

Letter from the Secretary of State for Education: testing in schools and colleges

You may be aware that education unions issued a joint statement on Friday 18 December regarding proposals for rolling out lateral flow testing in schools and colleges in the first weeks of January.

Please find below a copy of the Secretary of State's response to that statement.

The Secretary of State met today with unions and key representatives of the school and college sector and reassured them of the support we will provide to help schools and colleges deliver asymptomatic testing. The Department will continue to engage with the sector to implement this programme.

The path of this pandemic is changing. The scientific evidence does not suggest that schools and colleges themselves are driving the transmission of the virus. The actions we are proposing will support settings to stay open to all pupils as well as reduce the risk of transmission within local communities.

Testing will mean more children, teachers and staff can stay in their schools and colleges without the need to self-isolate. We do not underestimate the challenges involved and scale of delivering this, which is why a cross-government operation is being mobilised to support schools and colleges. We have published detailed guidance to help schools with the logistics of the testing process and will be providing more information in the coming days.

Secretary of State's response to the joint unions' statement

David Hughes, Chief Executive, AoC
Geoff Barton, General Secretary, ASCL
Patrick Roach, General Secretary, NASUWT
Emma Knights, Chief Executive, NGA

Kevin Courtney, General Secretary, NEU
Mary Bousted, General Secretary, NEU
Nigel Genders, Chief Education Officer, CofEEO
Paul Whiteman, General Secretary, NAHT

19 December 2020

Dear colleagues,

I am writing following the joint statement issued by your organisations on my Department's announcement about lateral flow testing for schools and colleges for the week commencing 4 January.

First, I would like to thank you for the broad support in your statement for the concept of testing in schools, and your commitment to supporting the national effort to roll out the programme. Testing in schools, both in the early weeks of term and throughout the academic year, is a key element of the Government's ambition to limit the spread of COVID-19, and to ensure that as many children and young people as possible are able to receive full time face to face education. I am conscious of the huge difficulties that the education system has faced since the start of the pandemic, and I am extremely grateful for all of the hard work of leaders, teachers and support staff in supporting the education and wellbeing of our children and young people throughout such a difficult year.

I also recognise and understand the frustration in the system over the timing of this testing announcement – coming so near the end of term when staff are in need of a break. I wanted however to set out why it was so important to make this announcement when we did; to reassure you and your members about what is being asked of schools; and to set out the support available from my Department and more widely.

Rationale for testing and timing

We announced on 15 December that from January, we would be introducing weekly testing of the school and college workforce,

alongside regular testing of the close contacts of confirmed COVID-19 cases, in order to reduce virus transmission and limit the numbers of pupils and staff needing to self-isolate. This approach builds on the success of testing pilots in schools and colleges over the past few months. Indeed, schools are the first sector to introduce widespread regular testing as an alternative to self-isolation given the importance to Government of maintaining face to face education.

As you will be aware the path of the epidemic is changing rapidly. We have seen in recent days increases in infection rates across the country which are likely to continue through into January which will be a key moment for the nation in controlling the spread of the virus. Medical experts provided advice on the risks to me and to the Prime Minister following the latest ONS figures earlier this week, and made clear that there is a public health case for putting in place additional measures, including in schools and colleges. Scientific evidence does not suggest that schools and colleges themselves are driving virus transmission, and we know that the range of protective measures that settings have worked hard to put in place create environments that are as safe as possible for pupils and staff. However, the advice is to seek to reduce mixing of all kinds in the weeks immediately after Christmas, and infection rates remain higher than we would like amongst secondary age students. Based on that advice, and on public health grounds, we are proposing a three-pronged approach:

- supporting secondary schools to set up a regular testing programme to test staff and the close contacts of staff and students who test positive for the virus (as announced on 15 December)
- reducing the number of children in secondary schools and colleges for the first full week of January, with vulnerable children, critical worker children and exam cohorts receiving face to face education, and others learning remotely
- offering secondary schools and colleges help, support and facilities to test as many pupils as possible as they resume face-to-

face education and encouraging them to do so – especially where prevalence of the virus is high

We have had to quickly weigh up the public health need for additional measures, with the operational challenges for education settings that would result from a short notice announcement. We were clear that if this was to be done, it must be communicated before term ended. We were also clear that this would be a difficult ask of school and college leaders, and that is why testing of all students (as opposed to the staggered closure, and the serial testing already announced) is recommended and supported, but not mandated.

These measures, taken together, should reduce risks of transmission both within settings and within the community; and will enable settings to be in the best possible position to stay open and provide full time face to face provision for the remainder of the term. We are asking that pupils not in these priority groups receive remote education until the week commencing 11 January, when all settings should open in full. All pupils in special and alternative provision schools and colleges will attend from 4 January (as their entire cohorts are considered vulnerable), and settings should follow the same testing regime as secondary schools and colleges. This round of testing is not required in primary schools because infection and transmission rates for primary pupils are significantly lower, and therefore all primaries should return as normal on 4 January.

Support to schools and colleges

We cannot do this without school and college participation, and that participation is voluntary. We are providing support in five ways:

- Provision of all test kit, PPE and training, as has been provided in other settings such as care homes and universities

- Reimbursement of reasonable costs for the additional workforce needed to deliver the testing of students on return in January in state-funded secondary schools and colleges
- Armed forces personnel will support directly through planning with schools and colleges
- Guidance and training for schools: we have issued guidance and held a webinar for all schools. Further guidance, including more webinars, videos, detailed operating procedures and letter templates, will follow in the coming days
- An additional INSET day to plan for the testing programme and remote education.

A number of other sectors have successfully delivered asymptomatic testing, and in institutional settings many have done so using their own workforces. We recognise the rapidity with which testing will be stood up in the schools that test pupils as they return, and the need for schools to continue to provide education, and we are therefore providing workforce funding and military support, and a strengthened offer of guidance and instruction. Feedback from school leaders who have participated in testing pilots and seen lateral flow tests in use has been positive. The lateral flow test is easy to administer – taking just 90 seconds to complete and 30 minutes to deliver a result – and it requires brief training for a small team of dedicated staff. Secondary age children can do their own ‘swabbing’, so the staff are not carrying out a procedure on a child, but organising the process and ensuring the results are reported.

The pandemic has caused unparalleled challenges for us as a country and it is down to the sheer hard work of teachers, support staff and those working in our early years settings that we have been able to keep young people in education and support the most vulnerable families.

Despite the enormous challenges, approximately 99% of schools have been open every week since term began and millions of pupils are continuing to benefit from lessons in class. This week 20,000 students received their autumn exam results and I know schools had to work especially hard to make these exams possible.

I know that this extra round of testing and week of remote education adds to the pressure on school leadership teams during this pandemic. They have worked tirelessly to make sure school communities are not only open but are also the same welcoming, positive places they always have been. We understand and appreciate how you feel at being asked to do more now.

However, we also know how much many school and college leaders want to be able to use testing to support education; and we have also been advised that this approach is the most effective way to keep the maximum possible number of students in face-to-face education through the spring term and beyond, and also to help limit the spread of the virus in the community. I do fully appreciate that knowing sooner that this would be recommended would have been better; but having had it recommended, we cannot ignore it; instead, we would like to work with you as constructively as we possibly can to strengthen the support we are giving to help schools and colleges take up the offer of more testing for pupils at the start of term.

Building on the incredible work schools and colleges have done this year, this will help to reassure students, parents and teachers about returning to school and college, minimising disruption during the spring term, and helping identify positive cases.

I would like to offer the opportunity to discuss this further with me. My office have been in touch to set up a discussion. I would also very much welcome your comments on the attached revised guidance which we are due to publish on Monday, so that we can make it as helpful and supportive as possible.

The Rt Hon Gavin Williamson CBE MP

Secretary of State for Education