



The Rt Hon Gavin Williamson MP
Secretary of State for Education
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Sent by email: sec-of-state.ps@education.gov.uk

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Dear Secretary of State

We are requesting urgent clarity following contradictory and confusing messaging from Government on new self-isolation and contact tracing requirements for educational settings.

On the issue of self-isolation, Government Stay at Home Guidance issued on 13 August 2021 states that from August 16, those who are below the age of 18 years and 6 months will not be required to self-isolate if they live in the same household as someone who develops Covid-19.

- Could you confirm this means children and young people will be able to attend school if a member of their household, such as a sibling they share a bedroom with, has Covid-19?
- Could you confirm that while a PCR test will be advised, this will not actually be required, and children will still be able to attend schools if they decide not to get tested, or while they wait for test results?
- Given that the Government has always stressed the issue of household transmission, on what evidence is this policy change based?

On the issue of contact tracing, it is not clear whether tracing of close contacts in educational settings will actually happen under Department for Education (DfE) guidance.

The main operational guidance for education settings says the following:

'Contacts from a school setting will only be traced by NHS Test and Trace where the positive case and/or their parent specifically identifies the individual as being a close contact.'

Meanwhile, a set of updated FAQs issued by the DfE to all education settings on 28 July contained the following statement:

'Contacts in an educational setting will be traced if the positive case specifically identified an individual as having close contact **which will normally have occurred in a social setting e.g. sleepovers.**

'Education and childcare settings may be contacted, if deemed necessary, by local health protection teams in response to a local outbreak, as currently happens in managing other infectious diseases'.

This appears to suggest that everyday contact in education settings – even when sitting alongside a positive case – is not going to be deemed close contact. This seems to be at odds with the [Public Health England \(PHE\) definition of a close contact](#). If close contacts in educational settings are not traced by NHS Test and Trace, or are not deemed to be sufficiently close because they occurred in an educational setting, they will not even be advised to take a PCR test. This increases the risk that infections will go undetected, subsequently leading to more disruption and illness with the virus spreading more widely across schools.

A further concern is that schools may not even know that potentially infected close contacts of positive cases are attending, because there does not seem to be any requirement for NHS Test and Trace, the parents or the student themselves to let the school know who their close contacts had been.

Worryingly we are heading into a new school year with infection rates 25 times higher, and hospitalisation rates 10 times higher, than this point last year and with most mitigations removed.

Please urgently answer the following questions:

1. What definition of 'close contact' will be used by NHS Test and Trace in educational settings? Will the PHE definition of 'close contact' still apply to educational settings?
2. If not, why are educational settings being treated differently, when mode of virus transmission is the same?
3. If the PHE definition still applies in educational settings, how will contacts be determined by NHS Test and Trace given they have no information about student seating plans and children's contacts in schools, and parents are unlikely to have this information?
4. What number of cases will constitute an "outbreak" in an educational setting?
5. Did PHE/DfE undertake a risk assessment of the new contact tracing system?
6. Will PHE/DfE publish the risk assessment findings and recommendations?
7. Will DfE/PHE circulate to all stakeholders and educational institutions, including early years, a copy of the questions NHS Test and Trace will use to determine the close contacts of pupils and students?

Our priority is to ensure there is no return to the educational disruption we saw at the end of the school year, and the only way to do this is by protecting pupils from the risks of Covid.

It is only 2 weeks until the start of the new term. Staff, leaders, parents and students need clarity about the systems that will operate. They need reassurance that what is in place is based upon robust evidence and assessments of risk which offer the maximum protection from disruption, as well as the risks of developing Covid and Long Covid.

Yours sincerely



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