



# MSAD #49

8 School Street, Fairfield ME 04937 ~ Telephone 207.453.4200 ~ Fax 207.453.4208

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Dear Parents, Guardians and Caretakers,

The Maine Department of Education is encouraging school districts to adopt pooled testing for the 2021-2022 school year.

I've listed some of the advantages of pooled testing for our students, staff and families.

- **The testing timeframe is weekly for our students, and takes no longer than 15 minutes;**
- **Schools will be strongly encouraged to participate in the pooled testing program to protect those students for whom a COVID-19 vaccine has not yet been authorized. This will minimize education disruption and exclusion from extracurricular activities resulting from having to quarantine when identified as a close contact.**

Here is further testing information.

## **Frequently Asked Questions for Students, Parents and Families About the Pooled Testing Program**

### **What are the benefits of pooled testing when staff and some students are now being vaccinated?**

While children that are 12 and older are eligible to be vaccinated, there are many families that are hesitant or concerned about vaccinating their child, which will delay herd immunity among children 12 and over. Currently, children under the age of 12 are not eligible for the vaccine. While we know the vaccines are highly effective, there are "breakthrough" cases of COVID-19. These cases could impact other people. The pooled test is a PCR test, which is considered the "gold standard" of COVID-19 testing. It can detect the virus at incredibly low levels, catching COVID-19 asymptomatic individuals before they become symptomatic or infectious.

### **How is pooled testing conducted?**

Students and staff that participate in pooled testing are tested weekly. On testing day, the students and staff participating will each be given a short swab to swab themselves. Students as young as kindergarten are able to swab themselves with trained staff supervision. The swab is short and it is a shallow swabbing process comparable to picking one's nose. Each nostril is swabbed and the student swirls the swab four times per nostril.



The swabs are placed in one test tube together which creates the pool. An example of a pool is one individual classroom of students and any staff in that classroom (teacher, techs). The whole process takes 15 minutes or less and allows us to test students at a fraction of the cost of individual testing and at no cost to families or the school district (this is a state funded program).

The tube is then sent out to the laboratory via FedEx. The PCR testing method is completed on the swabs. This method is more sensitive in identifying positive cases as opposed to the rapid antigen tests. Results are returned back to the school within 24-48 hours. Staff and students do NOT need to quarantine while waiting for pooled test results unless they are showing signs and symptoms of COVID-19. All student information sent to the outside lab is completely confidential.

# How pooled testing works

## Step 1

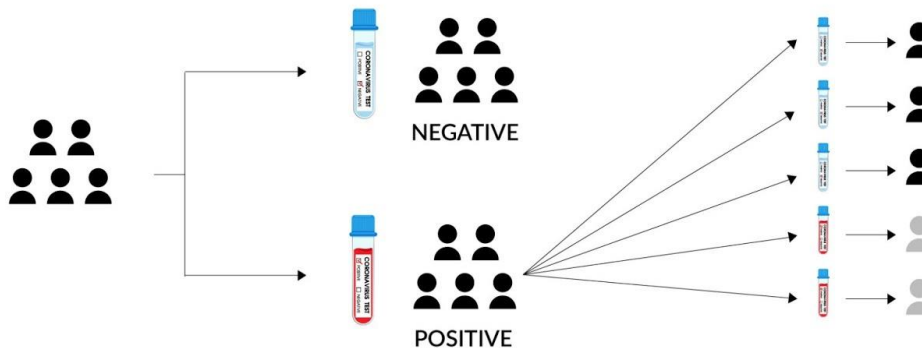
People are broken up into groups and a group is tested together

## Step 2

A combined sample from the group either test negative or positive

## Step 3

If a pooled test result is positive, people are tested individually to find the positive cases



### **What happens when there is a positive in the pool?**

If the test results of a particular pool (i.e. the 5th grade class and teacher) come back positive, then each student and staff member in that pool will receive the Abbott BinaxNOW rapid test to determine who the positive case is. Once the positive case is identified, the positive person will have to be isolated for 10 days and contact tracing will be completed to determine any close contacts at school.

The advantage of pooled testing is that the students/staff who participated in the pooled test will not have to quarantine despite being deemed close contacts. The reasoning behind this is because we have already obtained negative test results on these individuals via the rapid test and we can continue to monitor them for signs and symptoms of COVID-19 as they will continue to be part of the pooled testing on a weekly basis.

Any students or staff who opt out of pooled testing and are deemed close contacts in a classroom OR are unwilling to get follow-up BinaxNOW testing as part of a positive pool will need to stay out of school and quarantine for 10 days.

### **Can a parent of a child not participating in the pooled testing program have their child tested outside of school to get out of quarantine and return to school?**

No. A school should not accept a one-time test to get out of quarantine. The student placed in quarantine was not tested at the time the positive case was identified, nor would they be tested each week moving forward. Therefore, a one-time test is not helpful in monitoring the student.

### **Do individuals in a positive pool need to quarantine while they are awaiting individual-level test results?**

No, not unless they are symptomatic.

**Why does a school have to meet the 30% or greater participation requirement in order to decrease the spacing requirement between students?**

Screening testing provides a layer of protection. It has been shown to catch cases early and reduce transmission in the classrooms and community. With this added layer of protection, the Maine DOE will allow schools to reduce the physical distancing requirements, except for when students and staff are eating. For a school to reduce physical distancing, they must first have 30% of students and staff participating in weekly testing. In order for us to bring our entire student population back 5 days a week in the next school year, we need to have families and staff opt in now. The program is voluntary and nobody is being forced to participate.

**Do families need to complete consent forms each week a pooled test is conducted?**

No. Staff and parent/guardian consent forms only need to be completed once a year for participation in the program. The consent form is universal and covers pooled testing and any required follow-up testing. Students and staff are able to withdraw from the program at any time. It is an ongoing application process.

**Is the Abbott BinaxNOW rapid test accurate enough to be used as follow-up to the positive pool test, especially for asymptomatic children?**

Yes. The Maine CDC endorses its use in follow-up testing. No test is 100% accurate; however, BinaxNOW tests are effective at picking up those individuals with high viral loads (and who are assumed to be the most infectious) and are adequate for this purpose.

**Key Point to Take Away**

- The testing method is not uncomfortable and is completed by the students
- Those who participate in pooled testing will not be required to quarantine even if they are identified as a close contact of a confirmed positive case
- Those students and staff who are NOT fully vaccinated and choose NOT to participate in pooled testing WILL need to quarantine if they have had close contact with someone who tests positive COVID-19.

Below is a link that gives you additional Q/A to questions you may continue to have concerning Pooled Testing.

[Please Click Here for More Information](#)

Please don't hesitate to reach out to your school nurse or me if you need further clarification.

Sincerely,

*Patricia Watts*

Patricia Watts  
Assistant Superintendent  
RSU/MSAD #49  
453-4200 – Ext. 3102