StrongSchoolsNC

NCDHHS K-12 COVID-19 Testing Program Guidance

Please note: The below information pertains specifically to the NCDHHS StrongSchoolsNC Testing Program. For the most up-to-date K-12 COVID-19 testing guidance, refer to CDC Guidance.

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

**Audience:** This 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.

With the extension of federal funding to support K-12 COVID-19 testing, NCDHHS is continuing support for school-based testing during the 2022-23 school year. This document provides key testing-related definitions, details the types of testing schools may elect to perform, the support available for these testing modalities and provides answers to frequently asked questions (FAQs). In consultation with their Local Health Departments (LHDs), school leaders can determine their own local approaches to administering COVID-19 tests at their discretion.

For more information about the StrongSchoolsNC COVID-19 Testing Program, please visit [covid19.ncdhhs.gov/SchoolTesting](http://covid19.ncdhhs.gov/SchoolTesting). This webpage contains regularly updated information about the testing program and related funding opportunities, program announcements, and answers to frequently asked questions.

**Why Testing Matters**

The goal of school-based COVID-19 testing is to keep students and staff healthy and in the classroom. 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. Implementing a testing strategy along with promoting vaccination, ensuring students and staff know to stay home when they are sick, optimizing ventilation to improve air quality, reinforcing hand hygiene and respiratory etiquette, and following recommended cleaning procedures remain critical tools to slow the spread and lower the risk of COVID-19 in our communities.

**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), often referred to as PCR tests, and antigen tests. Please reference the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) [COVID-19 Testing Overview](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/testing/testing-overview.html) 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. 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.

**Screening testing** refers to testing done on someone without symptoms or known close contact with someone with COVID-19. The CDC no longer recommends routine screening testing in K-12 schools. However, at a high COVID-19 Community Level, K-12 schools and ECE programs can consider implementing screening testing for students and staff for high-risk activities (for example, close contact sports, band, choir, theater); at key times in the year, for example before/after large events (such as prom, tournaments, group travel); and when returning from breaks (such as, holidays, spring break, at the beginning of the school year). Screening programs should include both vaccinated and unvaccinated people.

Screening testing should be done in a way that ensures the ability to maintain confidentiality of results and protect privacy. Consistent with state legal requirements and [Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA)](https://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/ferpa/index.html), K-12 schools and ECE programs should obtain parental consent for minor students and assent/consent from students themselves, when applicable.

### NCDHHS K-12 2022-23 Testing Program: Overview

In April 2021, the CDC released funding to states to provide COVID-19 testing and support. Since the release of initial funding, the CDC has provided an extension to ensure support can also be provided in the 2022-2023 school year. NCDHHS 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>
</table>
| State-contracted vendor | - Match school/district with testing vendors  
- Advise schools/districts on their vendor implementation as needed | - Perform the test sample collection and processing  
- Obtain results of tests  
- Report results of tests to NCDHHS, school and parent/guardian | - Decide on testing plan and communicate with vendor  
- Collaborate on consent process  
- In some circumstances, school staff may elect to perform the reflex antigen test, as long as testing requirements are assured  
- Communicate results of tests to patient/family as applicable  
- Provide guidance on quarantine/isolation | Opt-in Form shared with school/district leaders. |
| Independent testing | - Provide free of charge tests to schools/districts | N/A | - Decide on testing plan  
- Assure compliance with all testing requirements, | Opt-in Form shared with school/district leaders. |
| At-home Testing | Provide free tests to schools/districts | N/A | Complete test ordering registration form
- Distribute the tests to students and staff | Opt-in Form shared with school/district leaders. |

| Add On: Funding to support K-12 testing in Public Schools | Provide funds for:
- Hiring staff
- PPE
- Hygiene and cleaning supplies
- Portable HEPA fan/filtration systems
- Public health events
- Promotion of vaccination for K12 population
- Mental/Behavioral Health support for students impacted by COVID-19 | N/A | Opt-in and complete draft budget for additional allowable expenses.
- 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. |

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**NCDHHS K-12 2022-23 Testing Program: Options and Operational Guidance**

Districts, charter, and independent schools interested in receiving state support for their 2022-23 school year testing programs must fill out the NCDHHS K-12 Testing Program Opt-in Form. This form was 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, NCDHHS will contact the point-of-contact listed for next steps.

**Option 1: State-Contracted Vendor Program**

The state vendor program is available throughout the 2022-23 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. Schools must opt-in to the vendor program to establish testing at their school site. The below table summarizes the services offered by the state-contracted vendors.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th><strong>MAKO Medical Laboratories</strong></th>
<th><strong>Concentric by Ginkgo</strong></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 5-8 (Piedmont-Triad, Southwest, Northwest, Western)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Test Modalities Offered</td>
<td>Routine Screening:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1. Individual PCR screening test</td>
<td>1. PCR (results typically within 48hrs)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Diagnostic Testing:</td>
<td>2. Antigen Tests (supplied for school staff to administer provided that the school meets the requirements)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staffing Model</td>
<td>Vendor staff manage end-to-end testing process.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

**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 NCDHHS 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

Depending on the specific vendor available in your school/district’s region, schools may need to be responsible for additional requirements. If administering professional point of care antigen tests, schools must comply with state requirements, including the CLIA waiver, full-time clinical
oversight (e.g., RN School Nurse) and testing under a standing order. Please note that the statewide standing order for COVID-19 testing was extended through December 31, 2023.

Schools/districts that opt-in to the vendor program should be prepared to provide the following information to vendors and NCDHHS 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)

**Option 2: Independent Testing**

Public and private schools/districts that 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 NCDHHS 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 hours prior to return to school
5. **Special event testing** for students, staff, and attendees within 48 hours prior to event

NCDHHS is currently supplying interested districts and schools with 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 NCDHHS
opt-in form, to ensure that your team gets access to the latest guidance and resources available through NCDHHS. Note that testing requirements and process may vary based on test type. Please review manufacturer or vendor requirements and ensure that your district/school can meet specifications prior to submitting the NCDHHS 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 NCDHHS 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; and

3. Complete the NCDHHS StrongSchoolsNC K-12 Testing Program Opt-in Form.

NCDHHS reviews opt-in forms on a rolling basis and will contact your district/school with more information about how to request testing resources.

**How do I order tests from?**
Test ordering will depend on the program your school opted into, and the type of test requested. Please see the table below for a summary:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program Type</th>
<th>Professional point-of-care Antigen Tests</th>
<th>PCR Tests</th>
<th>At-Home Tests</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vendor Program</td>
<td>Vendor portals (i.e., MAKO, Ginkgo)*</td>
<td>Diagnostic: Vendor portals (i.e., MAKO, Ginkgo)</td>
<td>Smartsheets ordering form</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Screening: Vendor provides and administers PCR tests</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent Program</td>
<td>Smartsheets ordering form</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At-Home Only Program</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Even if acquiring antigen testing through a vendor, schools must ensure they meet all requirements to administer professional point-of-care tests.

For more information on at-home testing, please see the at-home testing guidance.
**Requirements to Request State-Supplied Test Kits**

All districts and schools interested in receiving state-supplied rapid antigen test kits must complete all nine (9) 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 Standing 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.

**3. Clinical Oversight** - An appropriately licensed individual, such as a registered nurse (RN), must provide oversight for testing as described in the Statewide Order. A physician may provide a standing order for a school and provide clinical oversight for testing.

**4. Training** – Ensure all testing personnel have completed training modules and are competent.

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

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

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

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

**9. 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.

**Option 3: At-home Testing**

NCDHHS is offering rapid at-home antigen testing supplies to support school testing efforts. At-home tests can be requested by schools at no cost and distributed to students and staff for use at home. Use cases include:

- Close contact notification testing
- At-home testing of symptomatic individuals
- Return from break, holiday, or special events screen testing

For more information about at-home testing kit distribution to students and staff, please refer to the at-home testing guidance document.
Add-on for Public Schools

LEAs and charters who elect to participate in one or more of Option 1 (State Vendor Program), Option 2 (Independent Testing), or Option 3 (At-home Testing) will be eligible to receive add-on funding for the 2022-23 school year.

Temporary School Health Staff:

NCDHHS 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-19 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.

Additional allowable uses of the funds, including mental and behavioral health support initiatives, are listed in the above table.

Add-on 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

Additional Requirements for Staff Funding

If requesting to use add-on grant funds to support hiring additional staff, the following requirements must also be met:

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 School Nursing Support webpage (Healthcare Teams in the School Setting) or from your School Health Nurse Consultant.

Appendix: 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 NCDHHS 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 rapid antigen tests 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.

☐ **Clinical Supervision**: All locations performing ANY testing must have a licensed supervising clinician (i.e. registered nurse) available for oversight of the testing program. Other staff (including non-clinical staff) may perform the antigen tests as long as they have completed the appropriate 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 antigen test kits have completed all necessary training modules and are competent. 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 required training videos.

☐ **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: NCDHHS 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:** 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 NCDHHS 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.
  - Review and stay up-to-date on the CDC’s recommendations for K–12 testing.