediatric cases of COVID-19” in summer 2020. The sheer size of the district added to the pressure JPS felt to keep students at home because COVID is a virus that preys on crowds of people. JPS felt it was too risky for students to return to the school buildings at that moment in time: they could not ensure students would not get sick.
The reopening plan was first made public via press conference, which received extensive media coverage. The plan was additionally made available on the district website as well as social media, including Facebook and Twitter. JPS also held a Facebook Live event to discuss with their audiences what the plan about the upcoming school year entailed.

**STATE OF REOPENING, SPRING 2021**

When students returned from the winter break in January 2021, JPS transitioned to phase 2 of their reopening plan, which offered hybrid, in-person, and virtual options for families. Unfortunately, COVID-19 has not been the only disaster that JPS has had to navigate this school year. At the same time JPS was launching the second phase, Jackson experienced a very rough winter. Three years ago, during a winter storm, multiple municipal water pipes broke across the city of Jackson. Many of the fixes were temporary, so again, in 2021, below freezing temperatures and snow left much of the city without safe running water for a month. Because schools cannot operate safely if there is no water for fire suppression systems or toilets, or if the water is unsafe to drink, JPS had to close school buildings. This caused the district to shift their reopening plan once more and students were required to go back to phase 1—virtual school—while the city worked through its water issues. The district then staggered reopenings as schools gained running water, though it was still undrinkable in many cases. As this was happening, there was another local surge in COVID, followed by a week of spring break. Because the district believed there would be an increase in travel during spring break which could further increase COVID exposure, the district instituted a
mandatory quarantine period the week after spring break. Students again were required to attend school virtually for a week before they could shift back into phase 2.

In this time period, JPS notified their stakeholders through several means, including the district’s automated calling system, social media, and local news media. JPS heavily leveraged its Facebook following at this time because most of the district’s audience could be found there and families could access it from smartphones if their homes did not have power in addition to water. Throughout this time, district leadership provided daily updates to keep families aware of which schools would be able to open safely, since these reopenings were handled on a rolling basis. Leading these communications efforts were JPS communications staff, Sherwin Johnson and Georgette Keeler.

Jackson Public has had a unique school year. Not only have they had to overcome the challenges of navigating an extremely large, diverse school district through the pandemic, but they have also had to deal with school buildings not being operational due to broken water pipes when it was finally safer to reopen schools. At every level, stakeholders have been frustrated with how the school year has unfolded. However, in the face of unprecedented challenges, JPS was able to communicate effectively with its stakeholders.

One successful strategy JPS implemented was to use Facebook Live meetings to create a space where the public could have a direct conversation with school leadership, particularly the superintendent. Facebook Live meetings helped JPS build and maintain a trustworthy and compassionate relationship with parents and the public by keeping stakeholders updated on school reopenings, safety measures, and other community concerns. During the water crisis, the district also used this channel to provide direct information from the superintendent to students, families, and teachers.

Another successful strategy JPS employed was to implement stakeholder surveys throughout the year. The surveys helped the district understand the variety of barriers and concerns they would need to address, ranging from what the digital divide looked like in the district to what students and families needed in terms of scheduling. This was a strategy that many districts across the state have utilized to understand what students and families need.

One of the findings from the surveys was that the district needed to change how they delivered information. Employing some of their past tactics taught the district that their stakeholders best respond to short text and appealing graphics rather than lengthy text, such as the full 12-page reopening rollout plan. JPS took this into consideration and prepared graphics and other visual aids, such as video demonstrations and live video conversations. In order to simplify complex messages, the district used wordsmithing, web management, graphic design, data simplification, and visual adaptation to provide quick, concise, comprehensive information to community members.

Finally, while reaching their audiences was a top priority, the district has continued to struggle with ensuring accuracy in local news reports. JPS is being more intentional about its relationships with local media and has begun sharing pre-written statements directly with outlets. They also send their social media posts directly to news media.