

# Practical steps to reduce the risk of Covid-19 disruption in schools and other education settings

Summer 2022



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## Joint union guidance for schools and other settings

Though there has been extreme pressure on schools and colleges again in 2022, most staff have now had their double vaccination and booster. Our focus has always been, and remains, on preventing educational disruption, which has meant recommending measures to keep staff and children as protected from the virus as possible in very challenging circumstances. Prevalence is still high, and the pandemic is not over. Covid-19 still has the potential to cause disruption to education, for example through new variants.

This revised guidance has been issued by the joint unions (NEU, GMB, Unison, UCU and Unite) for use in schools, colleges and other settings from May 2022. It:

- explains the relevant [public health guidance](#);
- reflects what is required by health and safety law; and
- incorporates the joint unions' steer on how best to implement this in education settings.

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## Risk assessments

- It is still a legal requirement that leaders regularly review and update their overall risk assessment (including measures to identify and reduce risks from Covid-19), in consultation with union reps and staff, whenever circumstances change, to reflect the current level of risk. Revision of risk assessments offers an opportunity for staff to organise around what is important to them collectively.
- Revised procedures should be clearly communicated to staff, students, parents/carers, contractor staff, visitors and visiting workers.
- The position of the most vulnerable staff, and those who are pregnant, should continue to be addressed through individual risk assessments. Read our full joint union advice for staff at greater risk [here](#).

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## Vaccinations

We continue to urge all members to get fully vaccinated, including boosters. This is to protect everyone, including more vulnerable colleagues and students, the community, the provision of in-person education and, ultimately, the ability of the NHS to treat the backlog of serious non-Covid-related conditions. Where necessary, any remaining staff who have not yet been vaccinated should be allowed paid time off so they can receive their jabs and boosters at the earliest possible opportunity. Health professionals are continuing to urge pregnant women to get their vaccines as unvaccinated pregnant women are at greater risk of severe illness and pre-term birth.

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## Ventilation

Covid-19 spreads through the air. Good ventilation reduces the amount of virus in the air and therefore helps reduce the risk from aerosol transmission. It is key to a safer indoor working environment.

- ❑ The level of CO2 acts as a proxy for the Covid-19 risk as people exhale airborne viruses when they exhale CO2. All settings should by now have access to Government-provided CO2 monitors and ventilation measures should keep CO2 below 800ppm in all occupied classrooms.
- ❑ The CO2 monitoring results should feed into a risk assessment. If the levels are consistently above 800ppm, and ventilation cannot be improved, naturally or mechanically, then options available include reducing the number of people in the room, reducing the length of time groups spend in the room, or temporarily vacating the room. Any areas identified as having levels of CO2 consistently above 800ppm should be provided with equipment to supplement ventilation, such as a HEPA filtration unit. The Department for Education rolled out a very limited number of these units,

but most schools were not able to benefit from this scheme. We cannot recommend models, but this [resource](#) should be helpful.

- ❑ Improving ventilation must remain a focus for the long term, to reduce the risk of transmission of other airborne viruses, to aid concentration in the classroom and to help schools and other settings meet their sustainability goals.

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## Face coverings and PPE

- ❑ Face coverings played a valuable role in reducing transmission of the Omicron variant, which could otherwise have been even higher. Although face coverings are no longer recommended by the Government, we encourage schools and other settings to adopt an agile approach and respond proportionately to spikes and outbreaks by reinstating the wearing of masks where necessary as part of risk assessments and in response to local public health guidance.
- ❑ No member of staff or pupil in any setting should be prevented from wearing a face covering in any part of the premises.
- ❑ Personal protective equipment (PPE) should continue to be provided for staff administering first aid, medical care or personal care activities in all educational settings.
- ❑ FFP2 masks should be made available to staff who were previously classified as clinically extremely vulnerable or otherwise at significantly greater risk, and any member of staff who is anxious about their situation.
- ❑ Where face coverings are worn, pupils who rely on lip reading or facial expressions to communicate, can be supported by the wearing of transparent face coverings.

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## Symptoms, testing and staying at home

### Staff

- Employers still have a legal responsibility to follow the government's [public health guidance](#) relating to Covid-19 as well as to take account of their legal health and safety responsibilities as employers.
- [Government guidance](#) states that 'people with symptoms of a respiratory infection, such as Covid-19, and who have a high temperature or do not feel well, should try to stay at home and avoid contact with others. Those who are asked – or choose - to test – and get a positive COVID-19 result should try to stay at home and avoid contact with other people for 5 days following the day of their positive result.'
- It also advises that people with symptoms of a respiratory infection, such as Covid-19 should avoid 'close contact with [those whose immune system means that they are at higher risk of serious illness from COVID-19, despite vaccination](#). If a person has tested positive for COVID-19 they should avoid those people who are at higher risk of serious illness for a 10-day period.'
- The joint unions' view is that, for clarity and to prevent even wider disruption, employers should support all staff reporting any of the [NHS Covid symptoms](#), (note that the list of symptoms has been expanded) or who test positive without symptoms, to stay at home, (and work from home where possible), to reduce the risk of transmission and disruption to education. Staff staying at home should be on full pay and the absence recorded separately so as not to count towards any triggers in absence policies. Employers should also require contractors to comply with this for all their staff working on site.

### Pupils

- [Government guidance](#) recommends that children and young people are not tested for Covid-19 unless directed to by a health professional. (No clinical reason is given why testing children is not recommended.) The guidance advises that children with a positive test result 'should try to stay at home and avoid contact with other people for 3 days after the day they took the test, if they can.'
- According to the Government guidance, children with 'mild' symptoms (which they define as runny nose, sore throat, slight cough) who have not been tested, but are otherwise well, can continue to attend their education setting. 'Those who are unwell and have a high temperature should stay at home and avoid contact with other people, where they can. They can go back to school, college, or childcare, and resume normal activities when they no longer have a high temperature, and they are well enough to attend.'
- We are, however, urging schools to support pupils affected by any of the [NHS Covid symptoms](#) to stay at home for a short period, to reduce risk of transmission and disruption, with online learning and free school meal provision where appropriate. This should also be applied to pupils testing positive with no symptoms. Most importantly of all, we are urging Government to bring back free testing for pupils and staff, and to allow schools to use their existing stocks. Where exams are affected, the exam board should be notified at the earliest opportunity. You can find 2022 special consideration guidance [here](#).

## □ Hygiene

- A continued focus on enhanced hygiene and cleaning regimes, particularly handwashing, is [recommended](#) both in the context of Covid-19 and in preventing outbreaks of other infectious diseases.

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## Staff shortages

- Teachers at a school (other than those employed wholly or mainly to cover, including supply teachers) should be expected only to cover for absence in circumstances that are not foreseeable. Given the ongoing nature of the pandemic, teacher absence as a result of Covid-19 is foreseeable and should be planned for accordingly.
- Teachers should not routinely be expected to cover for absent colleagues, nor should they be expected to teach pupils who they have not been assigned to teach, i.e. pupils who are not registered for timetabled lessons with them, or in collapsed classes. Cover is not an effective use of a teacher's time and collapsing/combining classes is not only cover but increases the numbers of pupils in classrooms, or halls, which may increase transmission of the virus.
- Where teachers are being expected to cover routinely, or accept additional pupils from combining classes, this should be urgently raised with their union rep or branch.
- Any proposed changes in role or responsibility for support staff should be discussed and agreed with the individual staff member. Only suitably qualified teaching assistants (usually HLTAs) should be asked to lead classes, and even then, only in situations not known about in advance and not on an indefinite basis.
- Support staff who are asked to undertake a role they are not trained or qualified for should urgently raise this with their union rep or branch.
- In special schools recruiting suitable cover for absent staff can be challenging and disruptive for pupils. Where schools have staff shortages, they should use risk assessments and discussion with staff and parents, to decide whether additional measures need to be introduced.