

Public Schools of Brookline - Expert Advisory Panel #4 (Public Health, Safety, and Operations)

Panel Statement on Diagnostic Testing and School Re-Opening

Final -- Adopted by Unanimous Vote on August 14, 2020

Our panel is composed of Brookline parents with expertise in public health who are assisting the Brookline School Committee with the difficult process of re-opening the Public Schools of Brookline. Below is a brief, non-technical summary of the discussions the panel has had since June 12, 2020 on the subject of diagnostic testing. For more technical information, minutes, and recordings of the meetings, please refer to the [school website](#).

Advisory Panel 4 Members

Dr. Elena Savoia, Deputy Director, Emergency Preparedness Program, Harvard School of Public Health (co-chair)

Mr. David Gacioch, Partner, McDermott Will & Emery LLP (co-chair)

Ms. Lan Dennie, RN, BS, CMAC, Occupational Health Nurse, Fenway Health

Dr. Benjamin Linas, Infectious Diseases Physician, Boston Medical Center

Dr. Nira Pollock, Associate Medical Director, Infectious Diseases Diagnostic Laboratory, Boston Children's Hospital; Assoc Professor of Pathology, Harvard Medical School

Mr. Boris L. Perlovsky, Director, Innovation Strategy. Cambridge Innovation Center

Dr. Serena Rajabiun, Assistant Professor of Public Health, University of Massachusetts, Lowell

Dr. Vishakha Sabharwal, Pediatric Infectious Diseases, Boston Medical Center

Dr. Benjamin Sommers, Professor of Health Policy & Economics, Professor of Medicine, Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health / Brigham & Women's Hospital

Dr. Lakshman Swamy, Pulmonary/Critical Care physician and Medical Director at MassHealth Payment & Care Delivery Innovation

Dr. Jenny Tam, Senior Staff Scientist, Wyss Institute, Harvard University

1. Panel 4 believes that access to diagnostic testing for COVID-19 with rapid results turnaround time (TAT) is a key component of a multi-pronged strategy to allow as many children and staff as possible to attend school in person this coming school year. To be clear, Panel 4 does **not** think that increased access to rapid TAT diagnostic testing is an absolute public health/safety prerequisite to commencing or continuing in-person school. The purpose of the planned safety measures (masks, hygiene/cleaning, distancing, and ventilation) is to prevent in-school transmission, and symptomatic children and staff should not be in school without confirmation of COVID-negative status. Based on current data on community prevalence and transmission of COVID-19 in eastern Massachusetts, the combined deployment of cohorting, physical distancing, masks (whenever feasible), improved hand hygiene and cleaning, and use of well-ventilated indoor and outdoor space allow for an in-person re-opening that will best reduce risks to teachers, staff, students, and their families. Panel 4 supports an

in-person return to Brookline schools under the current conditions, as appropriately low-risk from a public health and safety perspective.

2. However, Panel 4 believes that without increased teacher/staff/student access to rapid TAT diagnostic testing, PSB is likely to face a major loss of staff and student in-school days. This concern is based on the fact that: 1) COVID-19 testing that is currently available to community members has a turnaround time of several days or more; 2) DESE guidelines (July 17, 2020) require anyone with potential COVID symptoms to be tested; negative test results will be required for return to school once symptoms have resolved, and symptomatic individuals who are not tested will require an extended quarantine (DESE presently recommends 14 days from symptom onset); and 3) Numbers of symptomatic individuals requiring testing are expected to increase during flu season, as cold and flu symptoms overlap with COVID symptoms.
3. Increased access to rapid TAT testing can be achieved by creating a testing site dedicated to students and staff of the Public Schools of Brookline (including non-resident students and staff, and optimally, open to other Brookline employees, as well) to test individuals with symptoms suggestive of COVID-19 (and contacts of known cases) **and ensure a rapid return of test results**. A testing program will allow schools to **remain open** by helping staff and students be cleared to return to school much more quickly and enabling efficient quarantining and contact tracing, when needed, to further minimize transmission. Development of such a testing site will require significant additional resources and support from the Town and the Brookline Health Department. We have not seen any evidence of such Town engagement on this issue to date and that is of concern.
4. Testing of symptomatic individuals and direct contacts of COVID-19 positive cases should be prioritized over broader asymptomatic screening in our opinion, but the latter may be useful to help assuage fears of teachers or other constituents around returning to school. Exploring asymptomatic testing as an additional layer of security is worthwhile, but understanding that at this time, costs far outweigh benefits as compared to other protective strategies. Asymptomatic testing is not necessary prior to re-opening schools in our view and has not been utilized even in most hospital settings. Serial testing of asymptomatic populations may be considered as more cost-effective testing strategies become available.