

FAQs — Pooled COVID Testing at BB&N

What is pooled testing?

Pooled testing, also known as multi-stage, group or batch testing, involves mixing individuals' swab samples together, and then conducting one laboratory test on the group. This approach increases the frequency and number of individuals who can be tested for COVID-19, and ultimately reduces disruption to instructional time and requires fewer resources as compared to individual polymerase chain reaction (PCR) tests.

If the result from the pooled test is negative, then all samples can be presumed negative with the single test. No additional testing is performed.

If the pooled test result is positive, each individual who was part of the pool will need to be tested again individually to identify which sample(s) are positive.

Pooled testing is most effective in areas or situations where the number of positive test results is expected to be low, as was demonstrated by our most recent campus-wide baseline testing. With low rates such as these, repeat testing of individual, non-pooled specimens is an uncommon occurrence.

What is the science saying about pooled testing?

Pooled testing has been shown as an effective way to detect SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, from positive specimens.^{1,2,3} Pool sizes have varied across studies from 5 to 32 individual specimens, but have shown that individual positive samples of SARS-CoV-2 can be detected. At a pool size of 16 samples, sensitivity was 96%, with a false negative rate of about 10%.

One critical element to the usefulness of pooled testing is conducting it in areas or situations where the overall prevalence of COVID-19 remains low, such as at BB&N. Places experiencing higher rates of COVID-19 do not benefit from pooled testing because a large number of pools will likely be positive resulting in more people needing to receive an individual test. We will continue to work with the Cambridge Public Health Department and other partners to monitor COVID-19 in our community-at-large, and will make changes to our protocol accordingly.

¹ Baha Abdalhamid, MD, PhD, Christopher R Bilder, PhD, Emily L McCutchen, MS, Steven H Hinrichs, MD, Scott A Koepsell, MD, Peter C Iwen, PhD, Assessment of Specimen Pooling to Conserve SARS CoV-2 Testing Resources, American Journal of Clinical Pathology, Volume 153, Issue 6, June 2020, Pages 715–718, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ajcp/aqaa064>

² Gupta E, Padhi A, Khodare A, Agarwal R, Ramachandran K, et al. (2020) Pooled RNA sample reverse transcriptase real time PCR assay for SARS CoV-2 infection: A reliable, faster and economical method. PLOS ONE 15(7): e0236859. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0236859>

³ Sunjaya, A., & Sunjaya, A. (2020). Pooled Testing for Expanding COVID-19 Mass Surveillance. *Disaster Medicine and Public Health Preparedness*, 14(3), E42-E43. doi:10.1017/dmp.2020.246

What is the pooled testing schedule at the Upper School?

We will be testing 9th and 10th graders every Monday and 11th and 12th graders every Thursday. Due to the January 18th holiday, we will test 9th and 10th graders on Tuesday, January 19.

When will testing be conducted at the Upper School?

Pooled testing will be conducted during lunch, and should take less than 10 minutes. Students will be required to report to the testing site at their designated time, and will be pooled with nine other students who are also there at the same time and are in the same grade. Testing times will be structured alphabetically by last name, and every student who is on campus for in-school learning and/or athletics will be required to be tested at their designated time.

What happens if my child misses the mandatory pooled testing?

Our goal with pooled testing is to safely keep as many students in school and engaged in their activities as possible. To ensure this program works to the best of its ability, we ask for your support in ensuring your child/ren who attend in-person schooling and athletics be on time for their allotted testing slot. Any student who is absent from school or forgets to show up for the mandatory pooled testing will not be allowed to return to school until the next pooled testing date. For example, if a 9th grader misses mandatory pooled testing on Monday, this student will not be allowed on campus the following day (Tuesday), unless approved in advance. The next time the 9th grader can be on campus is the following Monday when the next round of testing will occur. We recognize that a pool which reads for a positive result may ultimately require a student to miss school/events until individual tests are complete, but we are working to minimize the amount of time missed to the extent possible (e.g., response testing on campus).

Students who miss school for these reasons should contact their teachers to inform them of which class(es) they will miss.

What happens if my child/dren are in a positive pool?

If your child is in a positive pool, you will be contacted via email with directions on retesting at BB&N. At this point, all of the students in this pool will need to remain home until they receive a negative PCR test result. Based on our pilot experience, we estimate a 48-hour turnaround time on results, and students in all positive pools will be re-tested on the next Thursday (for 9th/10th graders) and Monday (11th/12th graders). If you choose to have your child re-tested prior to BB&N re-testing, you may get a rapid⁴ or PCR test at your own expense.⁵

Who sees the results of a pooled test?

BB&N will receive the full pooled testing results and families with a student in a positive pool will receive notification. No other results from a pool will be reported.

⁴ Evidence suggests that an individual in a positive pool may get a rapid test or PCR test.

⁵ Some insurance companies will pay for a rapid or individual PCR test regardless as to the reason why you are being tested. Please check with your insurance company should you decide to be tested on your own.

What are the next steps?

Students will receive an email with information about what to expect and when they should show up for testing. Messages will go out on Friday, January 15th, for testing next week.

What do I do if I have additional questions?

Reach out to Dr. Tammy Calise, Associate Director of Health & Wellness, via email at: tcalise@bbns.org or phone at: 617-800-2433 if you have additional questions regarding pooled COVID testing.