

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20510

October 6, 2021

VIA ELECTRONIC DELIVERY

The Honorable Xavier Becerra
Secretary
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
200 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20201

The Honorable Miguel Cardona
Secretary
U.S. Department of Education
400 Maryland Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20202

Dear Secretary Becerra and Secretary Cardona:

We write in regards to rising hospitalization rates among school-age children who contract COVID-19, particularly the Delta variant, and efforts to implement effective COVID-19 testing policies, processes and procedures in schools as students physically return to classrooms across the country.

We commend President Joe Biden's leadership in reiterating his call to keep students safe in classrooms during the COVID-19 pandemic by encouraging local education agencies to continue vaccinating eligible unvaccinated individuals, while increasing diagnostic testing, among other measures, to protect all individuals, from students to educators and other school personnel.

President Biden's September 10, 2021 speech is consistent with the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) guidance to schools, school districts and States that regular COVID-19 testing should be part of a comprehensive multi-layered approach to safety and infection control, along with COVID-19 vaccination for eligible students older than 12, better facility ventilation and proper use of well-fitted masks in classrooms, among other public health measures.

Vaccination is the leading public health prevention strategy to end the COVID-19 pandemic, but as children under 12 are still ineligible for the vaccine, a layered prevention strategy is critical. With tens of thousands of children in the United States contracting COVID-19, it is clear that our efforts to promote vaccination and mitigation must be improved.

The importance of enhancing school COVID-19 testing capabilities and capacity is clear. As the CDC noted in its August 25, 2021 updated guidance: "Regular testing, along with COVID-19 vaccination, helps protect students, staff, family members and others who are not currently vaccinated against COVID-19 or are otherwise at risk for getting seriously sick from COVID-19," and importantly, "Testing programs help keep students in the classroom and allow them to take part in the other activities they love." Evidence from studies conducted by Mathematica and the RAND Corporation earlier this year also found that weekly screening "of all students, teachers, and staff can reduce in-school infections by an estimated 50 percent."

We are troubled that there are a wide range of policies in our schools that lack the necessary consistency or adherence to best practices for mitigating public health risks associated with reopening K-12 schools for in-person learning in the midst of a pandemic. The implementation of school reopening policies and practices that are poorly aligned with the CDC's guidance may contribute to confusion and worse, could put large numbers of educators, school personnel, students and families at a higher risk of contracting COVID-19.

Despite President Biden's commendable COVID-19 vaccine mandate for Head Start workers and his call for accessible and affordable testing in schools throughout the Nation, along with Federal investments to promote mitigation efforts including providing \$10 billion to expand testing in schools, local educational agencies across the country appear to have struggled to expeditiously establish and implement comprehensive testing programs.

As the U.S. Department of Education continues to implement the "Return to School Roadmap" and CDC continues to update COVID-19 guidance for elementary and secondary schools, we urge your respective Departments work together to prioritize efforts to accelerate State and local efforts to swiftly implement effective and efficient testing programs.

Our Nation should continue working until notably every student, and school staff member, educator and family member or guardian is able to conveniently and regularly receive a COVID-19 test in accordance with public health guidelines. Accordingly, we request that the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the U.S. Department of Education provide the following information:

1. A description of current Federal initiatives to accelerate efforts by schools, local educational agencies and States to spend Federal COVID-19 testing funds to implement effective and efficient COVID-19 testing programs for students, family members and staff throughout the 2021-2022 school year; and
2. Examples of local educational agencies operating COVID-19 school testing programs that both Departments view as modeling a public health and school "best practice" that warrant replicating throughout our Nation.

For many parents and guardians of school-age children – especially adults responsible for children under 12 years of age or children that are immunocompromised – the rising number of children hospitalized with severe COVID-19 illness is alarming.

That is why in addition to focusing on increasing vaccination rates, improving ventilation and promoting the use of well-fitting masks that are tolerated by the child; we strongly urge your respective Departments to redouble efforts to support State and local education officials in establishing effective and efficient COVID-19 testing programs across the country.

Sincerely,



Tammy Duckworth
United States Senator



Kim Schrier, M.D.
Member of Congress



Tina Smith
United States Senator