



# COVID-19 Testing for the 2021- 2022 School Year

The Virginia Department of Health (VDH) and Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) are partnering to develop the Virginia School Screening Testing for Assurance (ViSSTA) program, which will offer COVID-19 testing to K-12 schools across the Commonwealth for the 2021 - 2022 school year. The ViSSTA program will primarily support screening testing. Screening testing is the regular testing of asymptomatic individuals to identify asymptomatic and presymptomatic cases of COVID-19 with the aim of catching cases early and stopping further transmission. Through the program, VDH/VDOE will match school divisions/schools with testing vendors that will conduct on-site testing. VDH/VDOE will also provide schools with staff and resources to support program implementation and assist in COVID-19 mitigation as schools return to full in-person instruction. COVID-19 testing is intended for school students, staff, and teachers and will be voluntary; only individuals who consent will be tested.

## Why conduct COVID-19 screening testing in schools?

### Create Resilient Schools

The [CDC](#) and VDH recommend implementing COVID-19 mitigation measures to keep students, staff, and teachers safe while in school. Research supports the value of screening testing to limit spread and increase caregiver confidence in sending children back to school:

- A [study conducted](#) by Mathematica, supported by The Rockefeller Foundation, found that weekly testing of all students, teachers, and staff can reduce in-school infections by an estimated 50%.<sup>1</sup>
- [Virginia Commonwealth University](#) conducted a statewide poll in May 2021 to understand parents' hesitations to sending children back to school. Over half of parents (56%) said conducting regular COVID-19 tests on teachers would increase their willingness to send their children back to school in the fall, while 44% said regular testing of students would increase their confidence.

While Spring 2021 has brought encouraging news with increasing vaccination rates and decreasing case counts, testing is a minimally-invasive tool that can help keep children, staff, and teachers safe without interfering with normal school operations or classroom life. Fall 2021 will bring many uncertainties as many school-aged children will remain unvaccinated, the impact of new variants remains unknown, and schools change their approach to existing mitigation measures. Schools have an opportunity to build their testing infrastructure now, so they are prepared to meet the moment should changes in the environment occur in the fall.

### Support Equitable Access to Education and Health Resources

COVID-19 has disproportionately affected certain groups, such as people of color and individuals who earn lower incomes. These individuals may be more likely to live in an area that is medically underserved, and therefore, less likely to have access to healthcare resources in the



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community. Children are particularly impacted by [social determinants of health](#) and schools can play an important role in providing equitable access to healthcare resources, such as testing, to vulnerable groups.

Additionally, every student deserves to feel safe during school, including children who are considered higher risk due to underlying health conditions. Screening testing programs provide a layer of protection that can help ensure these students have equal access to the classroom. This prevention layer is even more critical as many schools relax other mitigation measures such as mask-wearing and as many children remain unvaccinated.

## How will VDH and VDOE support schools that conduct testing?

Through a CDC grant, VDH/VDOE will partner to provide testing vendors, supplies, staffing, and incentives with the goal of maximizing resources available to schools to navigate full in-person instruction in the fall and minimizing added work to existing school staff.

- **Contractors to conduct pooled testing:** VDH will contract with vendors that provide pooled testing. Pooled testing is a testing method in which samples from many individuals (e.g., a classroom) are combined for faster processing. Vendors will provide end-to-end services for testing, including: providing testing supplies, conducting testing on-site, and notifying results.
- **School-based and regional staff:** VDH/ VDOE will fund additional staff that schools require to support the testing program. This might include additional school-based nurses to advise on medical matters and mitigation/containment and administrative staff to support coordination.
- **Technology and supplies:** VDOE can provide funding for supplies to implement the program including technology resources and infrastructure (e.g., outdoor tents).
- **Specialized event support:** Testing plans may include requests for staff and testing supplies to help schools safely hold extracurricular activities (e.g., athletics, performing arts) and events such as proms and graduation ceremonies.
- **Containment and mitigation support:** VDH will assist schools in responding to school-based cases and make resources available to advise on case-specific questions.

## What are the next steps?

**School divisions should indicate their intent to participate in the testing program to VDH/VDOE by July 1.** VDH/VDOE will distribute a survey to all Superintendents via email to capture this information. School divisions are asked to complete the survey as fully as possible to assist in matching resources and vendors to schools; however, VDH is able to provide additional planning support to help divisions develop a program that is tailored to their purposes. In the interim, any school divisions/schools with questions may contact Dominique Jones ([dominique.jones@vdh.virginia.gov](mailto:dominique.jones@vdh.virginia.gov)) or Jyll Turner ([jyll.turner@vdh.virginia.gov](mailto:jyll.turner@vdh.virginia.gov)), VDH K-12 Testing Coordinators.

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