



Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

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Jeffrey C. Riley
Commissioner

MEMORANDUM

To: Superintendents, Charter School Leaders, and Leaders of Educational Collaboratives and Approved Special Education Schools
From: Jeffrey C. Riley, Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education
Date: January 8, 2021
Subject: Pooled Testing in K-12 Schools

In preparation for the start of the 2020-2021 school year, the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) released a series of guidance documents outlining the key health and safety requirements for in-person learning. These mitigation requirements include rigorous hygiene and handwashing, use of masks/face coverings, physical distancing, reducing interaction between groups, and staying home when sick. DESE, in collaboration with the Department of Public Health (DPH), has begun to introduce COVID-19 testing in K-12 public schools and approved special education schools as an additional mitigation strategy.

In late fall 2020, DESE announced how districts can request a state-sponsored mobile testing unit if a potential cluster of COVID-19 is identified and transmission appears to have occurred within school. In early November, DESE announced a phased rollout of the Abbott BinaxNOW antigen testing for an initial group of districts and schools, with plans to expand the use in early 2021.

In the coming weeks, DESE and DPH are seeking to introduce COVID-19 screening testing using a pooled strategy in the school setting. This memo provides a brief overview of the pooled testing strategy, a description of the state's early launch of this initiative, the related reporting and consent requirements, and the role of the testing service provider. If after reviewing this information your district or school is interested in participating, we strongly encourage you to fill out the brief survey below to register for this initiative and attend an optional informational webinar on Tuesday, January 12, from 10:00-11:15 a.m. We will be joined in this webinar by district leaders who are currently using and finding success with pooled testing, and the webinar will be recorded and posted afterward.

Survey Link

<https://survey.alchemer.com/s3/6123054/Pooled-Testing-Interest-Survey>

Please complete the survey by close of business on January 15 if you are interested in participating.

Overview of Pooled Testing

Pooled testing involves mixing several test samples together in a “batch” or “pool” and then testing the pooled sample with a PCR test for detection of SARS-CoV-2¹. This approach increases the number of individuals that can be tested using the same amount of resources as a single PCR test. The test is performed at least once per week with anterior nasal swab for all students and staff members. Results are delivered within approximately 24-48 hours. If a pooled test result is negative, then all individuals within that pool are presumed negative and may continue to remain in school. If a pooled test result is positive, then all individuals in the pool must quarantine until they are retested individually. The Abbott BinaxNOW rapid point-of-care antigen test will be the primary source of this individual follow-up testing. More detailed guidance on protocols addressing positive/negative pooled test results will be available prior to the launch of this program. The test kits, training, and testing software will be provided by a third-party vendor and tests will be analyzed at an authorized laboratory.

Description of 6-Week Early Launch

During an initial 6-week period, participating districts and schools will receive the test kits, support from a testing service provider, and the testing software to track results, all at no cost to them. In most cases, districts and schools will administer the tests using existing staff resources. Following the initial 6-week launch, districts and schools may continue using pooled testing by purchasing the tests and any other accompanying testing materials, software, or support from a statewide contract using their federal stimulus dollars.

A district or school providing any type of in-person instruction, such as full in-person or hybrid instructional models or in-person services for high needs students, is invited to participate in this initiative. In addition, districts and schools that are currently in a remote instructional model but intend to return to in-person learning are also invited to participate. Private and parochial schools are not able to participate in the early launch, but they are able to purchase tests, materials, and software directly from testing services providers.

Consent Requirements, Reporting, and Testing Service Providers

Consent Requirements

Individuals may participate in pooled testing only with valid consent. DESE and DPH will provide further information on the consent and authorization that districts and schools participating in this initiative must obtain. This process will include obtaining consent from students’ parents/guardians prior to administering the tests to students.

Reporting

Neither Schools nor Local Boards of Health need to report results from pooled tests to the Department of Public Health. Conversely, schools and Local Boards of Health must provide results from individual diagnostic tests (both positive and negative) done following a positive pooled test result to the Department of Public Health using the established reporting mechanism. Further guidance on reporting is forthcoming.

¹ FDA, Pooled sampled testing and screening for COVID-19, (2020, August 24). Available at: <https://www.fda.gov/medical-devices/coronavirus-covid-19-and-medical-devices/pooled-sample-testing-and-screening-testing-covid-19>

Testing Service Provider

Under a statewide contract, districts and schools will work with a testing service provider who will manage the logistics (e.g., delivery of tests to schools, operations hardware, and coordination with the testing lab), and provide training for schools and districts, software associated with pooled testing, and technical assistance/customer support to district/school personnel. DESE will assume the costs of the testing service provider and other materials associated with pooled testing for the first 6 weeks of the program. Following the 6 weeks, districts and schools may use their federal stimulus funding to continue the program. In most cases, districts and schools will use existing staff resources to administer the tests and to manage onsite logistics.

Conclusion

If your district or school is providing any form of in-person instruction (full in-person, hybrid, or services solely for high needs students), you are well positioned to participate in this pooled testing initiative. We hope you will complete [this survey](#) by January 15 to indicate your interest in participating.