



**Kathleen Cuddy, MPH
Public Health Director
Cayuga County Health Department
8 Dill St.
Auburn, NY 13021**



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Statement from Cayuga County Health Department

The 2021-2022 school year has undoubtedly been amongst the most challenging for schools, staff, parents, and most importantly, children. The Cayuga County Health Department acknowledges the benefit of children to have in-person learning and fully supports keeping children in the classroom. We have worked with schools to implement preventive actions such as physical distancing, daily health screening, universal masking in school buildings and on buses, and cleaning and disinfecting to help keep children healthy and disease free.

School is different this fall than last spring in that children are able to participate in more activities both as part of school and outside of the school community. Consequently, in conjunction with the highly contagious COVID variants, we have more children getting diagnosed with COVID as compared to last year. To help minimize the spread of COVID, students and staff exposed to a person who is positive with COVID must quarantine. Fully vaccinated individuals do not need to quarantine if they are symptom-free.

The New York State Department of Health released a document to local health departments on October 27, 2021 in which updated testing and quarantine requirements for schools was discussed. New York State Department of Health clearly states throughout the document that they do not recommend Test to Stay (TTS) or Test out of Quarantine (TOQ) options but local health departments can choose to diverge from this recommendation. In consultation with our statewide local health department counterparts, it was identified the majority of local health departments are not adopting TTS or TOQ. The Cayuga County Medical Director also provided recommendations to these options.

Test to Stay strategy proposes that students who were exposed in the school setting have an antigen test every day prior to school and if they receive a negative test they could participate in school instruction that day. Students would still be in quarantine for all other activities outside of the classroom, including school-related sport or other activities outside of school such as dance or karate, and at night and on weekends for the duration of the quarantine. Test out of Quarantine strategy requires diagnostic testing to be performed after a period of quarantine, and if negative, the quarantine period would be shortened.

In Cayuga County, and across New York State, both antigen and diagnostic testing resources are limited. Equitable access and distribution to testing is a problem. NYS recently announced they had not received their order from the antigen test manufacturer which limits the State's ability to fulfill orders on behalf of the schools. Additionally, Cayuga County health care facilities and providers use commercial-based diagnostic testing kits and analysis equipment, which also are scarce. Unfortunately, the current supply-chain issues with testing resources is compounded by the increased demand for tests. This has created longer turnaround time for test results and limited availability of appointments. Therefore, while in theory the TTS and TOQ strategies might allow more children to stay in school, if test kits aren't available the strategy cannot be implemented. Testing must be equitable.

Given that these obstacles are beyond our control, the main strategy to minimize the number of children from having to quarantine that local health departments and our partners are focused on is vaccination. Up until this week vaccination was limited to children 12 years and older. For exposed individuals who are not vaccinated, quarantine is necessary to limit the risk of virus spread to other people, especially those who may be more susceptible to worsening symptoms. With the approval of Pfizer for children ages 5-11, the Cayuga County Health Department and private practitioners will soon be rolling out vaccine clinics targeting younger children. Vaccination will provide the opportunity to diminish viral spread and consequently reduce illness in our schools and community. Remember, vaccinated children exposed to a positive COVID case will not need to quarantine unless they have symptoms. Vaccination is what will keep our children in school.

Cayuga County Health Department clinics for vaccination of children will begin the week of November 15, 2021. Our approach will be to offer on-site clinics at schools as well as large scale vaccination clinics at our centrally located clinic site at the Finger Lakes Mall.

Clinic dates, times and locations will be confirmed and issued in our press releases to share with people how to register their child to receive this vaccine.
