

HHS National COVID-19 Testing Implementation Forum (NTIF)

Meeting #4

Topic: Testing Strategies for K-12 Schools

Thursday, September 24, 2020, 2-3:30 p.m. EDT

The Office of the Assistant Secretary for Health is hosting a series of meetings on COVID-19 testing to gather individual input from a wide range of stakeholders. The objective for this meeting was to discuss testing strategies for K-12 schools.

Action Items

- Future meetings will focus on testing in the context of K-12 schools again, and on reporting of test results.
- Further comments or questions may be sent to ntif@hhs.gov.

COVID-19 TESTING STRATEGIES FOR K-12 STUDENTS AND STAFF

A representative from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention presented on potential testing strategy considerations for schools as they reopen. The presenter emphasized that testing is an important component of a comprehensive COVID-19 mitigation strategy. Schools need to work closely with public health officials on testing guidance and implementation, and on protocols to follow when cases are detected. Decisions need to be made on who will be tested. Symptomatic individuals should be tested, and the next priority is testing asymptomatic close contacts of people who have tested positive. Schools need strategies for determining close contacts, for which the CDC offers guidance, and test results need to be reported to state or local public health departments, as well as to families.

A representative of the Rhode Island Department of Health presented on the testing regimen in the state, noting that Rhode Island has focused on testing in high-density urban settings, contact tracing, and promoting testing to at-risk groups such as young adults and people in high-contact professions. A testing program has also been specifically developed for K-12 schools. Tests for students and staff are currently being conducted at 15 sites outside schools but chosen for their accessibility, and there is a focus to ensure that that positive cases can be detected and confirmed quickly. In the future, Rhode Island hopes to administer tests within schools and take steps to help school nurses feel safer.

LARGE-SCALE TESTING STRATEGIES

A representative of the Duke-Margolis Center for Health Policy presented on strategies for surveillance testing. Repeated surveillance testing is needed in settings where people repeatedly congregate, including K-12 schools. A successful screening strategy needs to take into account local risks and the resources available and decide on actionable results. Wider-scale testing than currently available could be used to reduce infection rates nation-wide. Information on testing supply is needed to shape national testing strategies, and testing capacity should not be an obstacle to surveillance testing especially in the riskiest settings, like schools. Recommendations from the Duke-Margolis Center for Health Policy included: 1) work together to develop evidence-based and model-based guidelines for screening and surveillance testing, 2) expand pilot testing initiatives to build an evidence base for testing strategies, and 3) the federal government is needed to help develop coordinated plans to procure and distribute tests.

DISCUSSION

Participants discussed the importance of supply chain issues in regard to rapid testing, and that bottlenecks in the speed of data flow are also an important issue as testing scales up. Some participants recommended challenging manufacturers to help develop reporting systems, noting that those systems should include fields such as demographic data. Some participants also noted that a national system of regulations are needed that operate across manufacturers, and that quick adaptation is needed as many tests come online. Examples of increased testing and successful school reopening were presented during the discussion, and during these examples multiple participants noted that there are concerns about testing that include privacy.

The Assistant Secretary for Health said a future meeting of this forum would focus on test results reporting; he said another meeting would be devoted soon to K-12 school issues.