



Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

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Jeffrey C. Riley
Commissioner

November 5, 2021

Senator Jo Comerford
Representative Mindy Domb
Representative Natalie Blais
Massachusetts State House
24 Beacon Street
Boston, MA 02133

Dear Senator Comerford, Representative Domb, and Representative Blais:

Thank you for your email of November 1st, addressed to Commissioner Riley, highlighting the concerns of nurses in your districts with regard to the implementation of our statewide COVID testing support initiative. Commissioner Riley has asked me to reply on his behalf.

As you heard at the October 21st Oversight Hearing on Children's COVID-19 Vaccination and Testing, a key goal for our agency this school year is to continue to support districts, schools, and students to mitigate the impact of COVID-19. We have seen the effect that COVID-19 has wrought on the already heavy workload of our state's nurses, and how its impact has added significantly to their work responsibilities, hours, and stress, resulting in an increased occurrence of turnover in these positions due to "burnout". It is with our nurses and their school- and district-based colleagues in mind that EOHHS and DESE have endeavored to make diagnostic and routine (weekly) COVID pooled testing services available at no cost through the end of the 2021-22 school year, under a contract with the testing provider CIC Health. We appreciate very much your sharing the feedback you have received from nurses in your districts on the implementation of this program, as it allows us to continually improve on the supports being provided and will help us in our decision-making in the future.

We have noted that much of the feedback you have passed on to us relates to four key areas of the work: staffing, training, supplies, and communications. As I am sure you have heard from your other constituents, staffing and training challenges have been immense across many industries right now, and education and healthcare are no exception. Due to the huge demand for testing support and the rapid ramp-up of the work to ensure that testing could start as soon as possible in the largest number of districts this school year, CIC Health struggled in the early ramp up period to identify and train the staff needed to support our districts. In support of these efforts, DESE and EOHHS have partnered with the Massachusetts National Guard and even offered the program coordination support of DESE staff to help key districts get up and running with their testing programs. Both of these endeavors have proven highly successful, with three of the thirteen communities that received support from the National Guard having already

transitioned back to receiving assistance as originally intended (and more scheduled to make that transition over the next few weeks). We are encouraged with the results of the National Guard's involvement, which include an improved level of communication between our vendor, CIC Health, and the districts they serve. I have also learned that today CIC Health is rolling out a new process for ordering testing supplies that should alleviate some of the problems our nurses are having with obtaining the supplies they need in a timely manner. We look forward to hearing from districts on how the implementation of that improved process is going in the future.

We have heard from nurses and other sources about the challenges that schools and districts have been presented with regarding the guidance issued on Test & Stay. Current guidance, the result of extensive collaboration between DESE and DPH, is that vaccinated individuals should not participate in Test & Stay. Massachusetts' guidance in this regard is hardly unique among the states that are conducting K-12 testing. No one involved with the program should be advising schools to function differently, and please rest assured that issue will be resolved with our vendor, CIC Health. Furthermore, close contacts from non-school sponsored activities should not be included in Test & Stay. DESE has reiterated this message to districts at a webinar this week. We are not aware of any districts that are not able to do Test & Stay at this time. Commissioner Riley reached out to all participating public K-12 districts twice during the week of October 4, and 18 districts reported that they were struggling with any aspect of the program. We believe that those issues have been resolved and we encourage any district that is still having trouble implementing any aspect of the program they should write to us directly at k12covidtesting@mass.gov to obtain further support.

Many school- and district-based stakeholders have also had questions about the Commissioner's mask mandate and the 80% vaccination threshold established to allow schools to safely transition from mandatory to voluntary masking, and we appreciate the nurses' feedback on the most recent guidance we have issued on masks. To provide the most succinct and up-to-date information about the policy, I am attaching to this letter a document which provides the rationale for the development of this specific guidance. This guidance was developed through many hours of discussions and collaborations among a group of experts in infectious diseases, infectious diseases management and preparedness, infection prevention, and pediatrics and the Departments of Elementary and Secondary Education and Public Health. I hope it helps address any concerns you and the nurses have on the policy and its implementation.

We can certainly appreciate how frustrating it is that the COVID-19 virus, and our knowledge about it, are constantly changing. However, as is reflected in some of the feedback on existing protocols in this list of concerns, we believe it is our duty to create the best possible guidance given what we know and can possibly operationalize at any given point in time. DPH and DESE agree that schools are a distinct and unique environment separate from human interaction at large. The mitigation measures that are in place in schools create something closer to a known quantity. This acknowledgement is what has allowed the Commonwealth's students to return safely to in-person learning, remain at school with minimal/isolated symptoms if they test negative, and stay in school using the Test & Stay protocol rather than face a 7-10 day quarantine after exposure. We appreciate the feedback on the issues experienced in accessing, processing and implementing the guidance, as we continue to strive to make all of our guidance genuinely useful for schools and districts.

Thank you once again for your interest in this crucial work. As we would with any concern that comes to us via any communications channel, we will follow up with every district who provided this feedback to make sure we fully understand the issues raised and provide the targeted support that is needed. We welcome further collaboration with you on this matter and others as we emerge stronger from the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Russell Johnston".

Russell Johnston, PhD
Deputy Commissioner

Enclosure: 80% Vaccination Threshold Document

Cc: Marylou Sudders, Secretary, Health and Human Services
Rebekah Diamond, Chief of Staff, Executive Office of Health and Human Services
Robert McLaughlin, Legislative Director, Executive Office of Health and Human Services
Jeremiah Hay, Deputy Strategy Director, COVID-19 Command Center,
Jeffrey C. Riley, Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education
Leldamy Correa, Chief of Staff, Department of Elementary and Secondary Education
Jessica Leitz, Director of External Partnerships, Department of Elementary and Secondary Education