

School leaders question testing plan

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School officials are raising concerns about the state's rollout of a new testing program, arguing they lack the capacity to pull it off.

Last week, the Vermont Agency of Education announced its new Test to Stay response testing program which aims, in part, to use onsite rapid testing at schools to keep more children out of quarantine and in the classroom.

Under Test to Stay, close contacts of someone who tests positive for COVID-19 will be asked to take a rapid antigen test every day for seven days after coming in contact with the symptomatic case. Those who test negative can stay in school rather than quarantine, as long as they have no symptoms. The testing is voluntary, but anyone who opts out will be required to quarantine 14 days.

Some superintendents, however, are saying the state is asking too much of schools right now.

"The testing opportunities, as they're being presented, may very well be the straw that breaks the camel's back," said David Younce, superintendent of Mill River Unified Union School District.

Younce, who also serves as president of the Vermont Superintendents Association, said he's not alone in his observation.

"When I look at districts nearby and talk to my colleagues, what I hear consistently is, it may very well be impossible — or at least incredibly difficult — to try to staff these testing programs that are being recommended without something else coming off the plate," he said.

Younce argued that the testing program is putting school districts in a difficult position.

"If they don't pursue it, districts are going to look like they're either being obstructionist or they're going to look like they're not willing to work hard enough to figure it out," he said.

The reality, he said, is most school districts simply don't have enough staff.

And despite having Early and Secondary School Emergency Relief funds available to hire staff for recovery and other COVID-related needs, Younce said no one is applying.

Currently at Mill River, Younce reported five para-educator vacancies and several unfilled custodian positions, noting that the situation is the same for school districts across the state.

Given these factors, Younce said he is leaning toward not bringing Test to Stay to Mill River.

“We do not have the capacity to make this happen with any sort of integrity,” he said.

Younce isn’t alone.

Libby Bonesteel, superintendent of Montpelier Roxbury Public Schools, is also opting out of the program.

“As of right now, we cannot pull off a Test to Stay program. We do not have the capacity,” she stated in an email. “We have an open mind and will put together what we can. Right now our resources are being put towards covering custodians, instructional assistants and food service as we have a significant staffing shortage in these areas. We will continue to reevaluate our situation.”

Jeanne Collins, superintendent of Rutland Northeast Supervisory Union, said Test to Stay is only going to add to the pressure schools are under this year.

She cited myriad job vacancies in nearly all departments, enforcing masking without a statewide mandate and the difficulty of contact tracing and subsequent quarantines.

Collins said, Rutland Northeast Supervisory Union has a total of 43 students and five staff at home in quarantine on Monday. By Wednesday, all of Neshobe Elementary School was quarantining for the rest of the week after nearly two-thirds of the school population were identified as potential close contacts to a positive case of COVID.

“The schools are not OK right now,” she said, echoing remarks made by Scott earlier this year when making his push to get kids back into classrooms.

Collins said that while she likes Test to Stay “conceptually,” she also has concerns.

“I think it’s a worthwhile goal to get to, because it keeps kids in school, but I think the state can do more to help us with the logistics,” she said.

Collins said schools can’t fill the job openings as it is, so she’s unsure where the state expects them to find even more staff. She called the notion that districts can simply go hire more people “tone deaf.”

“Even the Agency (of Education) can’t go out and hire and that’s why they’re not sending us anybody,” she said.

Collins suggested Gov. Phil Scott mobilize National Guard troops to help administer the tests.

But Younce isn't holding his breath for the state to provide a solution.

"I got the impression that there is no likelihood of staffing relief coming from the state," he said.

In an email statement, agency representative Ted Fisher acknowledged the challenges COVID-19 has posed for school communities this fall, stating, it's "unprecedented what is being asked of everyone in the interest of giving our children the educational experience they deserve."

He said the three response testing options being made available to schools — which also includes PCR testing both at schools and for families to administer at home — provide a "flexible toolkit that allows districts some leeway to structure things in the best way that meets their needs."

Fisher stated that the National Guard was not an option, explaining that despite being part of the state's vaccine response program, the pandemic is not the Guard's sole mission and additional units are unavailable.

Likewise, he noted nursing and medical staff shortages are preventing the state from diverting resources from the health care system to support schools.

"None of these testing programs require a medical background to implement, while other health priorities in the COVID-19 response do require clinician staff," he stated.

The roll out of Test to Stay seems to be indicative of what Younce characterized as the one-sided nature of meetings between superintendents and AOE Secretary Dan French.

Younce said input from superintendents is generally received after the fact and is not always impactful.

"Superintendents are grateful that we have regular opportunities to interact with (Secretary French) in meetings. We are really interested in having more of a dialogue and being able to proactively support the development of plans, as opposed to reactively navigating plans that have been developed for us," he said.

Collins agrees.

"I think there is a real disconnect from the state level to the actual school level as to what it takes to carry out the protocols and great ideas that are being trotted out," she said.

Collins expressed a desire for the state to spend more time talking to local school leaders to work out logistics of plans like Test to Stay before announcing them publicly.

“Schools are in business to keep kids in school and we want to make it work and we appreciate that new ideas are coming, but floating them out in a Tuesday press conference and we hear about it and we’re told, ‘Just figure it out,’ isn’t working,” she said.

Fisher noted that French meets weekly with superintendents to give them the opportunity to “directly answer questions and concerns as they come up.”

“The questions are helpful for the agency to understand the challenges in the field, and bring those to planning conversations with our state partners,” he stated.

He added that French met with superintendents and school nurse leadership this week “to discuss the response testing program specifically and consider ways we can more clearly communicate and gather feedback from their membership.”

Fisher pointed out that while some districts are struggling to implement Test to Stay, “a similar number” are ready to go, stating those districts either have the capacity to support the program or recognize the need to keep moving forward.

“The state’s challenge is to accommodate both; making sure that those who are ready to go can move forward, and supporting those who need additional support,” he said.

He added, “We are committed not only to working with school system leadership as a group to iterate and improve our COVID-19 response programs, but also to working specifically with individual district and school leaders to address their specific challenges.”

But like much of the pandemic, Younce argued that the disconnect between districts that can launch the program has yet again highlighted the issue of equity of access to resources across the state.

“Without a statewide solution to how to actually make it happen, that disconnect exacerbates those inequities as opposed to helps them,” he said. According to state data released on Oct. 3, 107 cases of COVID-19 were reported in schools in the previous seven days for a total of 651 cases since schools reopened this fall.

On Thursday, the state reported 287 new cases of COVID, with 35 hospitalizations, including eight people in intensive care. One new death was reported.