

# Virginia Department of Health (VDH) Test to Stay Guidance for K-12 Schools and Early Care and Education (ECE) Settings

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## Introduction

Test to Stay (TTS) is a practice that allows close contacts of individuals with COVID-19 who are not up to date on COVID-19 vaccines to continue to attend in-person school during their quarantine period, provided they have serial negative COVID-19 tests and remain asymptomatic. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) advises that K-12 schools may consider the use of TTS to minimize the impact of quarantine and limit school absences after a SARS-CoV-2 exposure in the K-12 school setting, based on [several investigations of TTS in K-12 schools](#) showing low SARS-CoV-2 transmission within the school. Currently, the CDC is evaluating the use of TTS in the early care and education (ECE)/ child care setting, where repeated quarantines after a SARS-CoV-2 exposure continue to place a significant burden on families and ECE programs.

The following guidance applies to both K-12 Schools and Early Care and Education (ECE) Programs.

[Traditional quarantine](#) should be used if the program does not have the resources to participate in TTS, if the child does not have permission to participate in TTS from a consenting adult, for children under the age of 2, or for individuals who are unable or unwilling to wear a mask as recommended (with exceptions for eating, drinking, and sleeping).

## Section 1: Key Definitions

- [COVID-19 Symptoms](#)
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## COVID-19 Symptoms

All students and staff should monitor for the development of [COVID-19 symptoms](#). Symptoms

may range from mild to severe and often develop 2-14 days after exposure. The list below is not comprehensive, and individuals may use the [CDC Symptoms Self-Checker](#) to further assess their symptoms.

- Fever or chills
- Cough
- Shortness of breath or difficulty breathing
- Fatigue
- Muscle or body aches
- Headache
- New loss of taste or smell
- Sore throat
- Congestion or runny nose
- Nausea or vomiting
- Diarrhea

If any emergency warning signs are present, including trouble breathing, persistent pain or pressure in the chest, new confusion, inability to wake or stay awake, pale, gray, or blue-colored skin, lips, or nail beds, or any other severe or concerning symptoms, please call 911 or seek care immediately.

Individuals who develop symptoms of COVID-19 are not eligible for TTS, even if they have a negative test for COVID-19 or are evaluated by a healthcare provider and have an alternate diagnosis. These individuals must follow procedures for traditional quarantine ([Protocol A-2](#)).

### **Definition of a Close Contact**

An individual is more likely to get COVID-19 if they are in close contact with a person who has COVID-19 while they are contagious or still able to spread illness to others.

[Close contact](#) means:

- Being within 6 feet of a person who has COVID-19 for a total of 15 minutes or more over a 24-hour period, or
- Having direct exposure to respiratory secretions (e.g., being coughed or sneezed on, sharing a drinking glass or utensils, kissing)

People who are exposed to someone with COVID-19 after they completed at least 5 days of isolation are not considered close contacts.

People with COVID-19 can pass the COVID-19 virus to their close contacts starting from 2 days before they become sick (or 2 days before they test positive if they never had symptoms).

Exception: In indoor and outdoor K-12 settings, a student who was within 3 to 6 feet of an infected student is not considered a close contact as long as both students wore well-fitting

masks the entire time. This exception may also be applied to school buses when the following criteria are met:

- Documented seating charts, and
- Assurance that masks are worn and students remain in assigned seats, either via video monitoring if available, or attestation from the bus driver or monitor.

The K-12 exception does not apply to teachers, staff, or other supervising adults in the school setting. This means that the standard close contact definition is applied when assessing exposure in a K-12 setting that involves a student with an infected adult or an exposed adult.

### **Close Contact Exemptions for Testing, Isolation, and Quarantine**

Certain close contacts may be exempt from TTS and traditional quarantine. These include the following:

- **Asymptomatic close contacts who recently had COVID-19:** People who have had confirmed COVID-19 in the past 6 months (testing positive using a [viral test](#)), as long as they do not develop new symptoms. This is different from [CDC Quarantine Guidance](#) that defines this period as 90 days. Of note, VDH recommends that the following groups continue to follow CDC guidance using a 90 day period: healthcare workers and staff or residents of long term care facilities, correctional facilities, or homeless shelters.
- **Asymptomatic close contacts who are [up to date](#) on COVID-19 vaccines:** Up to date with vaccines means a person has received all doses in the primary series and all boosters recommended, when eligible. VDH generally recommends quarantine for anyone who is not up-to-date if they come into close contact with a person who is infectious with COVID-19. However, to minimize disruption to in-person learning, students ages 5-11 years who completed their COVID-19 primary vaccine series but have not yet received a booster can forgo quarantine until the start of the 2022-2023 academic school year. At that time, all students should follow general [CDC Quarantine Guidance](#), and should quarantine if they are not up to date on COVID-19 vaccines (including booster doses, when eligible). Therefore, those ages 12 years and older who have received all [recommended vaccine doses](#) (including [boosters](#) and [additional primary shots](#) for some immunocompromised people), are not required to quarantine after a close contact exposure.
- **K-12 close contacts who were masked and physically distanced:** Students who are exposed to a COVID-19 positive student in indoor or outdoor K-12 settings while both individuals were masked and spaced at least 3 feet apart.
- **K-12 school bus close contacts who were masked and physically distanced:** Students who are exposed to a COVID-19 positive student in a school bus while both individuals were masked and spaced at least 3 feet apart, as long as the following

conditions are met in the school bus: documented seating chart and assurance that masks are worn and students remain in assigned seats via video monitoring or attestation from the bus driver or monitor.

- **Contact of a close contact:** People who have had close contact with a person who was a close contact to someone with COVID-19 (“contact of a contact”). If the contact tests positive for COVID-19, then the person should follow TTS or quarantine protocols.

### **School or ECE Program Eligibility Criteria for Test to Stay**

In accordance with [CDC guidance](#) and [COVID-19 Community Level Guidance](#), VDH recommends that all ECE programs consider implementing [layered prevention strategies](#) based on the COVID-19 Community Level, including vaccination of eligible individuals, masking of individuals 2 years of age or older, physical distancing and cohorting, ventilation, handwashing and respiratory hygiene, and cleaning and disinfecting. Programs that implement TTS should consider the potential additional risk of COVID-19 transmission introduced by allowing known close contacts to remain in the program when making decisions about the right combination of prevention strategies.

In addition, VDH recommends that schools have the following:

- Adequate resources to conduct TTS; including a designated school point of contact who will be responsible for managing testing data, is capable of providing guidance to students and parents, and to whom questions can be referred.
- Adequate resources to track and report information to the health department as requested.

### **Individual Eligibility Criteria for Test to Stay**

VDH recommends that TTS only be used for individuals aged 2 years or older. Children less than 2 years of age are not eligible to participate as they are not able to wear masks and there are no rapid COVID-19 antigen tests licensed for use in this age group. Students, teachers, and staff are eligible to participate if they meet the criteria below.

- **Asymptomatic Close Contact of an Individual with COVID-19** - An individual who has been identified as a close contact AND remains asymptomatic, who would otherwise be directed to quarantine according to routine protocol. The exposure can be one that occurred at the school or ECE Program, in the community, or in the household. The exposure may be masked or unmasked.
- **Remains Asymptomatic** - Has not developed any signs or symptoms of COVID-19 at any time since their exposure.

- **Not [Up to Date](#) on COVID-19 Vaccines and Recommended to Quarantine, including:**
  - Students age <5 years who are not vaccinated;
  - Students age 5-11 years old who have not received the primary series (two doses) of vaccines for COVID-19;
  - Students, teachers, and staff age 12 years and older who have not received all [recommended vaccine doses](#), including [boosters](#) and [additional primary shots](#) for some immunocompromised people.
  
- **Able to Mask-** Able to wear a mask while at the school or ECE program during the 5 day TTS quarantine period followed by 5 additional days of mask use (exceptions for eating, drinking, and sleeping). Schools and ECE programs implementing Test to Stay should consider privacy and confidentiality concerns for students participating in Test to Stay in light of any other school masking policies.
  
- **Remains Asymptomatic** - Has not developed any signs or symptoms of COVID-19 at any time since their exposure.
  
- **Consents to Participation.** Consent should be provided by the individual (in the case of an adult teacher or staff member), or by the parent/guardian (in the case of a child under the age of 18). The participating individual or parent/guardian agrees to:
  - Sign the consent form to participate in TTS.
  - Conduct active monitoring for signs and symptoms of COVID-19 each day before and after school or ECE program attendance.
  - Immediately contact their or their child's healthcare provider and school if any signs or symptoms of COVID-19 develop.
  - Refrain from attending the school or child care facility (in the case of adult teacher or staff), or sending the participating child to the school or child care facility if any signs or symptoms of COVID-19 develop.
  - Notify the school or child care facility of any new or additional close contact exposure to an individual with COVID-19 or suspected COVID-19 that is identified while participating in Test to Stay.
  - Promptly leave or pick up their child from the school or ECE program, should they test positive or develop signs or symptoms of COVID-19 while at school.
  - Comply with public health recommendations for quarantine when not attending the school or ECE program. (i.e. Stay home away from others.)
  
- **No Special Circumstances** - If a school or ECE program is experiencing an outbreak of COVID-19 that has been difficult to control or is unusual in size or scope, regional and local epidemiologists may apply professional judgment and recommend that the TTS method be temporarily paused and traditional quarantine standards applied until the

situation is stabilized.

### Individuals NOT Eligible for Test to Stay

- Children less than 2 years of age
- Individuals who are up-to-date on COVID-19 vaccines (not necessary as these individuals do not need to quarantine)
- Individuals who test positive for COVID-19
- Individuals with signs or symptoms of COVID-19
- Individuals who are not able to wear masks
- All other individuals exempt from quarantine (see [Close Contact Exemptions](#) above)

### Section 2: Recommended testing and quarantine response protocols

- [Protocol A: For asymptomatic close contacts](#)
- [Protocol B: For individuals who test positive for COVID-19](#)
- [Protocol C: For symptomatic individuals](#)

Please see [Flowchart](#) for an overview of Test to Stay Guidance.

#### Protocol A: For asymptomatic close contacts

Close contacts who are asymptomatic, not up to date on COVID-19 vaccines, and not [exempt from TTS](#) and quarantine should follow Protocol A (see chart below.)

Close contacts who are up to date on COVID-19 vaccines and are asymptomatic do not need to follow Protocol A and may remain in the classroom and fully engaged in all activities. If any symptoms develop, they should immediately isolate at home and follow [Protocol C: For symptomatic individuals](#).

<b>Protocol A: For eligible asymptomatic close contacts</b>
<b>Eligible for Test to Stay:</b> Yes
<b>Brief Summary:</b> Eligible close contacts who are asymptomatic and do not qualify for the <a href="#">exemptions listed above</a> may opt to participate in TTS (Protocol A-1) or traditional quarantine (Protocol A-2).
<b>Protocol A-1: Test to Stay</b>
<b>Duration:</b> Five (5) days from the date of exposure (Exposure date = Day 0)
<b>Return to School:</b> Eligible close contacts may remain in school as long as all of the following conditions are met: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The individual remains asymptomatic</li></ul>

- The individual wears a mask all of the time, except when eating and drinking, for 10 days after the exposure. The individual must wear a mask during the five day TTS testing period (Days 1-5) and continue to wear a mask for 5 days afterwards (Days 6-10).
  - During meals, snacks, sleeping, and other unmasked periods, individuals in Test to Stay should be 6 feet away from others for 10 days after the exposure. To ensure confidentiality, VDH recommends that all students maintain 6 feet of distance between each other during unmasked periods.
- The individual takes a daily rapid test either in the morning before school or the evening prior to school, ideally after 7pm, and the result is negative each day.
  - Rapid testing may be performed at home with a proctored test (e.g. eMed Abbott BinaxNOW Antigen At Home Test Kit)
  - Rapid testing may be performed upon arrival at school (if driven to school by a parent or guardian and does not ride a school bus) if the school has resources to do so. If necessary, schools may consider allowing students who will test in the morning at school to ride the bus.
- The individual does not need to take a rapid test on mornings that fall on weekends or holidays (or the evenings prior); however, they must quarantine on these days (i.e. the individual is not to attend birthday parties, sporting events, or any other group activities on these days)
- The individual immediately isolates at home if they receive a positive test result (see [Protocol B](#) for individuals who test positive)
- The individual must have at least one negative rapid test after the last exposure to the individual with COVID-19 and before returning to in-person instruction.
- The individual must have at least one negative rapid test on or after the 5th day before being released from TTS.
- The individual monitors for [symptoms of COVID-19](#) for 10 days, and immediately isolates at home if symptoms develop (see [Protocol C](#) for symptomatic individuals)

**Notes:** If a student is unable to wear a mask in school (except when eating, drinking, or sleeping) then the student is not eligible for TTS and must follow traditional quarantine (Protocol A-2). While participating in TTS, the student should quarantine from all non-school related activities (i.e. birthday parties) and should not participate in sports practice and competitions until they have completed the 5-day testing regimen. However, students may participate in school-based extracurricular activities as long as they remain masked and physically distanced (>3 feet) for the full testing period.

In the case of a household exposure, the individual with COVID-19 isolating at home should minimize close contact with others in the household as much as possible. This includes having the person with COVID-19 stay in a separate bedroom and use a separate bathroom if possible, staying at least 6 feet apart, minimizing time spent with each other, wearing well-fitted masks, and improving air flow by opening a window. Those participating in Test to Stay after close contact with a household member with COVID-19 should count the date of last close contact with the individual with COVID-19 as Day 0. If the individual with COVID-19 is able to completely separate from the close contact during the isolation period, then the date of last contact (Day 0) is the last day the close contact was [exposed to the individual with COVID-19](#), which may be before the individual with COVID-19 ends home isolation. Complete

separation means not having [close contact exposure](#) the entire time the person with COVID-19 is isolating.

If the individual with COVID-19 is **not** able to completely separate from the household contact, then the exposure is considered **ongoing**. Complete separation means not having [close contact exposure](#) the entire time the person with COVID-19 is isolating at home. In cases of an ongoing household exposure, the [CDC recommends](#) that the exposed household contact begin quarantine at home immediately and continue to quarantine at home for an additional 5 days starting the day **after** the end of isolation for the person with COVID-19. If the household close contact in this case is eligible to participate in Test to Stay, they would begin the testing period and return to school **after** the household member's home isolation period is over. The individual must have at least one negative rapid test after the last exposure to the individual with COVID-19 (Day 0) and before returning to school or the ECE program.

### **Protocol A-2: Traditional Quarantine**

**Duration:** 5 days from the date of exposure, followed by 5 days of mask use.

**Return to School:** Close contacts who remain asymptomatic should quarantine at home for 5 days (Day 1-5), followed by 5 days of mask use after return to school (Days 6-10). It is recommended to test for COVID-19 5 days after the exposure.

- The individual should immediately isolate at home if they receive a positive test result (see [Protocol B](#) for individuals who test positive.)
- The individual should continue to monitor for [symptoms of COVID-19](#) for 10 days, and immediately isolate at home if symptoms develop (see [Protocol C](#) for symptomatic individuals.)

**Notes:** If an individual is unable to wear a mask, including all students <2 years of age, they should quarantine at home for the full 10 days.

Resources:

[VDH When to End Home Isolation and Quarantine Infographic](#)

[What to do if you were potentially exposed to coronavirus disease \(COVID-19\)](#)

**If an individual participating in TTS tests positive for COVID-19, they must immediately isolate themselves according to [existing isolation protocols \(Protocol B\)](#).**

### **Protocol B: For individuals who test positive for COVID-19**

Any individual who tests positive for COVID-19 - whether vaccinated or unvaccinated, close contact or not a close contact - should follow Protocol B (see chart below.) This includes individuals who have a positive test result during TTS.

A positive test may be a rapid test (at-home or performed in a pharmacy or healthcare facility) or a PCR test. For more information on testing please see [VDH COVID-19 Testing](#). A positive rapid test in an unvaccinated student exposed to COVID-19 during TTS does not require confirmatory PCR testing as per [CDC Guidance for Antigen Testing for SARS-CoV-2](#).

### **Protocol B: For individuals who test positive for COVID-19 (Isolation)**

**Eligible for Test to Stay:** No

**Brief Summary:** Individuals who test positive for COVID-19 must isolate at home for 5 days, followed by mask use for the next 5 days if there are no symptoms or symptoms are resolving. This applies to anyone who tests positive, even if they are fully vaccinated, regardless of the presence or absence of symptoms.

**Duration:** Minimum of 5 days of isolation from the start of symptoms or positive test result, followed by 5 days of mask use.

**Return to School:** Individuals who isolate for a positive test for COVID-19 may return to school when the following four criteria are met:

- At least 5 days have passed since symptoms first appeared, and
- At least 24 hours with no fever without fever-reducing medication, and
- Other symptoms are resolving, and
- Able to mask for the next 5 days.

If the individual tested positive and never had any symptoms, they may return to school when:

- At least 5 days have passed since the date of their first positive COVID-19 test, and
- They continue to have no symptoms since the test, and
- Able to mask for the next 5 days.

**Notes:** If an individual is unable to wear a mask, including those less than 2 years of age, they should isolate at home for the full 10 days from the start of symptoms or positive test result. A return-to-school note from a healthcare provider is NOT necessary. A negative test at the completion of isolation is NOT required nor recommended. The [CDC recommends](#) that if an individual has access to a test and wants to test, that the best approach is to use an antigen test towards the end of the 5-day isolation period, to collect the sample only if fever-free for 24 hours without use of fever-reducing medication and with other symptoms improving. If the test result is positive, the individual should continue to isolate until day 10. If the test result is negative, the individual can end isolation but should continue to wear a mask around others until day 10.

Resources:

[VDH When to End Home Isolation and Quarantine Infographic](#)  
[What to do if you have confirmed or suspected coronavirus disease \(COVID-19\)](#)

## Protocol C: For symptomatic individuals

Any individual (vaccinated or unvaccinated) who develops symptoms of COVID-19 must isolate at home. This includes individuals who develop symptoms while enrolled in TTS. The duration of isolation will depend on several factors including testing and evaluation by a healthcare provider.

### Protocol C: For symptomatic individuals (Isolation)

**Eligible for Test to Stay:** No

**Brief Summary:** Individuals who have [symptoms of COVID-19](#) must isolate at home. Duration of isolation will be dependent on testing and/or evaluation by a healthcare provider. If no testing or clinical evaluation is performed, then the individual must isolate at home for a minimum of 5 days, followed by 5 days of mask use if there are no symptoms or symptoms are resolving. Please see the [VDH Flowchart for K-12 and Child Care Parents](#) for further details.

**Duration:** Variable

**Return to School:** Please see the [VDH Flowchart for K-12 and Child Care Parents](#) for guidance on evaluation, testing, and return to school.

**Notes:** If a close contact is symptomatic but does not have COVID-19 (determined through testing and/or evaluation by a healthcare provider), they are no longer eligible for TTS and must instead follow traditional quarantine (Protocol A-2).

Resources:

[What to do if you have confirmed or suspected coronavirus disease \(COVID-19\)](#)

[VDH Flowchart for K-12 and Child Care Parents: What to do if my child is ill or exposed to COVID-19?](#)

## Frequently Asked Questions

### **Why are students enrolled in TTS allowed to participate in some extracurricular activities, but not sports practices or competitions?**

Close contact team sports and indoor sports are known to represent a higher risk for COVID-19 transmission. Extracurricular activities in which a student remains consistently and correctly masked and physically distanced (>3 feet) for the full testing period represent a much lower risk for COVID-19 transmission. For this reason, the safest option is for students who have had an exposure to COVID-19 to refrain from high risk activities like sports until they complete the 5 day testing period for TTS.

Once the 5 day testing period for TTS is complete, students can participate in sports as long as they can adhere to strict mask usage on days 6-10, including during play. If strict mask use is not possible, participating in sports should be delayed until after day 10. Schools and families should be aware that team sports or other extracurricular activities, especially indoor activities involving shouting or singing, increase the risk of SARS-CoV2 transmission.

### **Can a K-12 student attend before or after school care while participating in TTS?**

Similar to extracurricular activities, students may continue to attend before or after school care while participating in TTS as long as they are able to wear a mask consistently and correctly, remain >3 feet from others (or >6 feet from others while eating or drinking, see [VDH Isolation and Quarantine FAQs for K-12 Schools](#)), and have the school's approval to do so.

The school must have a plan in place for checking the student's test result, symptom status, and ability to wear a mask prior to allowing the student to enter before school care. If this is not feasible for the school, then the school may not allow the TTS participant to attend before school care.

### **If a student enrolled in Test to Stay develops symptoms, but has a negative test, may they still go to school?**

No. Any student who develops symptoms must isolate at home. Even if the student has a negative test and/or an evaluation by a health care provider finds an alternative diagnosis to explain the symptoms, the student must complete traditional quarantine at home. They are not eligible to continue to participate in TTS.

### **If an asymptomatic student in TTS has a positive rapid antigen test, do they require a confirmatory PCR test? What happens if a parent obtains a PCR test for their student and the result is negative?**

Students with a positive rapid test must isolate at home (see [Protocol B](#)) and are no longer eligible to participate in TTS. [CDC Guidelines](#) do not require confirmatory PCR testing if the person with the positive antigen test is 1) symptomatic, or 2) a close contact of a known case. Therefore, individuals in TTS (who are close contacts by definition) do not need a confirmatory

PCR. If a PCR is obtained anyway and is negative, the student is still no longer eligible to participate in TTS and must complete isolation at home.

**What happens if the 5th day of testing occurs during a weekend, holiday, or extended break?**

The individual must have at least one negative rapid test on or after the 5th day before being released from TTS. If the first day back to school or the ECE program following an extended break is 10 days or more after the exposure, the student does not need to be tested upon return to school provided that they have not experienced any symptoms.

**How will a parent/guardian conducting an at-home proctored COVID-19 test communicate the results to the school or child care center?**

VDH encourages schools and child care centers to develop a secure mechanism for receiving results from at-home proctored tests. Child care centers may also consider alternative options such as obtaining parental attestation of the test results before the individual may proceed with participation in school or child care.

**Can students participating in TTS also be tested through the ViSSTA program's screening testing?**

No. The Virginia School Screening Testing for Assurance program, or ViSSTA, is a COVID-19 screening testing program that excludes individuals with known symptoms or exposure to COVID-19. Since all students participating in Test to Stay have a known COVID-19 exposure (they are a close contact), they should not participate in ViSSTA screening testing. Once the student has completed the Test to Stay testing period, they may begin participating in ViSSTA screening testing again. They may rejoin screening testing on Day 6 after exposure (after completing the Test to Stay 5 day testing period). The same would apply to an individual returning to school after completing 5 days of at home quarantine after an exposure.

**Why is mask use required on weekends and holidays during Test to Stay when the student is not at school or the ECE program?**

The CDC recommends that for the first 5 days after an exposure those in quarantine stay home, away from others in the community, and wear a well-fitting mask around others at home if possible. This time frame is when the individual is considered most infectious, and masking at home may help protect high risk individuals (grandparents, young siblings, or individuals with high risk conditions.)

If an individual in Test to Stay tests negative 5 days after the exposure, they may leave the house, but should continue to wear a well-fitting mask around others at home and in public until 10 days after the exposure. The individual may still be infectious, and wearing a mask will protect others in the home, at school, and in public from being exposed to COVID-19. It is recognized that it is not always feasible for a student, especially a young child, to mask at home all of the time, so attempting to keep physical distancing in place between the student and high risk individuals as much as possible may be a reasonable alternative at home.

**If a student enrolls in Test to Stay after an exposure to a household member with COVID-19, when should the student start the testing period and return to in-person instruction?**

The individual participating in Test to Stay should begin the testing period after the last date of close contact exposure to the individual with COVID-19. If the individual with COVID-19 is **not** able to completely separate from the household contact, then the exposure is considered **ongoing**. In this case, if the individual with COVID-19 ended home isolation on Day 5, this counts as the last day of close contact exposure (Day 0) for the individual participating in Test to Stay. (The individual with COVID-19 may end home isolation on Day 5, assuming they have had no fever for 24 hours without use of fever-reducing medication and their other symptoms have improved.) The individual participating in TTS must have a negative COVID-19 test after the last close contact exposure to the individual with COVID-19 and before returning to in-person instruction.

**If a student identified as a close contact continues to be exposed to a household member with COVID-19 on Days 6-10 after the individual with COVID-19's home isolation has ended, does the student have to wait until after Day 10 to enroll in Test to Stay?**

No. If the individual with COVID-19 ended home isolation on Day 5, this counts as the last day of close contact exposure (Day 0) for the individual participating in Test to Stay, assuming they were not able to completely separate within the household. The individual participating in Test to Stay may return to school after having a negative COVID-19 test and then continue the Test to Stay testing period.

## Virginia Department of Health Test to Stay (TTS) Guidance Flowchart

