



Joint union safety checklist for schools and other settings

Measures to slow the spread in schools and other education settings – January 2022

We face yet another critical moment in the pandemic in January 2022, with the dominance of the Omicron variant. This advice has been issued by the joint unions (GMB, NASUWT, NEU, UNISON and UNITE) for use in schools and other settings for at least the start of the Spring term 2022. It will be kept under regular review.

Our priority, as always, is to protect education, and this means keeping staff and students as safe as possible from the impact of the virus. The Government has no plan B for education. By following our guidance schools and other settings can seek to minimise the risk of disruption. According to ONS figures last term, education workers were at greater risk of testing positive for Covid-19 than the general population because of high cases among school children, leading to increased disruption.

Vaccinations

Although it is an individual's choice, we urge all members to get fully vaccinated, including boosters, and to encourage colleagues, who haven't done so already, to do this. This is to protect yourself, your more vulnerable colleagues and students, your community, the provision of face-to-face education and ultimately the ability of the NHS to treat those with serious non-covid related conditions. Where necessary staff should be allowed paid time off so they can receive their jabs at the earliest possible opportunity. Health professionals are particularly urging pregnant women to get their vaccines as unvaccinated pregnant women are at greater risk of severe illness and pre-term birth.

Risk Assessments

It is a critical and legal requirement that leaders review and update risk assessments, in consultation with union reps and staff, in light of the much more transmissible Omicron variant.

- Revised procedures should be clearly communicated to staff, students, parents/carers, contractor staff, visitors and visiting workers and their implementation monitored.
- In special schools revised risk assessments should fully reflect the additional challenges in protecting pupils and staff, particularly where pupils are unable to wear face coverings.
- In secondary schools a staggered start for the new term may be necessary to ensure every pupil is tested on site.

- The position of the most vulnerable staff should be addressed through individual risk assessments. Until we know more about the effects of the omicron variant, although it is not a government requirement, the joint unions urge all employers to permit staff who are clinically extremely vulnerable and pregnant women to work from home. Vulnerable staff should also be offered the option of a non-front-facing role with FFP2/FFP3 masks provided. More detailed joint union [advice for staff at greater risk is available here.](#)

Ventilation

- All settings should by now have access to CO2 monitors and ventilation measures should keep CO2 below 800 ppm in all occupied classrooms.
- The CO2 monitoring results should feed into a risk assessment, and if the levels are consistently above 800 ppm, and ventilation cannot be improved, naturally or mechanically, then options 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 800 ppm should be provided with supplemental ventilation, such as a HEPA filtration unit. The DfE is rolling out a very limited number of these units, but most schools will not be able to benefit from this scheme. We cannot recommend particular models, but this list [Air Purifier Comparison — \(fullplasticscientist.co.uk\)](#) does offer a wider range of options than the two expensive models recommended by the DfE.

Face Coverings and PPE

- Face coverings must already be worn, in line with Government requirements, by pupils and staff in secondary communal areas and by primary staff in communal areas. Until at least 26 January the Government is recommending that face coverings should also be worn by pupils and staff in secondary classrooms and other teaching areas. This includes special schools where children and young people are able to do so.
- Pupils in year 7 and above must also wear a face covering when travelling on public transport and should also wear one on dedicated transport to and from school.
- No member of staff in any setting should be prevented from wearing a face covering in any part of the premises.
- Personal protective equipment (PPE), including FFP2 or FFP3 grade masks as appropriate, should be provided for staff administering first aid, medical care or personal care activities where social distancing cannot be maintained, e.g. in some special schools and nurseries.
- Appropriate PPE should be provided for all catering, cleaning and estates staff.
- FFP2/3 masks should be provided for staff who are clinically extremely vulnerable or otherwise at significantly greater risk and are working in the workplace. (Risk assessments should address whether such staff should be working from home and where it is necessary staff should be supported to do so.)

- Where pupils rely on lip reading or facial expressions to communicate, transparent face coverings should be worn.

Social Distancing

- Measures to minimise mixing, for example keeping groups as consistent as possible, should be reintroduced. **DfE guidance to consider combining classes to address staff shortages will increase virus transmission, leading to further disruption, and therefore should not be adopted.**
- One-way systems, where no longer in place, should be reintroduced to cut crowding in corridors.
- Large gatherings such as whole school or whole year group/key stage assemblies, should be avoided or moved on-line. Face-to-face staff meetings and parents' evenings should not take place. They should be held online and should have appropriate social distancing maintained where there is no alternative to them being held in person.
- Staggered timings for lunch breaks, other breaks and start and finish times should be reintroduced.
- Safe arrangements for students and parents queuing on arrival, parents waiting to collect students, staff supervising students on arrival or departure and reception of visitors should be reintroduced.

Testing and isolation

- Leaders should strongly encourage testing for all staff and pupils at least twice weekly, and where possible daily, including registering of test results. Schools, staff and families should be advised where they can access these.
- Schools should consider texting test reminders, alongside symptom and isolation reminders and advice to parents twice a week.
- Government advice is that people who are fully vaccinated, or aged under 18 years and 6 months, and identified as a contact of someone with Covid-19, whether Omicron or not, should take a lateral flow test every day for seven days to help slow the spread. **The joint unions would urge that, in addition to LFD testing, sibling and other household contacts be encouraged to stay at home until a negative PCR test result has been received, to protect other pupils/staff and families.**
- Where close contacts are unable to get hold of LFDs due to supply issues, they should be supported to work from home for the isolation period.
- We would urge leaders to inform staff, parents and students of any positive cases, as soon as possible, without identifying any individuals directly or indirectly.
- Contractors should be required to comply with this checklist and ensure full pay for all Covid-related absences. Education providers should engage with contractors to ensure consistency in managing all aspects of Covid-19 mitigation measures on site.

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, collapsed classes or multi class assemblies. Cover is not an effective use of a teacher's time and collapsing/combining classes is not only cover, but increasing the numbers of pupils in classrooms, or having large numbers of pupils in halls, will also only serve to 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.
- 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 known about in advance and not on an indefinite basis.
- 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.

Hygiene

- A renewed focus on enhanced hygiene and cleaning regimes is needed throughout the premises, including arrangements for enhanced hand washing, for employing additional cleaning staff, and for additional payment to cleaning and estates staff for extra workload or hours worked.