

Test-to-stay: What happened when Grand Island offered rapid tests in school

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Results from Grand Island Central's pilot test-to-stay program are compelling: Of 193 tests given in the last two weeks, one child tested positive. That means just one child had to quarantine at home, missing school. About 70 other children, who were tested over multiple days, stayed in class.

Both Gov. Kathy Hochul and County Executive Mark Poloncarz have announced that the state would provide more rapid tests for schools to move the test-to-stay program forward, as well providing them to counties to distribute to the general public. "That's just, in my opinion, super positive," Grand Island Superintendent Brian Graham said. "Its success has been remarkable," said Tarja Parssinen, founder of Western New York Education Alliance. "Just think of all of those healthy students who have been needlessly quarantining."

The test-to-stay-in-school program targets children who have been identified as close contacts of someone who tested positive for Covid-19. Gov. Kathy Hochul said Monday that counties will be given the leeway to enact test-to-stay programs, which the federal Centers of Disease Control and Prevention also supports. Grand Island operates a pilot program, which runs through this week, in conjunction with Erie County. County Executive Mark C. Poloncarz said Erie County plans to expand the program. "We do plan on expanding it starting in January, but we are also waiting for further guidance from New York State, because the guidance that comes from New York State may actually change how we're running the pilot in Grand Island," Poloncarz said Tuesday.

Students who are close contacts are told they must quarantine for 10 days, which means they could miss up to eight days of school in a year following the 2020-21 school year that meant remote learning for many students. But if they test negative, they can stay in school. Vaccinated students do not have to quarantine unless they develop symptoms.

Parents and school leaders contend that most of the "close contacts" never get sick, and could be learning inside school buildings. Instead, they are forced to stay home, often with sparse contact with their teachers. And their parents have had to take off work or find another care giver for them during the quarantine.

Graham said around 70 children were tested in the program that started Dec. 6. Their parents bring them into school before classes start to take a rapid antigen test. Results are known within minutes. If they are negative, the student stays in school. If there is a positive result, the student goes home with a parent. The district estimates the program saved 1,152 in-school instructional hours for the students through Monday. A small number of parents decided not to take part, Graham said.