

MEMORANDUM

To: Maine School Superintendents and Administrators

From: Maine Department of Health and Human Services, Maine Center for Disease Control and Maine Department of Education.

Re: Temporary Changes to K-12 Pooled Testing Program Given COVID-19 Surge

Date: January 11, 2022

The Maine Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and Department of Education (DOE) are issuing this guidance to underscore the continued importance of the program as well as temporary measures schools may take in the face of this surge. Given the increase in COVID-19 transmission rates in Maine, driven by the Omicron variant, Maine has experienced a significant increase in the number of pooled tests returning positive. This has resulted in a larger number of BinaxNow tests schools are using to follow-up with participants of positive pools. Schools have expressed concern regarding their capacity to conduct these follow-up tests, to enter the results into REDCap, and to perform contact tracing.

This memorandum pairs with recent updates to the Maine CDC's Standard Operating Procedure regarding, among other things, contact tracing in school with a universal masking policy.

I. WHY SHOULD SCHOOLS CONTINUE TO PARTICIPATE IN THE POOLED TESTING PROGRAM?

Pooled PCR testing is a tool – along with masking, vaccination, handwashing, ventilation, distancing, and isolating individuals with COVID-19 – to keep communities safe, reduce transmission, and build confidence in school safety. Many people with COVID-19, especially children and teens, are less likely to have symptoms, though can still spread the virus. Regular testing helps find people who have the virus before it can spread to others, whether in the school or in the community. This benefit is important for children who are not yet eligible for COVID-19 vaccination, families and staff with younger children at home, those at risk for experiencing severe COVID-19 illness, and those who are not yet fully vaccinated against COVID-19. Pooled testing continues to be one of the layered strategies that schools may use. We recognize, though, that in times of very high incidence of COVID-19, pooled testing's benefits are weighed against the operational challenges it places on school staff.

II. TEMPORARY MEASURES SCHOOLS MAY TAKE TO MAINTAIN POOLED TESTING PARTICIPATION

- 1. Schools can reach out to their local community organizations and volunteers to support follow-up testing.** For schools that cannot identify community resources, please contact: DHHS.covidsocialsupport@maine.gov or complete the following form: [Social Supports Referral Form](#). Please include the name of the school and the point of contact in the request. The Maine DHHS/CDC team will review each request and identify potential local resources that may be available to support a school. Requests will be assessed based on the number of positive pools and students and staff that need follow-up testing.

2. Schools may suspend reporting negative BinaxNOW test results and report only positive BinaxNOW test results to the Maine CDC through REDCap. This temporary change will significantly lower the administrative work of reporting negative test results during this high-volume period. This reporting may resume in February, but will not be required retrospectively.

3. Schools may suspend contact tracing for BinaxNOW positive test results identified through pooled testing. Schools are encouraged to develop a generalized alert to the school community about positive pools in schools and are encouraged but, until further notice, not required to conduct individualized exposure notification to close contacts in schools. Note: this particular change applies to participants in pooled testing programs. At the same time, Maine CDC is updating its school SOP to reflect changes that will allow suspension of contact tracing in schools with an enforced universal mask mandate in place. Thus, it may be the case that certain schools with universal masking in place may be able to suspend contact tracing across the school, not just for pooled testing participants. For schools that do not have universal masking in place and who are not participating in pooled testing, Maine CDC recommends continuing with contact tracing.

4. If and only if the options above do not allow a school to conduct follow-up testing for all individuals in a positive pool, a school may triage follow-up testing for members of a positive pool.
Note: Schools will need to communicate this change in the testing program with all students and staff, as a student or staff may not receive a follow up test. Maine CDC recommends that such a school focus on students or staff in the following order:

- a. Symptomatic individuals;
- b. Individuals who are not fully vaccinated, or who are fully vaccinated but who have not yet received a booster;
- c. Medically fragile or those at-risk for severe disease;
- d. School staff, in the interest of maintaining school services.

This guidance is temporary in light of the rapid surge of COVID-19 in Maine and will be revisited in February 2022. Maine DHHS, CDC, and DOE will continue to monitor the situation closely and will determine whether additional steps are needed in or beyond January. As always, we are here to support you and have a team ready to assist. If you have questions about pooled testing, school personnel can either call the COVID-19 Hotline at 207-624-6717 or contact your regional public health liaison via email.