



WESTERN NORTH CAROLINA

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On Aug. 21 the Highlands Cashiers Health Foundation announced it would fund a weekly COVID-19 testing program for Highlands School, Summit Charter School and Blue Ridge School.

Highlands School and Summit Charter school began offering testing the week of Sept. 14. The testing will continue on a weekly basis through Dec. 18, as long as schools continue in-person learning.

“We knew that there was a scarcity of testing in the area, and we were just trying to figure out what was the best way for us to fill that need,” said Dr. Richard Ellin, HCHF board member and chairman of the program. Ellin said that the group came up with the idea of using their resources to test at schools and decided this was a great way to move forward.

“We thought that, number one, if we could put a program together where we could test everyone on a weekly basis, that would be sufficient so that if there were significant disease in the community we would know about it sooner than later and the schools could make informed decisions about whether they could continue in-school learning or not,” Ellin said.



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According to Ellin, the board also thought the regular testing would be reassuring to faculty, staff and parents. The foundation inquired with principals at Highlands School and Summit Charter school in Macon County, as well as Blue Ridge School in Jackson County and got a positive response about testing from those principals.

Mountain Park Urgent Care administers the molecular PCR tests and results are generally back within one to three days. Parents must give permission for their child's participation in the testing program.

As of Sept. 28, Principal Brian Jetter of Highlands school said 13 of 65 staff members had opted in for testing, and the parents of 67 out of 347 students had opted in for testing.

"I do expect [the number accepting testing] to grow, I hope it will grow, and I think that even if it doesn't grow, that's about 20 percent of the total numbers. Even that provides a service," said Ellin. "For example, the first week we did testing there were no positives. We tested about a total of 115 people between the two schools, and there were no positives. So that's very reassuring. It's unlikely, not impossible, but unlikely there is a significant prevalence of disease among the 80 percent we didn't test, given that there were no positives in the 20 percent we did test."

According to Dr. Ellin, testing at this level is effective. He said it is better than not doing any testing, though it is not as effective as testing a greater percentage.

"We feel that testing 20 percent is significantly better than not knowing anything," Ellin said.

At a Macon County School Board Meeting Sept. 28 John deVilleville, a Macon County Schools teacher, made a request to the school board that MCS not return to in-person learning until the local positivity rate is 3 percent or less, MCS employ more rigorous COVID-19 testing in schools and provide N95 masks regularly to all students and staff who wish to use them.

"I made those requests specifically to protect the health of our students, the health of the faculty and staff, and to protect the health of our community," said deVilleville.

At the meeting Chairman Jim Breedlove said Superintendent Chris Baldwin would look into it.

According to Dr. Ellin there are three main obstacles to more widespread testing. Funding and the availability of tests play a major role.

"Even if funds were freely available, I'm not sure that we would have access to the number of tests that we need to test everyone on a weekly basis," said Ellin.

The third obstacle is the lack of sufficient community acceptance of both widespread testing, and even that the virus is a problem in the first place.

"I've spoken with principals about where they think resistance is coming from, why they think when offered free testing every week only 20 percent have chosen to take advantage of it. They say they think a lot of people don't want to know. Because if their kid tests positive or they test positive, that means isolating, it means potentially losing income, not being able to go to work," Ellin said. "They also feel that some of it is political. It's no secret that we live in a relatively conservative, right leaning area, and we all know what the politics of COVID have become."