

PRESS RELEASE

NEWTON, MA, SAFER TEACHERS, SAFER STUDENTS COLLABORATION

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Media Contact:
Sena Desai Gopal
sena_desai@yahoo.com

Parent Survey, conducted by Newton's Safer Teachers, Safer Students Collaborative group, shows 95 percent of respondents support surveillance testing in Newton public schools.

Newton, MA (Oct. 5, 2020) – A citywide survey of families with children in Newton public schools has revealed that 95 percent of the 1,244 families responding supported surveillance testing as a back-to-school measure complementing the public health measures in place.

The survey, conducted to gauge the community's support for returning to school with surveillance testing, was prepared by a group of Newton scientists, physicians and parents working with a growing number of communities (known as the Safer Teachers, Safer Students, ST SS, Collaborative) advocating for surveillance testing in schools.

Almost a dozen communities including Wellesley, Chelsea, Somerville, Watertown, Arlington and Revere are working to collaborate on the implementation of SARS-Cov-2 surveillance testing pilots in their schools. Wellesley completed a once-off baseline, voluntary testing of its teachers and students last weekend before returning to in-person learning on October 1 and plans to continue testing of staff for about 12 weeks. Last week, Watertown began voluntary testing of its staff which it will continue once weekly for as long as possible.

On August 26, 2020, Newton Public Schools' School Committee voted for middle and high schools to begin the school year with remote learning. As a result, 7,000 of the district's 12,611 students, more than 50 percent, are not back to school in-person. A limited hybrid in-school option is available for elementary school students.

The survey by the Collaborative showed that of the 1,244 families responding, 85 percent had initially chosen the hybrid model for their children, 12 percent chose remote, and 3 percent chose a combination of hybrid and remote. Of those who chose remote learning (or a remote-hybrid combination), two thirds said that their enrollment preference would have changed to hybrid if testing was in place.

When asked to rate their comfort levels about sending their children back to school most parents responded that they were only "somewhat comfortable" with current safety measures. That number increased three-fold to "very comfortable" if surveillance testing was added to existing safety measures.

One respondent wrote – “I fully support teacher, staff and student surveillance viral testing! I believe it is extremely important to assure low rates of COVID-19 transmission and the safety of our teachers, children, families and community.”

Without state sponsorship, the testing programs among the ST SS collaborative communities are being funded through a varied range of fund-raising efforts, and the survey also assessed the willingness of the Newton community to help fund a limited, informative pilot study. While many respondents felt that the City of Newton or the State of Massachusetts should fund any testing, a significant number indicated a generous willingness to donate to cover the costs of a pilot study.

With Newton’s low level of viral transmission combined with basic public health precautions and ongoing repairs to ventilation systems, greater opening of schools to in-person learning can be done safely. The proposed surveillance pilot will not only assess these safety measures, but importantly determine the infrastructure needed for a more permanent testing program. This survey showed that surveillance viral testing is considered important to our community to help get kids into classrooms in NPS Middle and High Schools, and remain in-person at school.