

# COVID-19 testing in schools complex but doable, worth the effort

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A RAND Corporation report funded by The Rockefeller Foundation shows that COVID-19 testing can be effectively integrated into K-12 schools' pandemic response plans, helping families and staff feel more comfortable with in-person instruction.

The report found that even for well-resourced districts and schools, launching a COVID-19 testing [program](#) was a major undertaking that required access to rapid-turnaround tests, additional staffing or strong partners for logistical support, technical assistance for the design and execution of testing programs, and a strategy for successfully engaging the school community to participate in testing.

"Our interviews with K-12 schools show that COVID-19 testing is complex, but doable," said Laura Faherty, lead author and a physician policy researcher at nonprofit, nonpartisan RAND. "Many [early adopters](#) found it critical to partner with local public health departments, local health systems, their peers and testing vendors to launch feasible COVID-19 testing programs. But even with strong

partnerships in place, school and district leaders described just how much effort it takes to make a testing program run smoothly. They described being 'hungry' for guidance and in need of a lot of technical assistance."

Researchers examined the experiences of schools and districts that were early adopters of COVID-19 testing in Fall 2020, including insights from a national scan of schools as well as more than 80 interviews with K-12 school and district leaders in December 2020.

According to the report, COVID-19 testing programs were more often implemented in public and independent schools with access to resources such as expert advice, sufficient funding and strong local partnerships.

Schools encountered varying degrees of hesitation around testing and used several strategies to encourage participation. Privacy concerns were common: Staff and parents worried their health information could be shared with others. Members of school communities expressed concern about how their [test](#) samples would be used. Another barrier to engaging their communities in testing was doubt about the actual risk posed by COVID-19.

"To give their communities peace of mind to return to in-person learning, schools often started small, using a pilot period to work out many of the details before fully launching," said Benjamin Master, co-leader of the project and a policy researcher at RAND. "The most scalable testing models that we identified involved districts that were able to access expert technical support and partners who could help manage the logistics of testing."

The report provides recommendations for how schools can develop, and policymakers can support, effective COVID-19 testing programs. Among them:

- expand funding to ensure schools can access tests, hire additional staff and contract with vendors as needed to implement testing
- continue to invest in research and development of testing solutions that are convenient for schools to use
- provide incentives such as paid sick leave for teachers and families to participate in testing and isolate as needed
- promote the use of standardized metrics and data platforms to support decisionmaking
- provide resources to strengthen state and local health departments so they're fully equipped to help schools design testing programs and respond to positive tests.

The Rockefeller Foundation's funding for the report is part of its portfolio of work aimed at disseminating lessons learned so far about the use of COVID-19 testing to help facilitate [school](#) reopening.

**More information:** Laura J. Faherty et al. COVID-19 Testing in K–12 Schools: Insights from Early Adopters. (2021) [doi.org/10.7249/RRA1103-1](https://doi.org/10.7249/RRA1103-1), [www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RRA1103-1.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA1103-1.html)

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