

Baker announces coronavirus pool testing to be made available to all Massachusetts public schools

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Governor Charlie Baker SAM DORAN/STATE HOUSE NEWS SERVICE

Governor Charlie Baker unveiled plans Friday to begin wide-scale testing on students and educators in public schools across Massachusetts to detect the coronavirus, a move the governor hopes will entice more districts to reopen classrooms.

The testing program, which will kick off in about a month, will be voluntary and available to any district operating classrooms so they can routinely test students and staff. The program will be free for the first six weeks, and students and staff can decline to participate.

The program could cost the state between \$15 million and \$30 million. To keep costs down, test samples from multiple individuals will be pooled together in batches and analyzed. A positive result will lead to follow-up testing and contact tracing.

“Pooled testing will provide additional safeguards to stop the spread and give students, parents, teachers, and staff confidence that it is safe to be in schools,” Baker said.

“And this new testing will give school officials more knowledge about what’s happening inside their buildings every day. . . . We can’t wait for everybody to be vaccinated before kids get back to school,” he said.

The program represents the state’s most ambitious effort yet to conduct coronavirus testing in public schools and will for the first time routinely encompass individuals not suspected of having been exposed to the virus. Previously, testing programs targeted those with symptoms or who had been exposed and in some cases deployed mobile testing units.

The effort follows the lead of a handful of districts, including Watertown, Wellesley, and Salem, which have been routinely testing students and staff since the fall.

Watertown has administered more than 6,400 tests, which as of Thursday had uncovered nine positive cases among students and five among staff. That’s very few cases in a community where the two-week positivity rate is 5.1 percent, putting the community in the red.

More than 70 percent of students attending in-person classes and about 90 percent of staffers opted into those schools’ weekly testing program.

Students are tested by a school nurse, who uses a short nasal swab to collect the samples — a method the state program intends to use in all participating districts. In elementary schools, nurses go to classrooms with a cart and call students in the hall for the test. High school students can swab themselves under the nurse’s supervision.

Watertown Schools Superintendent Deanne Galdston said the testing has revealed no instances of in-school transmission, although there had been transmission among members of a sports team over winter break.

She said the testing was a worthwhile effort.

“We are in the middle of a pandemic,” she said. “Whatever we can do to make people feel safe we have to do.”

Salem uses a saliva-based test with its students and staff, weekly handing out tubes they can spit into while at school or at home. Superintendent Steve Zrike said positive results range from zero to two.

“Administering the test is not all that complicated because it’s spitting in a tube,” he said. “The more challenging part is the logistics involved when you get a positive result.”

Specifically challenging, he said, was the ensuing contact tracing.

In some instances, he said the district has had to close classrooms. He said the district learns from the board of health about other positive results that come from testing outside the school program.

While teachers unions, superintendents, and school committees have been pushing the state for months to enact a wide-scale COVID-19 testing program, it remains unclear whether the initiative will prompt more districts to open additional classrooms or reduce social distancing measures to accommodate more students.

“It’s not the magic solution,” said Merrie Najimy, president of the Massachusetts Teachers Association. “But it’s good news and long overdue.”

Boston Superintendent Brenda Cassellius said Friday that the new testing program sounds promising and that she is interested in participating. Boston launched a similar testing program before December vacation for students and staff members at 19 schools.

“It builds the confidence of the teachers, and everybody feels more comfortable,” she said.

Beth Kontos, president of the American Federation of Teachers Massachusetts, said the testing program will provide districts with vital information about any evidence of COVID-19 among students and staff in order to try and prevent any potential spread in schools or at home.

The state has repeatedly said that data reported by local districts since the fall has found low instances of COVID-19 in schools, and a growing number of national studies have revealed in-school transmission of the coronavirus is rare.

Baker reiterated those points Friday, while saying that the harm on students’ academic performance and social well-being is far greater if they are kept out of classrooms.

State officials also stressed that a variety of other safety measures, including mask wearing and social distancing, are adequately protecting students and employees from the coronavirus. The new COVID-19 testing program, they said, will boost protection.

“What I would say is between this and the vaccine that’s on the horizon, better days are ahead,” said Jeffrey Riley, state education commissioner.

Educators are slated to be vaccinated in Phase 2, most likely sometime in February or March.

At Friday’s press conference, Lieutenant Governor Karyn Polito also announced a separate testing initiative.

That program, Poitto said, will be run by the state Life Sciences Center and will help identify innovative solutions to expand testing in the Commonwealth, in order to provide new options and opportunities to testing centers.”

She said the program would “support projects focused on two core areas: accelerating the development of simpler, faster, at-home and [also of] point-of-care testing methods,” she said.

She said the new solutions would “address existing supply chain bottlenecks.”

Felicia Gans, Travis Andersen, and Martin Finucane of the Globe staff contributed to this report.

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