



## Acton-Boxborough Regional School District

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Peter J. Light  
Superintendent of Schools

January 13, 2022

AB Families,

The last few weeks have been particularly challenging for our schools, students, staff and families. I also understand that many of us have watched anxiously as COVID cases have risen. The last four weeks have marked a significant change in the course of the pandemic. We have certainly reached a point where we can no longer determine where transmission originated from, and assume that it is taking place both in the community and to some degree, in our schools. This is disconcerting, yet at the same time, we need to recognize that there has been a steep decline in serious illness due to the virus. Fortunately, many of our students and staff who are testing positive for Covid report mild symptoms or no symptoms.

The increase in cases of COVID-19 among students and staff have rendered some of our prior COVID protocols ineffective and in need of new thinking. It is important that as the virus changes, we also adapt our strategies to respond to these changes. We have spent considerable time thinking about our protocols and reviewing practices with our health advisory team that consists of our administration, nurse leaders, staff from each town's health department and our school physician. Based on what we see in our schools and after considerable discussion, we are making changes to some of our COVID protocols.

**Before highlighting the changes we are implementing, we cannot stress enough that it is critical to our continued operation that sick students, even with mild symptoms, be kept home from school.**

At this point in time, our strategy will shift toward increasing rapid antigen testing of symptomatic individuals. We believe that rapid antigen testing of symptomatic individuals will provide more accurate, real time identification of COVID-positive individuals in our schools who are more likely to transmit the virus. In order to provide our staff with time needed to do this, we will shift away from some of our previous strategies that are no longer proving effective.

We cannot stress enough however, that our increase in the use of rapid testing in schools is not an indicator that students should arrive at school sick. ***If students are sick, they need to stay home until symptoms are resolved***, and we highly recommend the use of home antigen tests.

There are two significant changes to our COVID protocols you should expect in the coming days that will allow us to shift our strategy:

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1. Effective today, we will continue to monitor cases internally, but no longer contact trace positive cases in our schools.
  - We believe that based on community transmission rates, all individuals should consider themselves close contacts of a COVID-positive individual.
  - We will discontinue close contact notifications to families of students who are not vaccinated. We highly encourage all members of our school community to be vaccinated as this is the best way to prevent serious complications from COVID-19.
  - Because the Test and Stay program is closely tied to the contact tracing process for unvaccinated individuals, and has not yielded a significant number of positive cases to date, this program will be discontinued.
  - Elementary and PK classrooms will continue to receive general notifications when a student or staff member in the class has tested positive for COVID.
  - We are discontinuing classroom notifications at the secondary level because the sheer volume of emails being sent exceeds what can have a meaningful impact.
  - We will continue to track and notify athletic teams of cases that occur on teams as this has proven to be an area of concern in the past.
  - All cases district-wide and in individual schools will continue to be reported on our COVID Dashboard.
2. This will be our last week for pooled testing in our elementary schools.
  - We will instead shift our time and energy to increasing the use of rapid antigen tests for students who become symptomatic during the school day as a strategy to better detect the virus in our schools. We believe this will be a more effective mitigation strategy given the change in the spread of the virus.
  - You will see an increase in testing of students who become symptomatic as our nurses conclude pooled testing and as we cease our current contact tracing efforts.

## **Additional Information and Background**

### **Contact Tracing PK-12**

Based on current transmission rates in our community and schools, each person should consider themselves to be a close contact of a COVID-positive individual and take appropriate precautions.

Last week, we modified our contact tracing program and began notifying whole classrooms in the event of a positive case within their classroom. This process is efficient for elementary classrooms, but in our JHS and HS, each student is in 5-7 classrooms per day, which results in an inordinate number of notifications to families. Just last week, we sent over 2,500 COVID notifications to families at the high school. We will continue notifying elementary and PK classrooms, as these are smaller, more self-contained communities, but will discontinue notification to high school and junior high school classrooms.

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Additionally, we will also no longer notify individuals who are unvaccinated and in close contact with COVID-positive cases. Please note that we will continue to trace and inform athletic teams of positive cases as this has been an area of concern. The purpose of notifying these individuals was to require additional quarantine time or allow for participation in the Test and Stay program. Test and Stay was very successful in keeping hundreds of students in school who would have otherwise needed to quarantine. However, for the hundreds of students who have had to test daily in order to attend school, there has been a remarkably low positivity rate that does not justify the continuation of this program. At this time, we strongly recommend that all eligible individuals in our school community be vaccinated as the best personal protection against serious complications from COVID-19. We will no longer differentiate between vaccinated and unvaccinated individuals in the contact tracing process.

### **Pooled Testing K-6**

Since the pandemic began, we have implemented many different mitigation strategies including masks, distancing, air purifiers and increased ventilation to name a few. One of the mitigation strategies included surveillance, or “pooled” testing of our student population. Pooled testing was introduced as a strategy designed to trace COVID cases among our students when they did not have access to vaccines and there was a very low rate of community transmission. Much has changed since this program was introduced last year, notably:

- Our students, including elementary students, have access to vaccines and our population is highly vaccinated (>80% for elementary students, and >92% for secondary students)
- The serious complications we understood to be associated with COVID have declined significantly, but have given way to very high levels of community transmission.

Based on the current environment in our schools and state-wide, we are experiencing significant challenges with the pooled testing program that have rendered it ineffective:

- There are delays at the state-level in processing results, which limit our ability to identify and isolate positive individuals using reflex testing within the 5-day isolation period
- The overall positivity rate in the community and our schools is high and we are seeing approximately 30%, but as many as 50% of pools return with positive results.
- The pooled “PCR” tests are detecting old and new infections and are therefore not valid to assess infectivity, particularly in vaccinated children. Because of this, we are not able to consistently identify positive individuals through our reflex testing process. Pooled testing was not intended for vaccinated individuals, and the program is no longer effective given our highly vaccinated status as a district.

For the last year and a half, pooled testing has given us reassurance that there were few cases of COVID in our schools and that we could identify and isolate individuals who were COVID-positive. This is no longer the case, and we strongly believe that continuation of the pooled testing program provides a false sense of security in our community and is not an effective program moving forward.

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**This week will mark our last week of participation in the pooled testing program. Instead, we are significantly increasing our capacity to use rapid tests in our health offices to positively identify any students who show symptoms of COVID.** We believe that rapid antigen testing will be a more effective mitigation strategy during this and future phases of the pandemic, and will focus our effort and resources on this important strategy.

If your child has participated in the pooled testing program, this week will be their last in the program, and we want to thank you. Until recently, this has been an effective tool to keep our schools healthy. As we move forward, we believe a focus on rapid antigen testing of symptomatic students will help us maintain a healthier environment for our students, staff and their families.

**Once again, we cannot stress enough that it is critical to our continued operation that sick students, even with mild symptoms, be kept home from school.**

Thank you for your ongoing support. We recognize this is a challenging time for many in our community. We believe that the changes noted here will allow us to focus our time, energy and resources into mitigation efforts that can have a more positive impact on the health of our schools and community.

Sincerely,

Peter Light  
Superintendent of Schools



Our **vision** is to provide high-quality educational opportunities that inspire a community of learners

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Our **mission** is to develop engaged, well-balanced learners through collaborative, caring relationships

## COVID-19 Update

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January 13, 2022

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## Core Public Health Principles

We established **core public health principles** as the foundation from which we design our tools, interventions, and solutions. They are the “guardrails” within which we must stay and design safer re-entry options.

The principles are used in combination for health decisions around reopening.

- **No single principle will effectively lower risk alone**, and we won't be able to do all of these principles perfectly all of the time.
- **These principles work together** to decrease the risk of transmission.
- **The more we follow these principles, the lower the risk.**
- **We cannot reduce the risk of COVID transmission to zero.** Some risk remains even with maximum adherence, especially if community transmission increases.

*Slide From Parabola Project's Public Health Principles for School Reopening (7/24/20)*

## What's being done to slow the spread of the Omicron variant in the US?



### Detect variants

Robust surveillance to rapidly detect variants



### Slow spread from international travel

Decrease window for required testing before travel to US; increase testing after arrival



### Slow domestic spread

Prioritize case investigation and contact tracing



### Support individual protective actions

Vaccination including boosters, masks indoors and in crowds, testing & isolation



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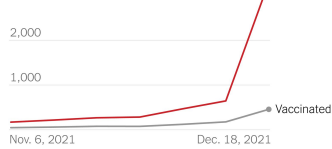
## Vaccination Rates

*ABRSD Data as of December 29, 2021*

## Importance of Vaccination

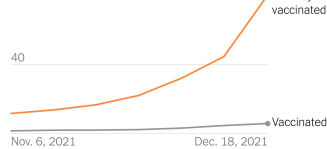
Weekly cases in New York City

3,000 cases per 100,000



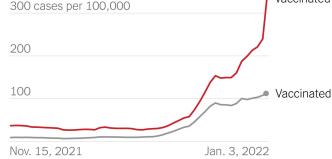
Weekly hospitalizations in New York City

80 hospitalizations per 100,000



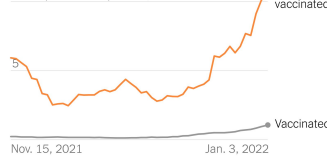
Daily average cases in the Seattle area

300 cases per 100,000



Daily average hospitalizations in the Seattle area

10 hospitalizations per 100,000



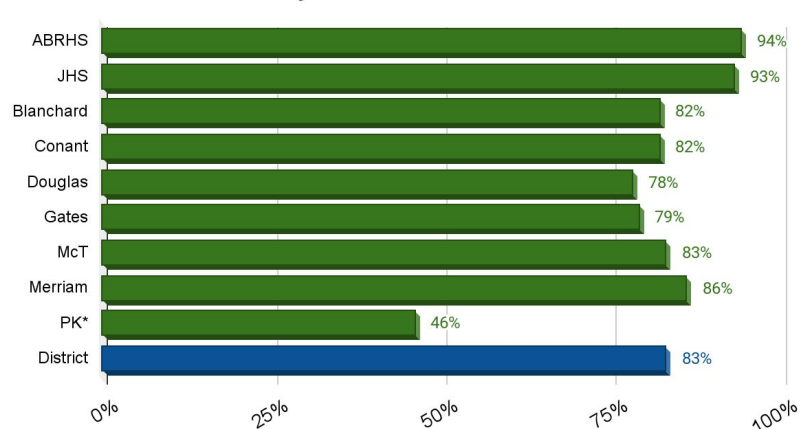
Source: New York Times 1/11/2022 "A Growing Gap"

- Vaccines remain our most important mitigation strategy
- AB Vaccination Rates far exceed statewide rates

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## Vaccination Efforts

AB Vaccination Rates by School



- Continue to work with BOH to provide vaccines and boosters to students
- Planning Booster Clinic for 12-18 y.o students (more info TBD)

Notes: Vaccination rates as of 1/13/22; PK Vaccination rate is reflected as % of eligible 5 year olds, not all students

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# Mitigation

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## Ongoing Mitigation Strategies

- Daily at-home self-screening for students and staff
- School Covid testing program
- Covid vaccine mandate for all staff
- Masks and hand cleaning procedures
- Physical distancing whenever possible and at the greatest distance possible
- Sanitizing/disinfecting of classroom and school spaces
- Students in cohorts (whenever feasible)
- Medical waiting room spaces for suspected COVID-19 cases
- Ventilation systems use recommended MERV-13 air filters / increased air exchanges
- HEPA air purifiers in every classroom and office across the district



## Additional *Temporary* Measures (as of 1/1/22)

- Desks arranged in rows ~3' to the extent feasible
- Removing unnecessary furniture from offices, meeting rooms
- Closing Locker Rooms
- Signage and Markings in Common Areas
- Event Guest Limits/ Virtual Events

## Staff Recommitment to Important Practices

- Adequate Airflow:
  - Air Purifiers running at high settings
  - Windows open
- Minimizing congestion in traffic areas, *if feasible*
- Reducing interactions between student cohorts
- Evaluating cafeteria seating, *if feasible*
  - *Each school has unique space limitations*
- 6' distance during mask breaks (snacktime, etc.)
- Regular hand washing/sanitizing schedules for students

# New Isolation and Quarantine Protocols (12/31)

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## New DESE/DPH Guidance for Isolation & Quarantine (12/28/21)

- Isolation time reduced 10 days → 5 Days
  - Symptoms must be *fully* resolved (fever free for 24 hours)
  - Must remain masked for 5 additional days
- AB revised flowcharts available on website

### Lunch/ Snack - (DESE FAQ 1/6)

*“Like individuals participating in Test & Stay, during meals, masks should only be removed when individuals are actively eating. Additionally, DESE recommends a physical distance of at least 3 feet while eating, as feasible. This means masks must be worn when individuals are waiting for meals or sitting at lunch tables after meals are finished.”*

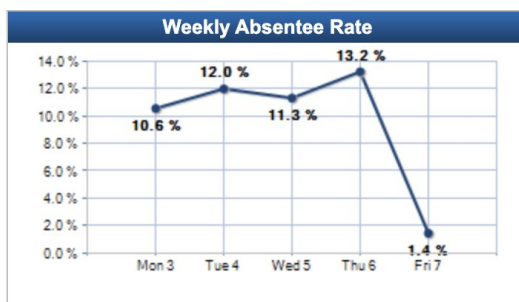
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# Staffing Challenges

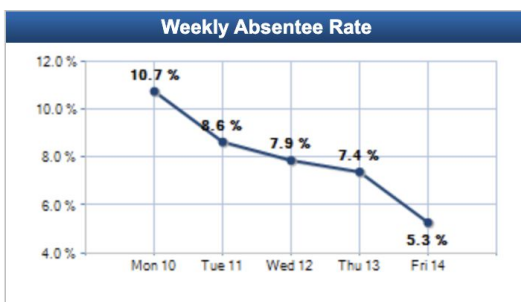
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## Staffing Challenges - Absences

Week of 1/3



Week of 1/10



- Week of Jan. 3, averaged ~120 staff absences per day
- Some improvement week of Jan. 10

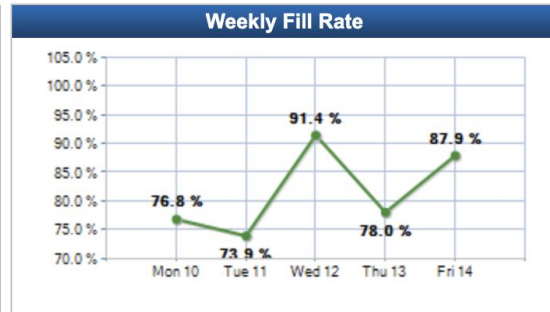
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## Staffing Challenges - Available Substitutes

Week of 1/3



Week of 1/10



- Serious Shortage of Substitutes
- No coverage available for 10-35% of positions that require substitute coverage

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## Other Significant Challenges

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## Contact Tracing

- Case numbers too high for Contact Tracing to be Effective
  - Contact tracing inconclusive
    - Unable to determine patterns anymore
  - Cannot be managed on daily basis
  - Creates false sense of security - we should all assume we are close contacts
- Classroom-wide notification system does not work in secondary schools
  - Too many classes
  - >2,500 emails sent to HS families week of January 3
- Highly time intensive for administrative & nursing staff

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## Pooled Testing

- Not designed for environment with high transmission
  - Designed for <5% positivity
  - Currently approaching 20% positivity in pools
  - ~25% pools coming back inconclusive or positive
- Cannot reflex positive pools consistently
  - Only able to determine positive individuals in ~60% of pools
  - PCR-based pools detecting current and prior infections
  - Particular challenge in highly vaccinated populations
- Significant delays statewide in processing pools
- Trying to reflex test 100's of students daily
- DESE/DPH do not recommend pooled testing for highly vaccinated populations for these reasons
- Highly time intensive for nursing staff - cannot tend to more effective measures

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## Test & Stay

- Has been *highly effective* in allowing more students (close contacts) to remain in school
- Only used for unvaccinated students
- Has shown transmission not occurring in classrooms and schools on a wide scale
  - 1000's of tests given, only 2-3 total positive results
- No significant school-based transmission, even with unvaccinated students
- Highly time intensive

## Looking Ahead

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Shifting the Strategy

## Shifting our Strategy and Efforts

- Despite our best intentions and our community's desire, we do not have staff, time or resources to do everything
- While old strategies may offer feelings of safety, they may no longer be the most effective tools at our disposal
- Need to focus efforts (staff, time, resources) on strategies we believe will have greatest positive impact in mitigating spread
- Several changes to how we do "COVID" (what to expect)
  - Significant increase in rapid antigen testing of symptomatic individuals
  - End of pooled testing program (this week is last week)
  - Curtail widespread contact tracing efforts

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## Focus on Rapid Antigen Testing

- Rapid antigen tests proving to be better real-time indicator of positivity
- Symptomatic individuals more likely to transmit virus
- Ability to remove symptomatic individuals from environment in real time
- Time intensive to complete testing, need to make time available for nurses to do this

Special Note: Families still **must** not send students to school with symptoms. Students must remain home if symptomatic. We highly recommend the use of home antigen tests.

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## Ending Pooled Testing

- For reasons stated previously, program is no longer effective for us
- DESE/DPH do not recommend pooled testing if highly vaccinated populations or vaccinated individuals
- Week of 1/10 is last week of this program

## Curtailing Contact Tracing Efforts

- During this time of extremely high transmission, we should all consider ourselves close contacts
- Will continue efforts in high-transmission environments (i.e. athletic teams) and in select cases where contact tracing may be necessary
- Changes to notifications of positive cases
  - Staff continue to be notified of all positive cases in their classrooms
  - Continue elementary classroom notification of cases
  - Continue reporting cases on District Website (considering shift to state dashboard)
  - Discontinue secondary classroom notifications
  - Changes take effect this week



Questions?