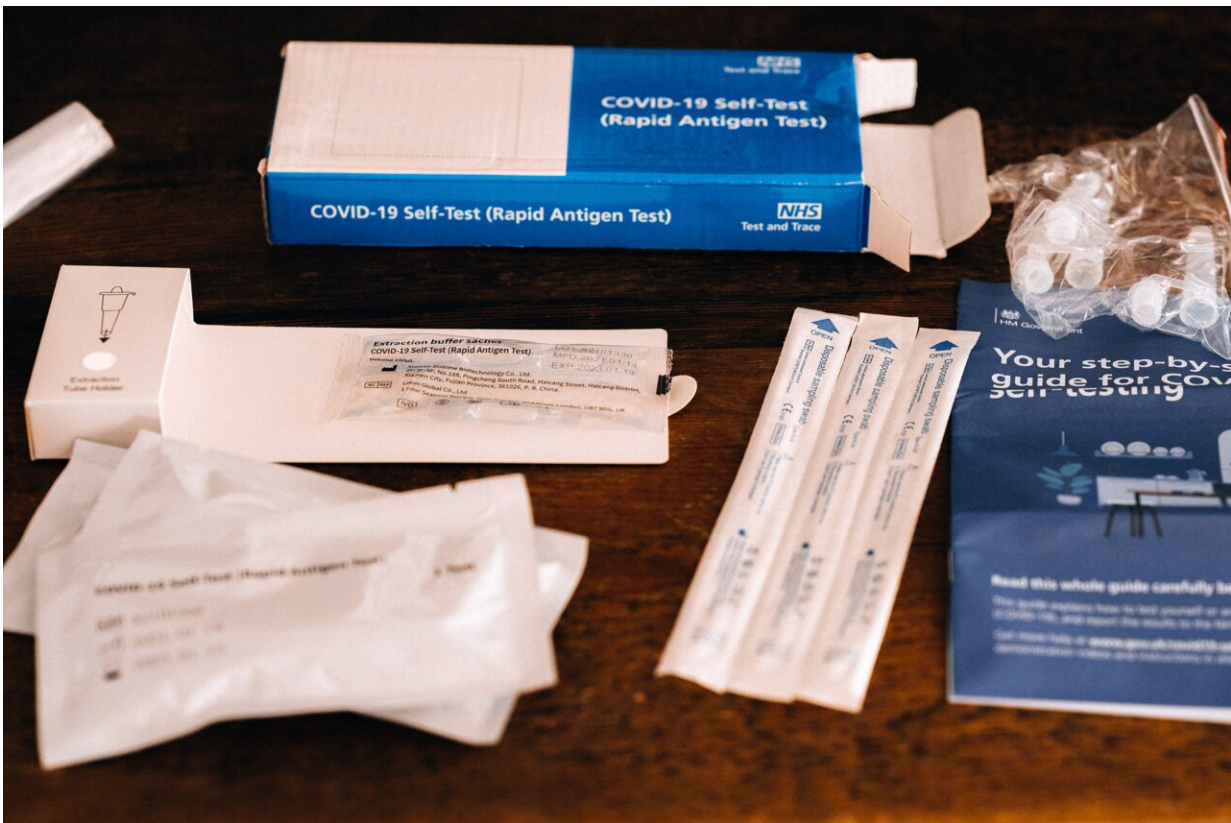


Can schoolchildren be tested regularly for COVID?

January 11 2022, by Cristine Hall



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Can schools handle the challenge of testing all students and staff for COVID-19?

It depends on which stakeholder you ask. A group of USC researchers conducted interviews in nine Los Angeles County school districts. The information was collected from focus groups via Zoom from December 2020 to January 2021, when the whole country was inundated with COVID cases, necessitating widespread school shutdowns.

Whether to close schools again, and for how long and under what circumstances, are issues raging once again as the nation deals with a new surge tied to the highly communicable omicron variant of the virus. The new USC study, published recently in *Health Promotion Practice*, could provide crucial guidance for school administrators and local governments trying to decide how much importance to place on testing of students.

"In-school COVID-19 testing could be a useful component of school reopening plans and will be accepted by stakeholders if logistical and financial barriers can be surmounted and stigma from positive results can be minimized," the authors concluded.

All constituencies interviewed by the researchers agreed that "frequent in-school COVID-19 testing could increase the actual safety and perceived safety of the school environment." But opinions diverged after that. School administrators expressed concern about the costs and logistics of implementing a testing program. Parents backed frequent testing but worried about the physical discomfort to children, and the stigma of a positive [test](#). Teachers and parents agreed that testing would keep sick kids from coming to school. For their part, [high school students](#) favored testing because it would allow them to resume in-person education after a difficult period of online learning.

Cost remains a key issue, a year after the researchers performed their work. Several companies are cranking out at-home antigen tests that can provide a positive or negative result within minutes. But they are scarce:

Stores sell out quickly when a new shipment arrives, and with demand skyrocketing, inexpensive tests bought at the pharmacy can be re-sold online at high markups. Also, some experts have questioned whether these rapid tests are sensitive enough to detect the omicron variant.

Many [local governments](#) are giving away testing kits through schools and libraries. Nationally, the dearth of testing kits could ease soon: The Biden administration is finalizing contracts to purchase 500 million kits and distribute them for free. California is beginning to ship testing kits to districts statewide. But school personnel are on their own to figure out how to set up and maintain a mass testing program.

The authors note that "closing schools has detrimental psychosocial, societal, and economic consequences for children and their families. Therefore, reopening schools safely is an important priority."

But testing is only one tool at the disposal of [school administrators](#), the authors wrote.

"In addition to physical distancing measures, mask mandates, improved cleaning procedures, and keeping students in [small groups](#), COVID-19 testing in schools could be a useful strategy to identify and isolate infected individuals quickly and restore feelings of safety in [school](#)."

More information: Jennifer B. Unger et al, COVID-19 Testing in Schools: Perspectives of School Administrators, Teachers, Parents, and Students in Southern California, *Health Promotion Practice* (2021). [DOI: 10.1177/15248399211066076](https://doi.org/10.1177/15248399211066076)

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