Members of the National Testing Action Program have drafted this open letter to call attention to the continued need for COVID-19 testing in schools across the country. As a dedicated group that's spent more than two years working to empower schools with public health data from testing, we feel it's important to continue elevating schools' needs for testing programs. The public health benefits of continuing to offer testing programs cannot be overlooked, nor can the consequences of ending support too soon.

We invite you to read, sign on, and share the following open letter with your network. Our NTAP partners believe in the importance of this message; we hope you'll join us in adding your voice to the conversation. Whether it's sharing this open letter with your community or online (tag #OpenandSafeSchools!), or advocating for local, state, or federal funding for testing in schools, your support is appreciated.

Please contact me with any questions: mara.aspinall@healthcatalysts.com

All the best,
Mara G. Aspinall

Community Open Letter on COVID Testing in Schools

Students around the country have returned to their classrooms and cold and flu season is upon us, along with a significant uptick in RSV. As we look ahead to the holiday season—and potential overlapping winter surges—testing for COVID-19 has to remain part of the "back to school" conversation. Data is among our greatest tools in the fight against COVID-19, and testing offers us vital information that helps facilitate in-school learning. Its impacts have been borne out in thousands of communities from coast-to-coast, through wave after wave, with a collection of recent case studies illustrating just a small fraction of what communities can make possible when they rally together.

Testing is an essential part of a layered public health strategy.
We cannot afford for this infrastructure to be lost as we look to the next new variant or emerging pathogen. Even with updated vaccines widely available, uptake has been highly variable. Mask mandates are gone nearly everywhere, and mask usage has dropped to a fraction of what it once was.

Testing is a safety net we cannot remove. It lets us know where and how prevalent the virus is, helping us to respond and prevent further spread. It can help reduce COVID-related absences among students and staff, which continue to disrupt staffing plans and learning progress. Our schools and communities have learned so much about running seamless testing programs and using data to make public health decisions. Communities have found ways to build confidence with teachers, parents and kids—even in areas where communities are grappling with historical lack of access or mistrust in public health.

Schools are increasingly being faced with tough decisions.
Schools have tough decisions about managing public health risk for their students, staff, and broader community. We're in a different phase of the pandemic than we were a year ago, with new public health issues playing an increasingly important role, and resources for ongoing COVID-19 mitigation are dwindling. While we all work to ensure that communities have access to the resources they need, there are proven and [CDC-recommended](#) approaches schools can take to navigate these challenges.

1. Maintain testing capacity for students and staff who are symptomatic or who have been exposed to someone with COVID-19.
2. Focus routine testing efforts on high-risk activities (like close contact sports and extracurriculars).
3. Keep some broader infrastructure in place to be able to ramp up during key time periods (such as "testing to return" from school breaks, particularly the winter holidays).

A school-based COVID-19 testing program can also be a helpful proxy for the community at large.
Community risk levels are getting harder to assess, as testing rates have dwindled and individuals have increasingly turned to at-home antigen testing with little to no public health reporting of results. Schools represent a key sentinel population to gain insight into the health of surrounding communities and direct public health support accordingly. Other members of students' households may inadvertently increase risk of infection and transmission, especially in lower-income areas with declining access to community testing programs. This can be mitigated by offering school-based testing where programs can help catch the virus, prevent spread, and perhaps help identify exposures among other individuals, like

grandparents or neighbors. School leaders who create a healthy school environment are also investing in health equity for their community.

We should take lessons from what has worked since 2020.
We have proven testing practices, and we can use them to help our communities manage the continuing risks. It would be a disservice to cast these efforts aside. Let's take the hard-won victories and continue having schools be a beacon for their community. COVID-19 testing is an essential strategy we cannot afford to lose. Testing programs are a low-burden, accessible strategy that provides a high return in regard to protecting community health. They can offer the peace of mind we need to face continuing uncertainty.

As you look ahead this fall and winter:
1. Plan for outbreaks and make sure you have accessible, response-ready systems.
2. Ensure equal access and availability of tests and reporting systems.
3. Communicate with your community what you're doing to prepare.

How has testing helped your school or community? Join the conversation at OpenandSafeSchools.org and sign on at www.healthcatalysts.com

National Testing Action Program (NTAP) is a dedicated group of professionals, businesses, and labs that have been working together since the start of the pandemic to share best practices and improve access to Covid-19 testing throughout our nation's schools. NTAP members range from community leaders to multinational businesses and meet regularly to exchange insights, lessons learned, and the latest science.