Maine Expands School-Based COVID-19 Testing to Support In-Person Learning

February 16, 2021

AUGUSTA— The Maine Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) and the Maine Department of Education (DOE) announced today new COVID-19 testing options to support schools in Maine, strengthening Maine's strategy that has effectively limited virus transmission in school settings.

The Departments announced today that the State has purchased 250,000 BinaxNOW rapid antigen tests and that they will prioritize these tests for schools, along with health care and long-term care sites, to expand regular testing in schools and support in-person learning. The tests are expected to arrive over the next three months and come in addition to 25,000 BinaxNOW tests that remain from the State's initial 2020 Federal distribution.

The BinaxNOW rapid antigen tests can detect coronavirus infection from a nasal swab sample in approximately fifteen minutes. The tests can support in-person learning by diagnosing COVID-19 in symptomatic individuals and enabling regular testing, or serial testing, of teachers and staff who are close contacts of COVID-positive individuals. Serial testing of asymptomatic teachers and staff who are deemed close contacts allows them to forego the need for quarantine for ten days and continue to provide in-person instruction, provided that they test negative. Serial testing of close contacts is supported by the Maine Center for Disease Control and Prevention (Maine CDC) and is used in health care, long-term care, and childcare facilities – prime settings for distribution of the new BinaxNOW tests.

To date, more than 80 school districts across Maine have received rapid tests. The Maine DOE nurse consulting team, along with the Maine CDC, will provide the support and technical assistance to schools that wish to implement additional testing as a strategy to advance in-person instruction. Schools must have a CLIA waiver and a nurse to administer the tests.

DHHS has also encouraged the state-supported "Swab and Send" sites that collect samples for the State's Health and Environmental Testing Laboratory (HETL) to provide PCR testing for school personnel and students who seek a diagnosis related to COVID-19. Each site can develop its own policy to prioritize these individuals, but ensuring teachers, staff, and students have access to timely, reliable testing will advance Maine's COVID-19 response.

> "Expanding COVID-19 testing in schools will further protect the health of Maine children, educators, and school staff, along with their broader communities," **said DHHS Commissioner Jeanne Lambrew.** "Quickly identifying cases and preventing outbreaks helps to keep schools and other settings safe, which is why testing is key to Maine's effective strategy to limit the spread of COVID-19."
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> "As a complement to existing safety protocols such as wearing masks, washing hands often, and physical distancing, expanded testing can help Maine school officials make informed decisions about how to keep their communities safe," **said Dr. Nirav D. Shah, Director of the Maine CDC.**
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> "We are grateful for the support from our colleagues at DHHS and CDC," **said Education Commissioner Pender Makin**. "They are providing another incredibly important resource that will add an additional safeguard to the already successful health and safety protocols Maine schools have been using."

The expanded testing options for Maine schools are consistent with new school guidance from the U.S. CDC. That guidance emphasizes a layered approach to COVID-19 mitigation strategies and is largely consistent with the strategy Maine put in place months ago to combat the spread of COVID-19 in school settings. The new federal guidance recognizes that in-person learning in schools that follow public health precautions can be conducted safely without increased transmission of COVID-19.

In July 2020, Maine DOE published a "Framework for Reopening Schools and Returning to In-Classroom Instruction" that includes six COVID-19 mitigation requirements to protect the health and safety of students, teachers, and staff and support a successful return to in-person instruction. Governor Janet Mills dedicated more than $329 million in Federal Coronavirus Relief Funds (CRF) to support schools in implementing these requirements to safely reopen last fall. The Maine Department of Education secured an additional $226 million in Elementary and Secondary Schools Emergency Relief Funding (ESSERF), which is provided through allocations, for public schools.

Further, the Mills Administration established a color-coded Health Advisory System that classifies counties' relative risk of COVID-19 transmission to assist schools as they continue with their plans to deliver instruction and support to students safely. The system is updated every two weeks and is based on a quantitative and qualitative review of the evidence of community transmission and safety of schools. Last Friday, February 12, 2021, the health advisory indicated that all counties in Maine are "green" for the purpose of in-person learning, subject to meeting the six requirements for in-person learning.

Maine's approach to school reopening and in-person learning is working. The rate of new cases of COVID-19 in school staff and students in Maine continues to be less than half of the statewide average (36 versus 81 per 10,000 in the last 30 days), and, as of February 11, only 33 (or 5 percent) of Maine's 610 schools had open outbreaks, the largest of which had 10 cases. As a result, the Administration will continue with its strategy, supplemented with additional testing, and urges school districts to continue to follow its requirements and recommendations.

> "Limiting COVID-19 transmission in schools is possible with many diligent layers of protection, including wearing of face coverings, regular hand washing, and physical distancing," **said Dr. Deborah Hagler, President of the Maine Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics**. "Evidence (//learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/reopening-schools-covid-19-brief) in Maine and across the country shows that distances of 3-6 feet in school settings, as recommended in AAP guidance (//services.aap.org/en/pages/2019-novel-coronavirus-covid-19-infections/clinical-guidance/covid-19-planning-considerations-return-to-in-person-education-in-schools/) , have been used without increases in community transmission. In-person learning, when conducted with these health and safety protocols, is fundamental to the health and development of children and adolescents and should be our goal."
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> "School boards across Maine have valued and supported the efforts of their schools to safely provide for their students and school community members," **said Maine School Board Association Executive Director Steve Bailey**. "We commend Maine's thoughtful and scientific approach that stays the course and adds additional support for testing, because we know that Maine's strategies are working."
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> "The superintendents and school leaders across our state have followed the experts and the science for safely providing in-person instruction, while ensuring the health and safety of their school communities," **said Maine School Superintendents Association Executive Director Eileen King**. "Maine's framework for return to in-person instruction and the color-coding system have guided their efforts, and we will continue to follow these strategies, which have proven successful."

With respect to COVID-19 vaccinations, the Mills Administration continues to assess Phase 1b, which includes frontline workers, as recommended by the U.S. CDC's advisory group. Identifying these workers and determining how they will be vaccinated is dependent upon vaccine supply, which is limited. For now, Maine continues to prioritize its limited vaccine supply to those who are 70 and older because data demonstrate they are most at risk of suffering or dying as a result of contracting COVID-19. To date, Maine has vaccinated 43 percent of Maine people who are 70 or older. Following the vaccination of these individuals, Maine plans to make people who are 65-69 eligible for vaccination given their increased risk of dying if they contract COVID-19.

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