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EDITOR'S PICK

Analysis

Mandatory School Covid Testing Takes 2 Paths

By Vince Conti

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School child wearing face mask during corona virus and flu outbreak. Boy and girl going back to school after covid-19 quarantine and lockdown. Group of kids in masks for coronavirus prevention.

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COURT HOUSE - Gov. Phil Murphy Aug. 23 signed Executive Order 253, mandating all public and private school teachers and staff be fully vaccinated against Covid by Oct. 18 or submit to weekly testing.

The state subsequently allocated \$267 million from federal American Rescue Plan funding to support the mandate.

Getting things up and running has been a challenge, even when a school district opts to use the state vendor. Some school districts are having teachers and staff begin with individual testing on their own, while arrangements are finalized for when the vendor can begin a screening program.

Over 40% of the 758 public and private school districts impacted by the mandate were granted an extension due to vendor issues.

One superintendent in Burlington County was supportive of the efforts being made by the state vendor, but said the company is behind “in terms of set up.” Other districts are waiting for start dates.

There are two options for school districts to implement the required testing.

In one option, the public school district can elect to end screening by a state-contracted vendor at no cost. For private schools, that option is also available, but free testing capability would last only as long as federal funds remain.

The state vendor, Rover Labs, is based in New York, with a laboratory in New Jersey. Rover offers a saliva-based RT-PCR Covid testing protocol and promises results in a 24- to 48-hour period. Rover Labs is doing testing in New York City schools and in a venture with the Georgia Federation of Teachers. The testing is onsite in Cape May County. Rover Labs did not respond to a request for information.

In the second option, districts can elect to set up a contract with their own approved diagnostic testing vendor and have the cost reimbursed by the state fund. One such vendor at work in the county is Inspire Diagnostics. The company is a subsidiary of Inspire Health Alliance and offers onsite and virtual, at-home testing capability to schools, colleges and businesses. Inspire is testing students and staff in districts in several states, including California, Texas, and Florida.

In the case of Rover Labs, the RT-PCR test is a molecular test that is highly accurate, but requires laboratory processing. Inspire Diagnostics is using an antigen test that gives rapid results in a 15-minute timeframe, but requires a confirming PCR test if the antigen test is positive for an individual without symptoms. State guidance calls for a PCR test for a symptomatic individual, even with a negative antigen test result.

Upper Township School District has elected to use the state vendor, Rover Labs. A letter to parents Oct. 20 states that the vendor will conduct onsite testing at the district's schools once per week, which was set to begin the last week of October. Results are supplied to the tested individual and the school in 24 to 48 hours.

Inspire Diagnostics is conducting onsite testing for schools in Collingswood. In Cape May County, the company is using a virtual clinic model for testing in the Middle Township, Lower Township, and Lower Cape May Regional school districts.

Staff who require testing are identified by the district and register through a company portal. Individuals are sent a monthly supply of antigen tests. The test, involving a nasal swab, is administered privately at home with Zoom participation by a company proctor. The goal of the process is to provide both privacy and oversight integrity.

If the antigen test is positive, the confirming PCR test is administered with the test sample prepaid overnight shipped to a laboratory for processing. Results from the PCR test, if required, come in a 24- to 48-hour window.

Both vendors use a protocol to simplify tracking and reporting requirements.

The regional vice president for Inspire Diagnostics/Northeast is Timothy Donohue. Donohue also serves as Middle Township mayor. Donohue said that the Inspire at-home program was designed with a focus on "scalability."

All vendors engaged in the school testing programs will be challenged by the need to scale their efforts if state guidelines are followed. That is especially so with the state's recommended random testing of unvaccinated students.

The state suggests, but does not yet require, random testing of students who are not fully vaccinated in weeks when the Covid Activity Level report indicates community spread at moderate or higher levels. Such testing requires parental consent and is voluntary.

Both the state vendor and Inspire offer the capability to do onsite random testing of students if the school district elects to do so. Donohue said Inspire is already doing a 10% random testing of students in Collingswood schools and would be prepared to do so in Cape May County if the schools elect to do so. Upper Township is actively soliciting parental permission for random testing of unvaccinated students.

Two factors are at play: The level of community spread, as recorded in the state's weekly Covid Activity Report, and the number of students who are unvaccinated either because of eligibility issues or resistance to vaccination of children.

So far, the metrics on community infections are declining almost as fast as the requirements for full vaccination are growing.

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