

# COVID Testing: Requests from DC parents after 2 weeks

What DCPS needs to do to limit COVID spread, and keep kids in school

## Summary

After a few weeks of DC school in fall 2021, students in schools across the city are testing positive for COVID. Parents are frustrated with delays in getting their kids tested, with being in the dark about whether their child was exposed, and with disruption in learning during quarantine. The situation can be expected to worsen in the absence of changes. Delta spread will take kids out of schools and drive up cases in the entire city – as has been the case with other Delta surges in MI, MN, Israel and the UK. **All of this can be mitigated by improving testing.** The requests outlined here are framed in the context of DCPS, but could be implemented in all DC schools.

**DCPS should:** (1) Implement rapid antigen testing for symptomatic students and staff, (2) Implement a rapid antigen testing test-to-stay program to reduce quarantine, (3) Speed up PCR result return times (to 6-18 hours) and test 100% of students each week with the asymptomatic PCR program.

This is doable for DC. [Massachusetts](#) and [Philadelphia](#) public schools both have deployed rapid antigen testing, and [LAUSD](#) does 100% asymptomatic PCR testing, supplemented by rapid tests.

**Definitions: "Rapid test"** means rapid antigen tests, like the BinaxNOW test, which can be administered at home and return results in about 15 minutes. **PCR tests**, in contrast, must be analyzed in a lab and return results with longer turnaround times, which can range from a few hours to as long as 3-5 days.

## Current situation

DCPS has an asymptomatic surveillance testing program, using PCR saliva tests. They aim to test 10-20% of students weekly. Some results come back as late as 3-5 days after testing. For students and teachers who develop symptoms, the majority are advised to go home and arrange their own testing. Symptomatic and close contact cases thus often use DC public PCR testing, which reports results in 3-5 days after test. Some parents now pay privately for fast-result PCR tests (up to [\\$250](#)) at sites like Sameday Testing Georgetown. **There are no rapid tests.**

## Requests: steps DC should take now

The Massachusetts Department of Education has developed statewide guidelines and published the details of their testing program. As DCPS parents, we encourage DCPS to emulate this public-health vetted testing program. DCPS must move *quickly* – we are already behind in procuring rapid antigen tests. DC should now:

- 1. Use rapid tests in schools for early symptomatic testing:** limiting the number of close contacts and reducing quarantine by catching cases more quickly. See MA Protocol C below: students or staff with symptoms, for example a runny nose or fever, get a rapid antigen test *immediately* in the school with results in 15 min. A positive result means they most likely have COVID and they quarantine. A negative result means they follow the symptom combination criteria for PCR testing. Right now DCPS lacks the rapid antigen step.
- 2. Get rapid tests to schools for test-to-stay:** reducing quarantine time of close contacts by testing each morning before going to school. Right now, the fastest return for DCPS

quarantined close contacts is 7 days, with a PCR test. Test-to-stay means close contacts can be back at school immediately, without quarantine, as long as they have a negative rapid test *each day*. Children who are close contacts do the test at home each morning before going to school, for 7 days. Rapid tests should be distributed to families for this purpose.

- 3. Increase asymptomatic (surveillance) testing rates to 100% and speed up PCR test turnaround:** to catch cases currently being missed, slow the spread within schools and throughout the city, and reduce disruptions in school. Weekly asymptomatic testing in schools should be for 100% of students, as targeted by both [LA's public schools](#) and [Chicago Public Schools](#). DC should also do whatever possible to get the asymptomatic PCR tests results back faster (and also speed up public-site PCR testing.) Getting PCR test results back in under 24 hours is critical. When PCR tests return results in 3-5 days, many infected cases will progress to symptomatic before results return, increasing virus shedding, increasing spread risk, and negating a major benefit of asymptomatic testing.

### Additional background

The BinaxNOW rapid antigen specificity is high: there are relatively few false negatives. And it seems that sensitivity is reasonably high when individuals are symptomatic and infectious. This ability to catch infectious cases probably explains why MA and Philadelphia use these tests for symptomatic individuals. The ease of use at home and 15 min test result time, which trade off against PCR's slightly higher sensitivity, probably explain why other districts use rapid antigen for test-to-stay.

Parents from elementary schools across the city, including several Title 1 schools, are buying rapid tests themselves and distributing them. Testing arranged by parents is catching cases the current DCPS testing system is missing. This means positive cases are going undetected in schools, increasing spread, which leads to more quarantine. This testing inequity should be addressed by DC by improving the school testing system city-wide.

Pooled testing is a way to implement PCR testing, in which samples are pooled at the laboratory to decrease the number of PCR runs needed and decrease cost. The key factors we are asking for are 100% asymptomatic testing and fast (<24h) turnaround. Whether this is best implemented with pooling or not depends on several factors, and we do not take a position on pooling, leaving implementation up to DCPS.

Recently we have heard that rapid antigen tests are available in some schools for teacher symptomatic testing. We have also heard that some school-administered asymptomatic saliva PCR tests are returning results in under 24 hours. This is a great start! We encourage DCPS to ensure these happen across all schools – and to implement all our testing requests.

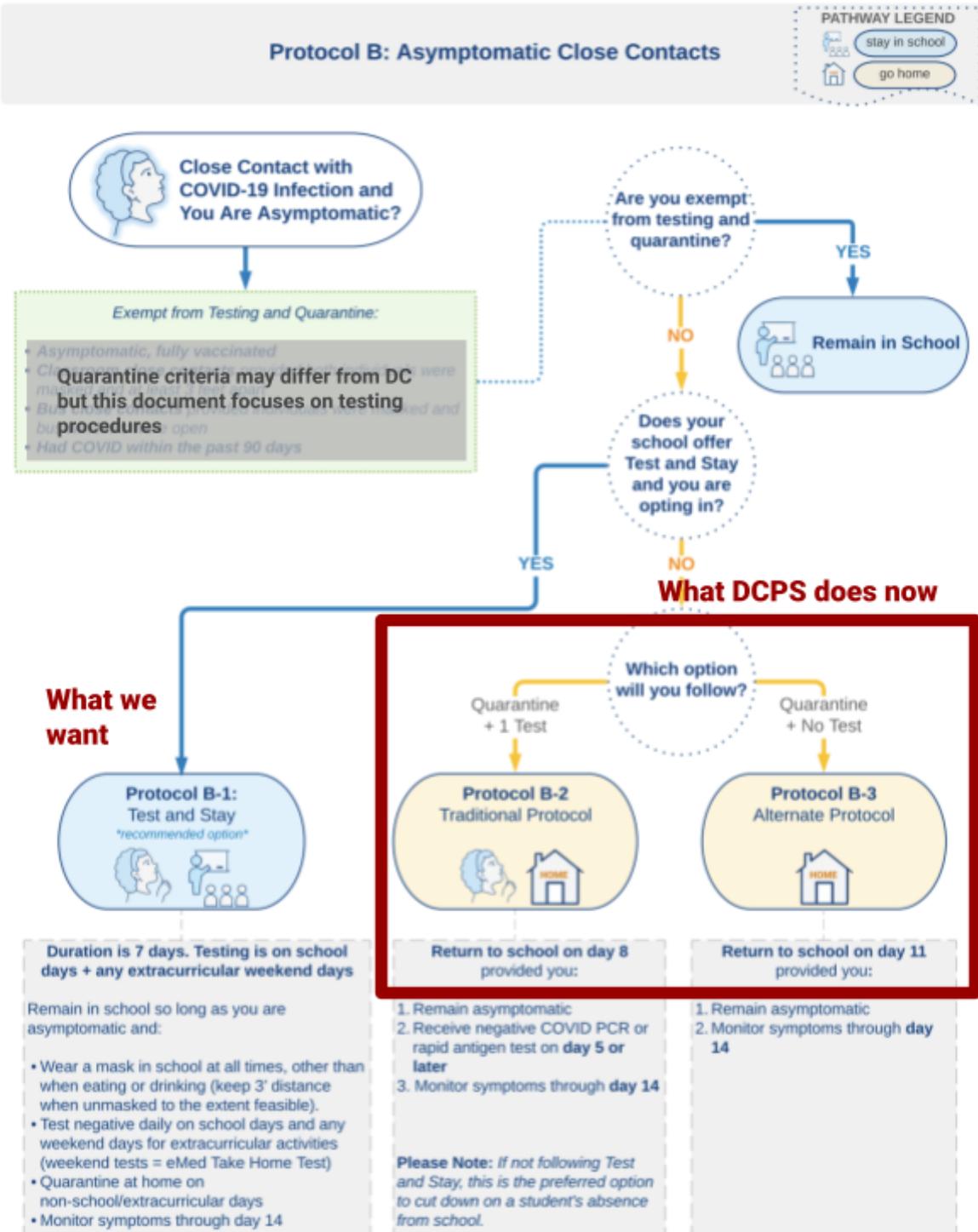
### Contact information

DC Families for COVID-Safer Schools — Working group on testing (All are DCPS parents)

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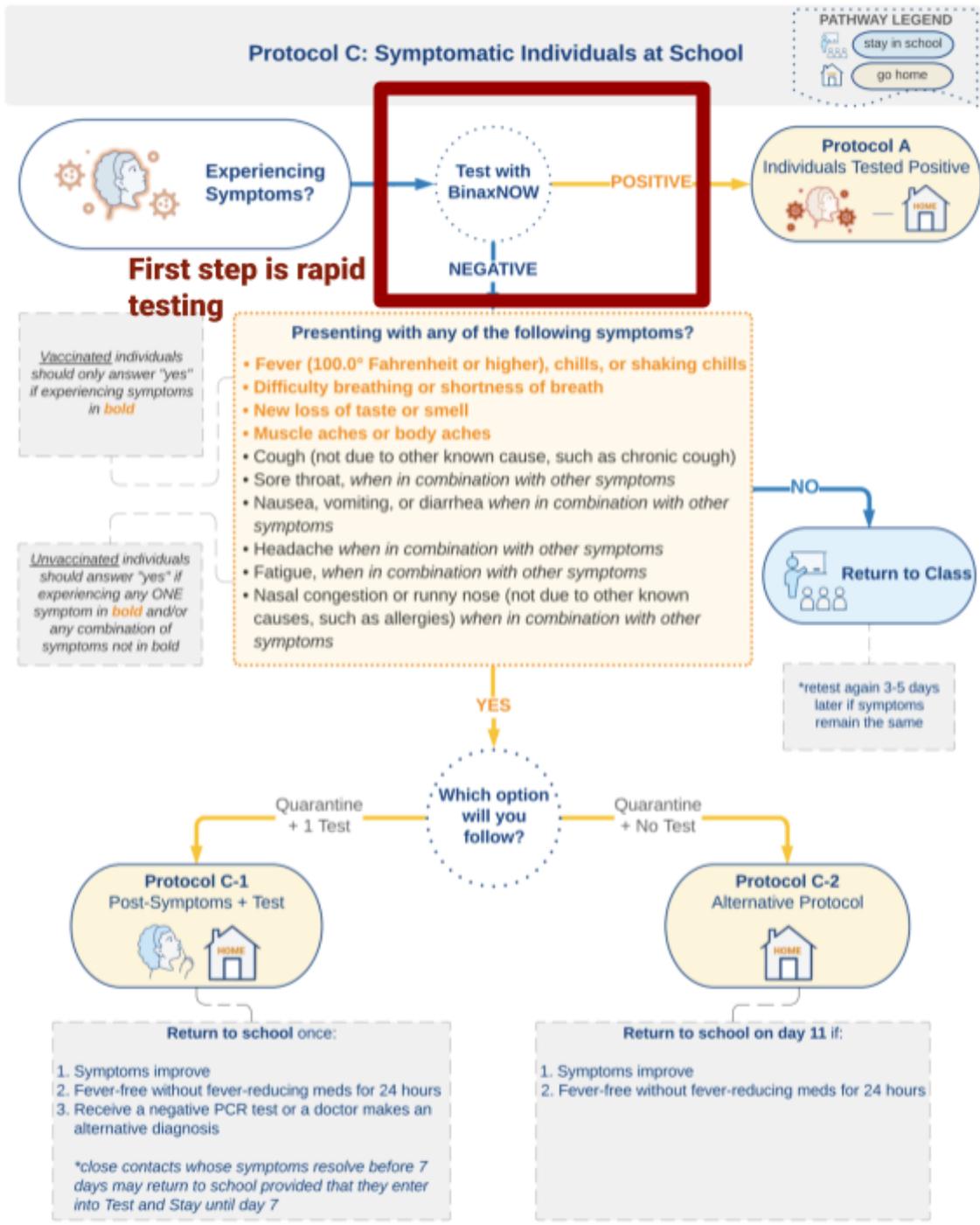
# Supporting information: Example testing procedures from Massachusetts

**Test-to-stay:** From the Massachusetts DOE [testing flowcharts](#). Under-12 children can *remain in school* if they use a rapid antigen test each morning. DCPS needs this “test and stay” program, and it needs rapid tests to do it.



<https://www.doe.mass.edu/covid19/testing/>

**Symptomatic rapid testing:** From the same flowchart document. Note that the first step after “experiencing symptoms” is “Test with BinaxNOW”. This returns a result in 15 minutes. If the individual is positive, they follow the quarantine procedure. If not, this is followed up with a symptom check and possibly a PCR test. This *keeps kids in school* and reduces spread by getting results quickly. DCPS must procure rapid tests to do this.



<https://www.doe.mass.edu/covid19/testing/>

## References

- [DCPS document](#) from Dec 17 2020 says rapid tests will be available at schools. Unclear how many were distributed or used. Also says an asymptomatic test form will be required and school nurses will provide tests.
- DCPS [letter from Chancellor Ferebee](#) Aug 27 2021 says “If any student or staff member is experiencing COVID-19 symptoms while at school, on-site rapid tests will be available beginning on the first day of school.” To our knowledge, no rapid antigen tests have been available in schools.
- [NY Times article](#) on test-to-stay, Sept 19, 2021.
- Massachusetts [testing and quarantine response protocols](#), MA dept of education, Aug 13, 2021.