Please note: The below information pertains specifically to NC DHHS’s StrongSchoolsNC Testing Program. For the most up-to-date K-12 COVID-19 testing guidance, refer to the most up-to-date CDC recommendations. For additional COVID-19 guidance for K-12 school operations, please see the NC Strong Schools Public Health Toolkit.

July 23, 2021

Updated July 23, 2021 for 2021-22 school year
Contents

Interim Guidance For COVID-19 Testing of Adults and Children Who Work in or Attend a K-12 School 3

Why Testing Matters................................................................................................................................ 3

Types of Covid-19 Tests............................................................................................................................ 3

Testing Strategies ..................................................................................................................................... 3

NC DHHS K-12 2021-22 Testing Program Overview ................................................................................. 6

Program Options and Operational Guidance........................................................................................ 7

   Option 1: State-Contracted Vendor Program.................................................................................. 7

       State-Contracted Vendor Program Requirements........................................................................ 8

   Option 2: Independent Testing........................................................................................................ 8

       Process to Request State-supplied Test Kits ................................................................................. 9

       Requirements to Request State-Supplied Test Kits .................................................................... 10

   Add-on for Public Schools: Funding for Temporary School Health Staff...................................... 11

       Staff Funding Program Requirements......................................................................................... 11

Readiness Review Checklist for Districts and Schools Requesting State-Supplied Test Kits .............. 12
**Interim Guidance For COVID-19 Testing of Adults and Children Who Work in or Attend a K-12 School**

**Audience:** This guidance document is targeted to district and school leadership, as well as school health staff involved in developing and implementing their school or district’s COVID-19 testing program.

Over the 2020-21 school year, we learned a great deal about the value of COVID-19 testing to identify and mitigate risks associated with spread in K-12 schools. Between December 2020 and June 2021, 58 public school districts, charter schools and private schools participated in NC DHHS’s K-12 Testing program, receiving over 70,000 antigen tests to perform diagnostic and routine screening testing in their schools. These schools were able to rapidly identify and quickly isolate cases to reduce the spread, keeping more students and staff in the classroom.

With these learnings and additional federal funding for K-12 COVID-19 screening testing, NC DHHS is expanding its support to K-12 schools to the 2021-22 school year. This document provides key testing-related definitions, details the types of testing schools may elect to perform and the support available for these testing modalities, and provides answers to frequently asked questions (FAQ). As more public health data accumulate and more is learned, NCDHHS will continue to update this guidance as a reference for schools and districts, including independent schools, local education agencies (LEAs), and public charter schools. In consultation with their Local Health Departments (LHDs) school leaders can determine their own local approaches to administering COVID-19 tests at their discretion.

**Why Testing Matters**

The goal of all COVID response in school settings is to keep students and staff healthy and in school. Viral testing strategies in partnership with schools should be part of a comprehensive approach. Testing should not be used alone, but in combination with other prevention strategies to reduce risk of transmission in schools. When schools implement testing combined with prevention strategies, they can detect new cases to prevent outbreaks, reduce the risk of further transmission, and protect students, teachers, and staff from COVID-19.

**Types of Covid-19 Tests**

There are two main types of viral tests that can be used to diagnose someone with COVID-19: nucleic acid amplification tests (NAATs) and antigen tests. Please reference the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) COVID-19 Testing Overview website for the most up-to-date information on the types of COVID-19 tests.

**Testing Strategies**

Testing for COVID-19 can help quickly identify those who are infected and those who have been exposed but have yet to develop symptoms. Viral testing strategies in partnership with schools should be part of a comprehensive approach. Testing should not be used alone, but in
combination with other prevention strategies to reduce risk of transmission in schools. When schools implement testing combined with prevention strategies, they can detect new cases to prevent outbreaks, reduce the risk of further transmission, and protect students, teachers, and staff from COVID-19. School testing programs can increase family confidence in school attendance and reduce barriers to testing access in a community.

**Diagnostic testing** refers to testing done on someone who has symptoms consistent with COVID-19 or has had a close contact with someone with a confirmed case of COVID-19. The ability to do rapid testing on-site can facilitate COVID-19 diagnosis and inform the need for quarantine of close contacts and isolation. Rapid antigen testing works to prevent in-school transmission while minimizing in-person learning time lost.

**Screening testing** refers to testing done on someone without symptoms or known close contact with someone with COVID-19. CDC guidance provides that people who are fully vaccinated do not need to participate in screening testing. Screening testing may be most valuable in areas with substantial or high community transmission levels, in areas with low vaccination coverage, and in schools where other prevention strategies are not implemented. More frequent screening testing can increase effectiveness, but feasibility of increased testing in schools needs to be considered. Screening testing should be done in a way that ensures the ability to maintain confidentiality of results and protect student, teacher, and staff privacy. Consistent with federal and state legal requirements, including the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), K-12 schools should, consistent with school and district policy around student consent, obtain parental consent for minor students and/or consent from students themselves.

Screening testing can be used to help evaluate and adjust prevention strategies and provide added protection for schools that are not able to provide optimal physical distance between students. Screening testing should be offered to students who have not been fully vaccinated when community transmission is at moderate, substantial, or high levels; at any level of community transmission, screening testing should be offered to all teachers and staff who have not been fully vaccinated.

To be effective, the screening program should test at least once per week, and rapidly (within 24 hours) report results. Screening testing more than once a week might be more effective at interrupting transmission. Schools may consider multiple screening testing strategies, for example, testing a random sample of at least 10% of students who are not fully vaccinated, or conducting pooled testing of cohorts. Testing in low-prevalence settings might produce false positive results, but testing can provide an important prevention strategy and safety net to support in-person education.

To facilitate safer participation in sports, extracurricular activities, and other activities with elevated risk (such as activities that involve singing, shouting, band, and exercise that could lead to increased exhalation), schools may consider implementing screening testing for
participants who are not fully vaccinated. Schools can routinely test student athletes, participants, coaches, and trainers, and other people (such as adult volunteers) who are not fully vaccinated and could come into close contact with others during these activities. Schools can implement screening testing of participants who are not fully vaccinated up to 24 hours before sporting, competition, or extracurricular events. Schools can use different screening testing strategies for lower-risk sports.

All schools should:

- Refer individuals to diagnostic testing who have symptoms of COVID-19 or disclose recent known close contact to a person with COVID-19.
- Offer free rapid (antigen) testing on-site at school to facilitate quick COVID-19 diagnosis, inform school staff of what students may be able to stay in school, and inform the need for quarantine of close contacts.
  - Interpretation of tests results can be found at this link to the CDC antigen algorithm.
  - Of note, a person who has symptoms of COVID-19 and has received a negative test for COVID-19 may return to school if the negative test was either (1) a negative PCR/molecular test or (2) a negative antigen test AND the person has a low likelihood of SARS-CoV-2 infection (i.e., the person has no known or suspected exposure to a person with COVID-19 within the last 14 days or is fully vaccinated or has had a SARS-CoV-2 infection in the last 3 months.
- Incorporate a screening testing strategy consistent with CDC recommendations as in the table below. Screening testing may be most valuable in areas with substantial or high community transmission levels, in areas with low vaccination coverage, and in schools where other prevention strategies are not implemented.

**CDC Screening Testing Recommendations for K-12 Schools by Community Transmission Level**


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Low² Transmission Blue</th>
<th>Moderate Transmission Yellow</th>
<th>Substantial Transmission Orange</th>
<th>High Transmission Red</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students</td>
<td>Offer screening testing for students who are not fully vaccinated at least once per week.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers and staff</td>
<td>Offer screening testing for teachers and staff who are not fully vaccinated at least once per week.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High risk sports and activities</td>
<td>Recommend screening testing for high-risk sports and extracurricular activities² at least once per week for participants who are not fully vaccinated.</td>
<td>Recommend screening testing for high-risk sports and extracurricular activities twice per week for participants who are not fully vaccinated.</td>
<td>Cancel or hold high-risk sports and extracurricular activities virtually to protect in-person learning, unless all participants are fully vaccinated.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Low-and intermediate-risk sports

Do not need to screen students participating in low and intermediate risk sports.

Recommend screening testing for low- and intermediate-risk sports at least once per week for participants who are not fully vaccinated.

1 Levels of community transmission defined as total new cases per 100,000 persons in the past 7 days (low, 0-9; moderate, 10-49; substantial, 50-99; high, ≥100) and percentage of positive tests in the past 7 days (low, <5%; moderate, 5-7.9%; substantial, 8-9.9%; high, ≥10%).

2 Schools may consider using screening testing for student athletes and adults (e.g., coaches, teacher advisors) who support these activities to facilitate safe participation and reduce risk of transmission. For an example risk stratification for sports, see https://ncaa.org.s3.amazonaws.com/ssi/COVID/SSI_ResocializationDevelopingStandardsSecondEdition.pdf

For more details on testing strategies see CDC Guidance for COVID-19 Prevention in K-12 Schools, including Appendix 2. For additional COVID-19 guidance for K-12 school operations, please see the NC Strong Schools Public Health Toolkit.

NC DHHS K-12 2021-22 Testing Program: Overview

In April 2021, the CDC released funding to states to support screening testing for school year 2021-2022. NC DHHS has elected to use funds to provide the following testing support to K-12 schools throughout the state, on an opt-in basis.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Testing Options</th>
<th>State Responsibilities</th>
<th>Vendor Responsibilities</th>
<th>School / District Responsibilities</th>
<th>How do I opt-in to this program?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>State-contracted vendor</td>
<td>• Match school/district with vendors</td>
<td>• Perform the test sample collection and processing</td>
<td>• Decide on testing plan and communicate with vendor</td>
<td>Opt-in Form shared with school/district leaders.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Advise schools/districts on their vendor implementation as needed</td>
<td>• Obtain results of tests</td>
<td>• Collaborate on consent process</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Report results of tests to NC DHHS, school and parent/guardian</td>
<td>• Communicate results of tests to patient/family as applicable</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Provide guidance on quarantine/isolation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent testing</td>
<td>• Provide free of charge tests to schools/districts</td>
<td>• N/A</td>
<td>• Decide on testing plan</td>
<td>Opt-in Form shared with school/district leaders.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Host monthly office hours and test result reporting training sessions</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Assure compliance with all testing requirements</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Obtain consent from students, parents, and families</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Perform the tests</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Obtain results of tests</td>
<td></td>
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<td>• Report results of tests to NC DHHS</td>
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<td>• Communicate results of the tests</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Provide guidance on quarantine/isolation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Add On:
Funding for Temporary School Health Staff for Public Schools

• Provide funds for hiring of staff
• N/A
• Hire registered nurse (RN), Licensed Practical Nurse (LPN) unlicensed assisted personnel (UAP), as applicable
• Assure hired individuals are operating within the limits of their licensure/credential

Opt-in Form shared with school/district leaders.

Schools/districts may choose not to opt-into testing at their schools. We encourage schools who do not test their students, staff or families to provide their community with a list of locations that provide access to free COVID-19 testing.

NC DHHS K-12 2021-22 Testing Program: Options and Operational Guidance

Districts, charter and independent schools interested in receiving state support for their 2021-22 school year testing programs must fill out the NC DHHS K-12 Testing Program Opt-in Form by the required date of September 13, 2021. This form has been sent to school/district administrators and should be completed once per school/district. Districts (LEAs) should complete the form on behalf of ALL schools in their district. Individual schools within a district may opt-out of the districts testing program at district leadership’s discretion; however, schools within a district should NOT complete the opt-in form. Once this form is completed, NC DHHS will contact the point-of-contact listed for next steps.

Option 1: State-Contracted Vendor Program

The state vendor program is available throughout the 2021-22 school year at no cost for all public and private districts and schools on an opt-in basis to conduct testing of students and staff. We encourage schools to opt-in to the vendor program by the required deadline. However, schools/districts may request to join the vendor program after the deadline by emailing K12COVIDTesting@dhhs.nc.gov to express interest in registering.

The below table summarizes the state-contracted vendor offerings.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Headquarters</th>
<th>MAKO Medical Laboratories</th>
<th>Concentric by Ginkgo</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Headquarters</td>
<td>Raleigh, NC</td>
<td>Boston, MA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regions served*</td>
<td>State Board of Education Regions 1-4 (Northeast, Southeast, North Central, Sandhills)</td>
<td>State Board of Education Regions 5-7 (Piedmont-Triad, Southwest, Northwest, Western)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Test Modalities Offered</td>
<td>Routine Screening: 1. Pooled 2. Individual</td>
<td>Routine Screening: 1. Pooled (preferred) 2. Individual</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Diagnostic Testing:
1. Rapid antigen
2. PCR (results within 24 hrs)

**State-Contracted Vendor Program Requirements**

All schools/districts who are interested in participating in this program must fulfill the following requirements:

1. **Testing Point-of-Contact** – Identify one staff member who will serve as the liaison between the school/district and NC DHHS as well as between the school/district and the vendor
2. **On-site storage** – Vendors will require storage space on school(s) campus(es) to store equipment during testing events
3. **Parent / Guardian consent** – Obtain consent prior to testing students and notify parents/guardians when testing has been performed
4. **Plan for Safe Isolation and Quarantine** – We encourage schools to closely consider additional support needs for historically marginalized or vulnerable groups

*Vendors may serve schools in different regions based on school needs, at NC DHHS’s determination*

Depending on the specific vendor available in your school/district’s region, schools may need to be responsible for additional requirements.

Schools /districts who opt-in to the vendor program should be prepared to provide the following information to vendors and NC DHHS teams.

1. Type and frequency of testing desired from vendor (see CDC screening testing recommendations)
2. Physical location of testing on school(s) campus(es)
3. Day(s) and time(s) for testing, including holiday schedule
4. Building entry, badge and access (during and after hours, as needed) requirements for vendor staff
5. Vendor staff parking, break area and bathroom access
6. Interpreter requirements
7. Equipment requirements (tables, chairs, etc..) Vendor will provide test supplies
8. Emergency protocols of which vendors should be informed (e.g. inclement weather, active shooter, etc.)

**Option 2: Independent Testing**

Public and private schools/districts who would like to perform diagnostic testing or screening testing on their own or in partnership with a non-state sponsored vendor may do so. Schools
interested in performing independent testing may request test kits directly from NC DHHS or elect to receive funds to purchase their own testing resources.

Districts and schools may request tests for any of the options below:
1. **Diagnostic testing** for all individuals, including students and school staff, who are symptomatic or had known exposure to a confirmed positive case, and/or
2. **Routine (e.g., once weekly) screening testing** of all students and adults – including teachers and staff (see CDC screening testing recommendations)
3. **Screening testing** for athletes, coaches, higher risk activities (i.e., chorus and band), and support staff on a regular, routine basis (e.g., weekly) and / or within 48 hours prior to events or tournaments
4. **Holiday or Break testing** for students and staff within 48 prior to return to school
5. **Special event testing** for students, staff and attendees within 48 hours prior to event

NC DHHS is currently supplying interested districts and schools with Abbott BinaxNOW Rapid Antigen test kits. All districts and schools interested in requesting these tests must meet the requirements, outlined below. Once the interested district or school has a plan in place to meet all requirements, they should complete the opt-in form shared with their school or district leadership and elect the independent testing option.

Some districts/schools may choose to conduct independent testing with self-supplied test kits or a non-state contracted vendor. These districts/schools should still complete the NC DHHS opt-in form, as expenses may be eligible for state funding. Note that testing requirements and process may vary based on test type. Please review manufacturer or vendor requirements and ensure that your district/schools can meet specifications prior to submitting the NC DHHS opt-in form. Districts/schools conducting independent testing will also need to meet **requirements for reporting** results daily to state or local public health.

**Process to Request State-supplied Test Kits**
A district or school interested in receiving tests for diagnostic or screening testing from NC DHHS must:

1. Review the **readiness checklist** and define a plan to meet all requirements
   
   *Interested LEAs must communicate with schools in their district to identify interested schools and submit one (1) request*

2. Communicate intent to provide testing to local health department point of contact and share/amend plan if directed by them.  
   
   *Formal LHD approval or sign-off is not required to perform tests*

3. Complete the NC DHHS **StrongSchoolsNC K-12 Testing Program Opt-in Form**
   
   *Form due by September 13th, 2021 to receive preferred assistance from NC DHHS*

NC DHHS reviews opt-in forms on a rolling basis and will contact your district/school with more information about how to request testing resources within 48 hours.
Requirements to Request State-Supplied Test Kits

All districts and schools interested in receiving state-supplied rapid antigen test kits must complete all eight (8) of the following requirements in order to receive approval from DHHS for their distribution of test kits.

1. **CLIA Certificate of Waiver** – Obtain an approved CLIA certificate of waiver if independently testing, or partner with an entity with a CLIA certificate if the partner is doing the testing.

2. **Physician Standing Order** – Elect to use the Statewide Order for testing, or secure a signed physician standing order that is compliant with NC Board of Medicine and Board of Nursing requirements for a standing order. Please note, an appropriately licensed individual, such as an RN school nurse, must provide oversight for testing as described in the Statewide Order.

3. **Training** – Ensure all testing personnel have completed training modules

4. **Parent / Guardian consent** – Obtain consent prior to testing students and notify parents/guardians when testing has been performed

5. **Reporting** – Verify ability to complete DHHS reporting requirements

6. **PPE** – Maintain an adequate supply of PPE to perform tests

7. **Medical Waste** – Adhere to standards to properly handle and dispose of medical waste

8. **Plan for Safe Isolation and Quarantine** – We encourage schools to closely consider additional support needs for historically marginalized or vulnerable groups

Districts and schools can choose to meet these requirements independently or partner with a provider, laboratory or other similar organization that assures compliance. When partnering with another agency who is performing the testing process many of these requirements may be met by the agency. More detailed information about each requirement is provided in the FAQ.

NC DHHS will provide the following additional resources to support interested Districts and Schools electing to perform independent testing:

- Monthly office hours to answer questions from interested or enrolled sites. Please email K12COVIDTesting@dhhs.nc.gov to request to be added to the call.
- Weekly DHHS-hosted training sessions on test results reporting platform, eCATR PTR. Please email CATR@dhhs.nc.gov to be added to the invitation
- Bi-weekly office hours for school nurses where testing will be included as a routine topic

1 School health staff and schools administrators may request 1-2 months work of PPE at a time through the NCDHHS form linked here: https://nc.readyop.com/fs/4diu/96df

**Items 1-6 are PPE Supplies:** Disposable masks, washable masks, N95 masks, Disposable gowns, washable gowns, face shields, gloves, thermometers, etc. The form will allow for up to 2000 of each of these items to be ordered.

**Items 7-10 are Cleaning/Hygiene Supplies:** Hand Sanitizer, Soaps, and Disinfectant Wipes. The form will allow for up to 12 of each of these to be ordered.

If your school / district requires more than the form allows, please note the full amount, and NC DHHS will try to fulfill as inventory allows. For more info on PPE orders, please contact your School Health Nurse Consultant.
Add-on for Public Schools: Funding for Temporary School Health Staff

LEAs and charters who elect to participate in either Option 1. State Vendor Program or Option 2. Independent Testing will be eligible to receive funding to hire temporary school health staff for the 2021-22 school year.

NC DHHS will provide schools/districts, who opt-in and meet the requirements of this program, with funds to hire a registered nurse (RN), licensed practical nurse (LPN), and/or unlicensed assisted personnel (UAP). These staff will primarily assist with the COVID-19 testing program and related COVID response but may also be available to perform other crucial school health needs, such as health related screening programs and other school health program activities.

Staff Funding Program Requirements

To receive funds, schools/districts must also complete the following requirements:

1. **Public School** – Verify that your school/district is a LEA or public charter school
2. **Testing** – Verify that your school/district is performing screening testing through the state vendor program or independent testing program by completing the opt-in form
3. **School Nurse** – Ensure that upon receiving the funds, your school/district will hire a registered nurse (RN) if a full time RN is not currently employed
4. **Reporting** – Submit to NCDHHS information regarding number, type and job responsibilities for staff hired using state funds via a future manner identified by NCDHHS.

LEAs and charter schools who opt-in to receive staffing funds will be contacted via email with more information. Resources to support implementation of health care teams and job descriptions are available at the [DPH School Nursing Support webpage](#) (Healthcare Teams in the School Setting) or from your [School Health Nurse Consultant](#).
Readiness Review Checklist for Districts and Schools Requesting State-Supplied Test Kits

District or schools interested in conducting diagnostic and/or screening testing using the free, opt-in test kits from NC DHHS must review and develop a plan to meet the below requirements, either themselves, or by collaborating with a partner organization.

Please direct questions to your regional school nurse consultant.

☐ CLIA Certificate of Waiver: The site has received a CLIA Certificate of Waiver OR has partnered with an entity to do testing who has a CLIA Certificate of Waiver to perform tests.

* A CLIA certificate of waiver allows non-laboratory facilities to perform FDA-waived tests, such as antigen tests for COVID-19. Requirements for the certificate are to complete the application linked above, pay the $180 certification fee (valid for 2 years) and follow the manufacturer’s instructions for the test that you are performing. The application process usually takes about 5 days.

☐ Physician Standing Order: The site has acquired a signed standing order for COVID-19 testing with the Abbott BinaxNOW from a physician, that is compliant with NC Board of Medicine and Board of Nursing requirements for a standing order or has elected to use the statewide standing order.

* For most entities, the statewide order is a sufficient and easy way to meet this request. Please note, the standing order should be reviewed by all testers and available in the testing setting. Compliance with all components of a standing order is required. All locations performing ANY testing must have a licensed supervising clinician (i.e. registered nurse) employed for oversight of the testing program. Other staff (including non-clinical staff) may perform the BinaxNOW tests as long as they have completed the BinaxNOW training modules.

☐ PPE: The site has acquired an adequate supply of PPE and will be able to procure additional PPE as is needed. Additionally, the appropriate staff that will be administering the tests have reviewed CDC guidance on the use of PPE.

* Personnel collecting specimens or within 6 feet of individuals suspected to have COVID-19, a surgical or procedural mask, eye protection, gloves and gown. Gloves should be changed between handling of specimens.

☐ Training Requirements: The site has ensured that all personnel administering Abbott BinaxNOW test kits have completed all necessary training modules.

* Testing personnel do not need to be clinical or medical professionals. Any non-medical personnel performing tests must be operating under the supervision of a licensed medical professional and complete the required Abbott training videos (Modules 1-4). Trainings take approx. 10 mins to complete. Modules 5-6 (9 mins) are optional.
Communication, Consent and Notification Processes: The site has identified processes to communicate testing program to families and staff, acquire testing consent and notify individuals of their results.

Reporting Requirements: The site has trained all necessary staff on how to appropriately report test results daily to state or local public health. Options for electronic reporting can be found at Getting Started with Automated Reporting: NC DHHS COVID-19.

Medical Waste: The site has a mechanism to safely dispose of used testing material. Other entities conducting antigen tests have collaborated with local hospitals, used Biohazard bags/containers or contracted with SteriCycle or another medical waste pick up.

Plan for Safe Isolation and Quarantine: The site has a plan in place to provide additional support needs for historically marginalized or vulnerable groups.

Ongoing Requirements: The site will adhere to the following ongoing requirements:
- Testing personnel will adhere to the written Instructions for Use (IFU) provided by the manufacturer in the test package insert.
- Ensure NC DHHS has up-to-date information on test administrators and locations.
- Abide by the infectious waste disposal criteria.
- Acquire consent for all individuals being tested, or their parent/guardian.
- Submit all required data elements to DHHS at least every 24 hours.
- Retain documentation related to the testing program for at least 2 years.
- Cooperate with their LHD on contact tracing as advised in the StrongSchoolsNC Public Health Toolkit and consider developing a contact tracing plan as advised in the StrongSchoolsNC COVID-16 Contact Tracing Procedures for K-12 Schools.
- Review and stay up-to-date on the CDC’s recommendations for K – 12 testing.