

August 24, 2021

Memorandum to: Directors of Education
Secretary/Treasurers of School Authorities

From: Nancy Naylor
Deputy Minister

Subject: **COVID-19: School Testing Pilot Program**

Building off information shared in the Ministry of Education's August 3rd memo, *COVID-19: Health, Safety and Operational Guidance for Schools 2021-22*, we are writing with an update on a pilot program for COVID-19 testing initiatives that are being offered on a targeted basis to Ontario secondary schools.

Overview: School Testing Plan

The government's testing strategy in schools is grounded in guidance from the Office of the Chief Medical Officer of Health and supports close collaboration between local public health units, schools, and Ontario Health. When an individual is identified as needing testing under provincial guidance, where possible, they will be offered a testing approach that is as minimally invasive as possible (e.g. nasal, mouth and saliva testing).

School Boards should be working with their local Public Health Units to ensure all students know where local testing options exist. When tests are needed, they will be made quickly accessible through multiple approaches (e.g. assessment centres and community testing sites), with a focus on reducing barriers to access and recognizing the unique needs of certain communities and geographies. Operationalizing the school testing plan could include deployment of mobile vendors to school sites and making take-home self-collection kits available in certain schools.

School Testing Strategy: Pilot Initiative for Targeted Ontario Schools

Starting in September, as part of the overall school testing strategy in schools, the Ministry of Education (EDU)—in close partnership with Ontario Health, Ministry of Health and Ministry of Government and Consumer Services—will initiate a pilot program in targeted secondary schools. Through this pilot, students and staff who are vaccinated and asymptomatic will receive a take-home self-collection kit when they have been identified as a high-risk contact as part of an identified cohort or outbreak.

The pilot phase would launch the week of September 7th, 2021 for a total of eight weeks, ending on October 29th, 2021.

The pilot project is intended for vaccinated, asymptomatic high-risk contacts (both staff/students). However, students are not required to disclose their vaccination status in order to participate in the pilot. Participation in the pilot is voluntary for staff/students.

Students, staff and families will continue to have the option to seek testing through their local assessment centre/specimen collection centre or the option to isolate.

This testing approach is in addition to locally driven testing initiatives and may be expanded throughout the school year based on uptake, effectiveness, and demand.

Overview of Pilot Program:

- Take-home kits including instruction materials and a laboratory requisition will be made available by the first week of September.
- The number of kits provided to school sites will be based on an estimated 15% of secondary schools' enrolment.
- Schools will be responsible for receiving, storing, and distributing take-home self-collection kits.
- The principal (or school leader/designate) would distribute a kit to each individual in the identified class or cohort as identified and directed by local public health units.
- Take-home tests can be self-administered or administered by another person (eg. parent or caregiver) and returned to the school location.
 - Participating staff and students will have access to instructional videos on completing the take-home self-collection kit.
- Schools will be the drop-off location for completed and packaged specimens and will be provided drop-off boxes. An on-demand courier will pick up specimens from school locations. Completed and properly packaged specimens do not pose a safety risk.

Site Selection:

Targeted secondary schools located in 13 public health units were identified based on local public health context, including vaccination rates and recent historical data on positivity rates.

A mix of schools was identified within 13 public health units to achieve a diverse mix of geographies and a balance of school settings (i.e., considering factors such as location, enrolment size, proximity to local testing centres). Consideration was also given to site distribution across identified school boards. These factors were considered to draw experiences and lessons learned to inform potential expansion and a broader provincial roll-out.

See Appendix for a list of targeted school boards and corresponding public health units, as well as a list of identified schools.

While this pilot initiative builds off of best practices identified through locally driven initiatives run by community partners and public health units in Toronto and Ottawa, school boards in Toronto and Ottawa are not included in the pilot to avoid duplicating services that are already being made broadly available in these regions.

Next Steps:

The Ministry of Education will contact identified school boards and corresponding public health units to schedule regionally-based meetings beginning the week of August 23, 2021 to further discuss this initiative and roles and responsibilities for identified school boards.

Thank you for your partnership in implementing local testing initiatives for the upcoming school year.

Sincerely,

Nancy Naylor
Deputy Minister

- c: Executive Director, Association des conseils scolaires des écoles publiques de l'Ontario (ACÉPO)
- Executive Director, Association franco-ontarienne des conseils scolaires catholiques (AFOCSC)
- Executive Director, Ontario Catholic School Trustees' Association (OCSTA)
- Executive Director, Ontario Public School Boards' Association (OPSBA)
- Executive Director, Council of Ontario Directors of Education (CODE)
- Executive Director and Secretary-Treasurer, Association des enseignantes et des enseignants franco-ontariens (AEFO)
- General Secretary, Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association (OECTA)
- General Secretary, Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (ETFO)
- General Secretary, Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation (OSSTF)
- Chair, Ontario Council of Educational Workers (OCEW)
- Chair, Education Workers' Alliance of Ontario (EWAO)
- Co-ordinator, Canadian Union of Public Employees – Ontario (CUPE-ON)
- Executive Director, Association des directions et directions adjointes des écoles franco-ontariennes (ADFO)
- Executive Director, Catholic Principals' Council of Ontario (CPCO)
- Executive Director, Ontario Principals' Council (OPC)
- Dr. Kieran Moore, Chief Medical Officer of Health of Ontario
- Liz Walker, Office of Chief Medical Officer of Health (OCMOH)