

## State Launches COVID-19 Testing Program For Schools

By Administrator

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The North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services is launching an expanded COVID-19 screening testing program to support public, charter and private K-12 schools in protecting students and staff from the spread of COVID-19. The program will launch in fall 2021 and schools can register to participate beginning in early July. “COVID-19 screening testing can help protect our school communities and help keep students in the classroom,” said Ann Nichols, State School Nurse Consultant at NCDHHS. “We encourage everyone, including students, to get vaccinated if they are eligible, but students under 12 don’t have that option yet. This testing program will help keep our schools safe and our students learning.”

Supported by a grant from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the program will provide participating schools with access to COVID-19 rapid tests and other testing options. Public school districts and charters will also have the option to receive financial support to hire additional school health team staff to facilitate the screening testing program and response.

A statewide vendor to provide COVID-19 testing services that follows CDC guidance will be available to all schools, public and private.

Schools choosing to hire additional school health team staff through this program will be able to increase their ability to provide health services to students. This may include enhanced capacity for important services that regularly occur in our schools — and have largely been interrupted during the pandemic — such as management of health conditions, hearing and vision screenings, vaccination support and connecting students to services that work to eliminate health inequities.

“We hope public schools will opt-in to the increased staff support,” said Ellen Essick, Section Chief, NC Healthy Schools at the NC Department of Public Instruction. “Today, not all public schools have a school nurse onsite. This means students are missing critical health supports, not only for COVID-19, but also for overall well-being concerns. We are thrilled that this expanded program gives our public school students and staff resources to ensure they can keep students healthy and learning in the classroom.”

This summer, NCDHHS will pilot the expanded COVID-19 screening testing program in several summer school programs and work with a team of community stakeholders in preparation for the 2021-22 school year.

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Registration for schools to participate in the program will open in early July. Information will be sent to superintendents this summer.