

# School Pooled COVID 19 Testing in Maine

**The Goal:** Keeping children in school full-time, safely and successfully in the fall of 2021 requires that we know about and respond to the potential spread of COVID 19 in schools. While vaccines are the best protection, more Maine people must get vaccinated to reach herd immunity, vaccines are not yet available to all children, and variants make COVID 19 unpredictable. Pooled testing offers the most efficient way to know about and limit COVID 19 in schools.

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## **The Tool: What is pooled testing?**

Pooled testing is a form of surveillance testing that combines a whole group's tests (5-25 individuals) into one 'pool' instead of testing everyone individually. Because pool participants get tested for COVID 19 weekly, they do not need to quarantine *from school* even if they are considered the close contact of another, school-related COVID-positive case. The whole process takes about 15 minutes per week.

If all individuals in the pool are negative, the pooled PCR test will come back negative and nothing further is required. If an individual in the pool is positive, the pool test result will be positive and pool members will be tested with Binax NOW Antigen tests to follow up. Meanwhile, pool members do not need to isolate unless their individual tests return positive or they are symptomatic. On average, about 1% of the pools require follow up because of a positive result.

So, if you have 500 students & staff in your school, instead of running 500 surveillance tests, you may run only 25-50 tests per week, including follow up tests. Pooled testing will also cut down on the number of individuals involved in contact tracing. **Students who do not participate in pooled testing who are identified as close contacts must be quarantined.**

**How it works:** Pooled COVID-19 testing offers school staff, students, and families more certainty about their school and work schedules because participants do not have to quarantine. Pooled testing also increases confidence in children's safety at school because it provides a better understanding of COVID-related risks.

- Unlike other COVID-19 tests, pooled testing offers less disruption from in-person learning and on-site work. (Non-participating students still have to quarantine when exposed to COVID-19.)
- It's free & efficient – pooled testing is the most efficient way to identify and limit COVID-related risks in school
- It reduces the likelihood of school transmission by supporting prompt isolation of any positive individuals
- It requires minimal administrative effort compared to individual, nurse-facilitated tests
- It maintains the confidentiality of participating students (pooled samples are not labeled with student names)
- Having testing in place ahead of potential COVID-19 surges will help a school cope more effectively with community transmission

#### **Benefits:**

- **Exemption from quarantine for pool participants in all school and/or school-related programs and activities**
- Confidence in public health safety at school
- Prevented transmission ahead of potential increased COVID-19 case counts
- Resources for school-related health strategies
- Happier families and peace of mind (when children do not need to quarantine from school, miss school-related events, or learn remotely)

#### **School Responsibilities:**

- Weekly pooled testing for each enrolled individual
- Follow up COVID-19 tests *for positive pool individuals only* using Binax NOW
- Tracking and reporting
- Minimal need for PPE, and other resources are provided by DHHS/DOE

#### **Parents'/guardians' responsibilities:**

- Provide consent for children's weekly pooled testing & follow up testing
- Follow quarantine guidance if child is identified as a close contact outside of school

**School decision-making:** We have designed school pooled testing to provide schools with choices about how it will happen, depending on their own infrastructure, vision, and resources.

Decisions include:

- Where it will happen – classrooms or central location
- How much staffing you accept: the program includes paid staffing for administration of weekly pooled testing. Districts can opt out if they prefer.
- How widespread it is – whether just one or all of your schools and/or classrooms will participate.
- How “hands on”– to what extent PPE is necessary or if ‘self-service’ suffices

**Steps to take to set up extra staffing (if needed):**

- Complete the online enrollment application for pooled testing following steps 1-4.
- When completing the form, note that your school will need additional staffing resources.
- The testing vendor will then work with the school unit to identify the type of resource needed (administrative or clinical or both) and the frequency/hours needed based on school size and number of pools each week.
- Additional staffing resources are available to the school for as long as they are needed.

Please refer to the [FAQs](#) for further information