

Main Headline

A New Covid Testing Model Aims to Spare Students From Quarantine

Sub Headline

More school districts are embracing “test-to-stay” protocols that allow uninfected close contacts to remain in the classroom.

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When the schools in Marietta, Ga., opened their doors on Aug. 3, the highly contagious Delta variant was sweeping across the South, and children were not being spared.

By Aug. 20, 51 students in the city's small school district had tested positive for the coronavirus. Nearly 1,000 others had been flagged as close contacts and had to quarantine at home for seven to 10 days.

“That’s a lot of school, especially for children that are recovering from 18 months in a pandemic where they missed a lot of school or had to transition to virtual,” said Grant Rivera, the superintendent of Marietta City Schools.

Last week, the district changed tack. Students who are identified as close contacts can now continue attending school as long as they have no symptoms and test negative for the virus every day for seven days.

An increasing number of school districts are turning to testing to keep more children in the classroom and avoid disrupting the work lives of their parents. The resource-intensive approach — sometimes known as “test to stay” or modified quarantine — allows students who have been exposed to the virus to stay in school as long as they take frequent Covid tests, which are typically provided by the school, and adhere to other precautions.

Experts agree that children who are infected with the virus should isolate at home, but the question of what to do about their classmates poses a dilemma.

Allowing children who have been exposed to the virus to remain in school does pose a potential transmission risk, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says that it “does not have enough evidence” to support the approach. Instead, it recommends that close contacts who have not been fully vaccinated quarantine for as long as 14 days. (Vaccinated close contacts can remain in the classroom as long as they are asymptomatic and wear a mask, according to the agency’s school guidance.)