

## TESTIMONY

**Testimony To:** Senate Committee on Education

**Respectfully Submitted by:** Daniel M. French, Ed.D., Secretary of Education  
Mark Levine, M.D., Commissioner of Health

**Subject:** School COVID-19 Testing Legislative Summary

**Date:** February 2, 2022

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### Background

During the summer of 2021, the State of Vermont implemented a surveillance testing program for students and staff in Vermont summer camps and schools. This program was administered by CIC Health, a state contracted vendor, in partnership with the Agency of Education and the Department of Health, using PCR testing. As the summer program was coming to an end, the state began planning for an expanded surveillance testing program for all of Vermont's schools to begin the 2021-22 school year.

Planning for this program began before the Delta and Omicron variants were identified and became prevalent. As a result, the school testing toolbox and testing protocols have evolved with the changing COVID-19 context (e.g. the transition from Delta to Omicron) as well as the introduction of new testing tools into the state (e.g. PCR tests and school-based antigen tests to LAMP tests and take home antigen tests).

With the support and guidance of the medical community, including the pediatric advisory committee and the state epidemiology team, the central focus of the COVID-19 testing program in schools has also transitioned. In the previous period of the pandemic, with little or no access to vaccination for students and staff, testing and contact tracing was centered on preventing the virus from entering the school community.

As vaccines have become widely available to the entire over-five population, and with the introduction of the highly contagious, but less virulent Omicron variant, the COVID-19 testing program has entered a new phase in which keeping schools open and keeping children in school for in-person instruction have become the guiding principles for testing protocols and tools.

### PCR School Testing

In August 2021 districts and independent schools began to onboard with CIC Health, the state-contracted vendor for PCR testing, to begin offering weekly surveillance testing to school staff and students over the age of 5. Schools that completed this onboarding process were also able to

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use these PCR tests to conduct diagnostic testing of symptomatic students or staff. All in school PCR testing required consent. Over the course of several months a total of 41 SU/SDs and 31 independent schools completed onboarding to use PCR tests in school.

In addition, schools were also able to access and distribute a take home PCR test that families or school staff could use and then send back for processing via UPS, or return to the school for pick up by courier. These take home PCR tests were limited in quantity and use, but several districts have continued to make use of this testing tool, particularly when community testing clinics may have been impacted by high case counts.

School PCR testing (Surveillance Testing and response or diagnostic)	Total
Number of school districts that onboarded for PCR testing (both ST and response testing)	41
Number of Independent Schools	31
All time PCR tests (since September 2021)	193,516
PCR tests in January 2022	53,822

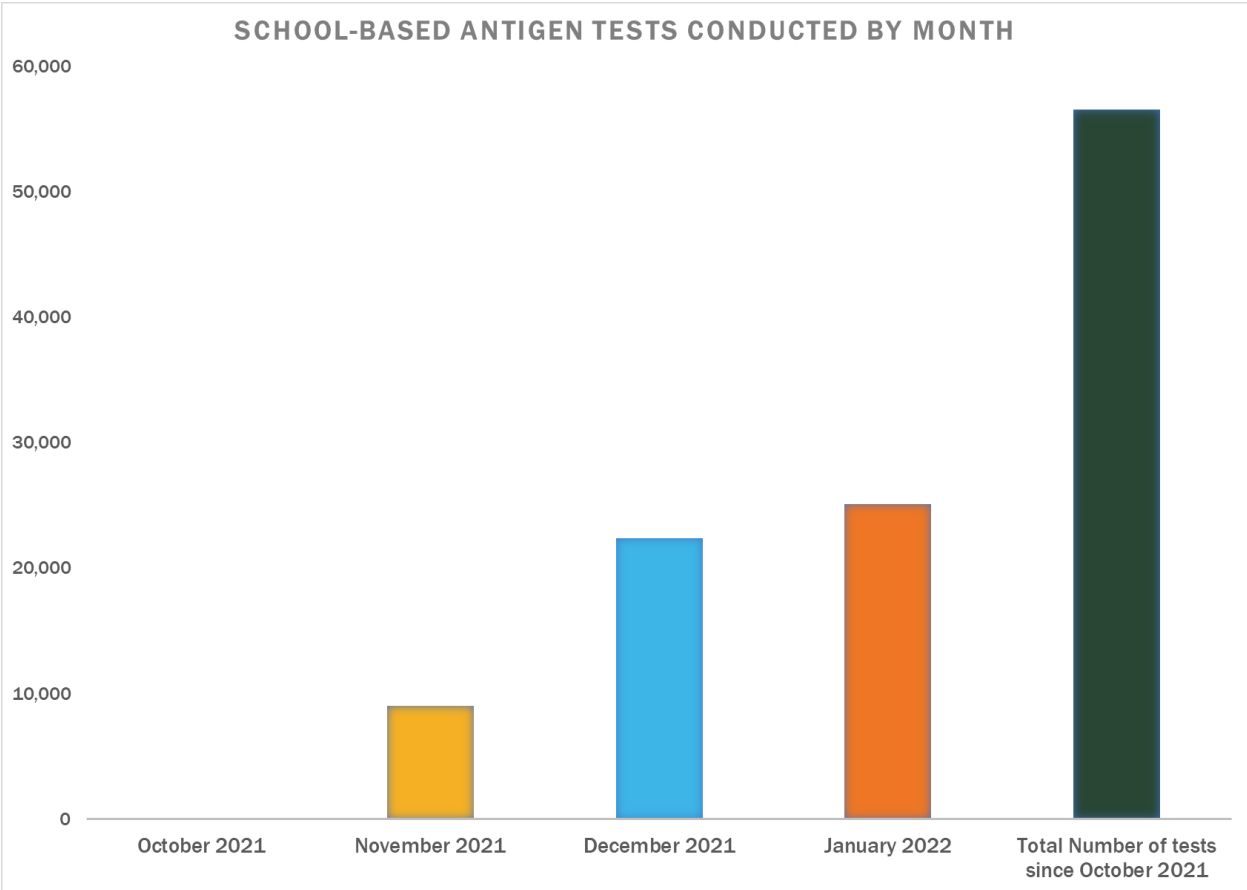
### Test to Stay Program

The Test to Stay program was created in response to the Delta variant and the high numbers of students that were identified as close contacts and required to quarantine. In order to address the educational goal of keeping students in school for in person instruction, the Test to Stay program, which leveraged the state’s stockpile of BinaxNow CLIA-waived tests, utilized contact tracing protocols to identify students who were eligible to take daily antigen tests in the school setting for 5 days after exposure to the virus through a school-based contact.

Districts and independent schools began completing the required onboarding steps in early October and by January 32 independent schools and all but two SU/SDs were conducting school-based antigen testing.

While a resource and labor-intensive program, Test to Stay demonstrated that antigen testing could be used to keep schools open and students in the classroom. As a rough metric, over 56,000 school based antigen tests were conducted in schools since October, translating into thousands of potential in person learning days saved by students who might otherwise have been in quarantine.

School Based Antigen Tests Conducted by Month	Number of Tests
October 2021	59
November 2021	9,034
December 2021	22,366
January 2022	25,096
<b>Total Number of tests since October 2021</b>	<b>56,555</b>



**Test at Home**

In early December the state began contemplating a shift to more home-based antigen testing in schools in light of the increasing demands on nurses and other school staff to manage contact tracing and school-based testing. This planning period was truncated by the arrival of the Omicron variant and the state, and schools, were forced to respond with maximum speed to

address the surge of positive cases following the holiday break that led to a large number of school closures.

In this new environment the medical community identified that both contact tracing and school-based testing, whether antigen or PCR, were too labor intensive and too slow to allow schools to effectively respond to the virus. In addition, new data on the virulence of the Omicron variant, combined with success in school-aged vaccination rates, meant that a paradigm shift in how schools approached COVID-19 was not only possible, but necessary.

Beginning on December 30 and 31 the state began a major rollout of home-based antigen tests to school-aged children across the state. On those two days 87,066 home-based tests were distributed, and the following week, another 89,378 home-based tests were delivered to SU/SDs and independent schools. As these distributions were taking place, the Agency of Education, along with partners in the Agency of Human Services and the Department of Health, aligned the new testing program to new CDC guidance regarding quarantine and testing requirements and the end of contact tracing in schools.

Over the course of January, the state continued to deliver tens of thousands of home-based antigen tests to public schools (independent schools will be offered home-based antigen tests as soon as the supply chain is able to support this additional demand) and to refine the parameters of the new Test at Home program in response to feedback and lessons learned in the field.

In all, the state has delivered more than 600,000 take home antigen tests to schools in less than thirty days.

Date	Amount of Antigen Tests Distributed
<b>December 31 through Jan 7<sup>th</sup> (Kits for Kids and Post-Holiday School Distribution)</b>	176,444
Week of Jan 2 <sup>nd</sup>	31,544
Week of Jan 9 <sup>th</sup>	145,902
Week of Jan 16 <sup>th</sup>	136,920
Week of Jan 23 <sup>rd</sup>	184,120
<b>TOTAL TESTS</b>	<b>674,930</b>