

# HISD PRESS RELEASE

## Ready, Set, Go: Thousands of HISD students begin the 2021-2022 school year

*Aug. 23, 2021* – Tens of thousands of Houston Independent School District students returned to classrooms today with an unparalleled amount of support during historically challenging times.

Among the supports — enhanced safety protocols, a virtual learning academy for vulnerable students, wraparound services specialists assigned to every school, emergency food pantries, and certified comfort dogs designed to aid students in crisis.

All these supports are designed to ensure students feel safe and ready to learn.

“As the largest school district in Texas, we are welcoming hundreds of thousands of students to school” HISD Superintendent Millard House II said. “That is why we implemented our *Ready, Set, Go!* Plan to ensure a safe return to school for students and staff.”

As the 2021-2022 school year begins, masks are required in all HISD classrooms, buildings, and buses regardless of vaccination status. HISD also will continue to clean and disinfect classrooms and encourage physical distancing of at least three feet indoors as space allows.

The district has expanded the Wraparound Services department, assigning at least one specialist to almost every campus. These specialists work directly with students to identify and meet their basic needs so they can focus on learning rather than food, clothing, and shelter concerns.

HISD also is launching 50 emergency food pantries through the Souper Bowl of Caring initiative. Data shows 25 percent of Houston youth experience hunger when they are not in school. The pantries will be open to anyone in need, even those who don't have students attending HISD schools.

In partnership with HISD Police and Social Emotional Learning, the Pet Assisted Wellness Support Program — dubbed PAWS — will address students' grief, stress, and anxiety associated with COVID-19 and other difficult situations. This program utilizes three comfort dogs trained to provide comfort and support to students in crisis.

For the district's most vulnerable students, HISD is launching a virtual instruction option for the fall semester. Starting Monday, August 30, the Virtual Academy will be available for eligible students who are too young to be vaccinated (11 and under) who have a compromised immune system. Additionally, HISD is also incentivizing vaccinations for HISD staff. The Board of Education recently approved a \$500 stipend for all vaccinated employees, as well as additional COVID-19 leave time for vaccinated individuals who become sick.

For more information about Ready, Set, Go! Back to School Plan, visit [HoustonISD.org/readyssetgo](https://HoustonISD.org/readyssetgo).

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The Houston Independent School District is the largest school district in Texas and the seventh-largest in the United States, with 280 schools and more than 209,772 students. The 333-square-mile district is one of the largest employers in the Houston metropolitan area, with more than 27,000 employees.

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