

Education Secretary's statement on coronavirus (COVID-19): 02 July 2020

Today, I am going to concentrate on our plans for the autumn for schools, early years and further education. Getting our children back to school is a vital part of our national recovery from the Covid-19 outbreak. Our children's futures depend on it. They will be the doctors, the teachers, the engineers of tomorrow and we must make sure they are able to achieve their dreams.

More and more parents are being reassured by the measures we are taking to keep their children safe and are letting them return to schools and nurseries if they are eligible to do so. As of this week there are more than 1.6 million children back in our schools.

If you are one of those parents, I'd like to say thank you for putting your trust in us. I know many of you had doubts, and may still do. I want you to know that I treat my responsibility for your children with the utmost gravity. Their safety and wellbeing is my top priority. In welcoming more children back, we have followed not only the best scientific advice but also what other countries have been doing to manage a successful return for their children.

At my last briefing, I told you how it was my intention for all children to be back in school in September. Today I want to give you more details about how we are going to make that happen.

But before I do, I'd once more like to thank the fantastic school and college staff, childminders, nursery workers and carers who are all making this return possible.

Schools, nurseries and early years settings have been welcoming more children back since the first of June. They have been keeping children in small consistent groups, with stringent infection control, hygiene and cleaning measures in place.

Now that infection rates are falling, we can relax these bubbles and from 20 July we can lift the restrictions on early years settings, who will be able to return to their normal group sizes, although other safety measures must remain in place.

We know that keeping contacts to a minimum is still one of the best ways to reduce the risk of infection and from this autumn, when the whole school population returns, we are asking schools to make sure that they continue to minimise contacts. This should be done by distancing where possible and by keeping classes or year groups separate from one another.

We have suggested, for instance, that schools may stagger the start and end of a school day and that they keep their corridors as free from congestion as

possible.

We have issued full guidance on the approach schools and colleges should take and I expect them to apply this in a way that works most effectively for them, their students and their wider communities.

We know that maintaining distance and bubbles may be more challenging in schools where children and young people have special educational needs and disabilities, so we have issued specific guidance for them.

If anyone in a nursery, school or college develops Covid-19 symptoms they can already be tested. From September we are going to give all schools and colleges a limited number of home testing kits to give to any children and staff who are unable to get to a testing centre.

Parents expect their children to be safe in school, but they also expect them to be getting a first-rate education. Which is why, from September, we will be asking schools to resume a broad and ambitious curriculum and we expect exams to go ahead as normal in the summer of 2021.

We all know that the best place for children to learn is in school, which is why I have been so determined to get them back there as soon as we could. From September, attendance will once again be mandatory and no child should be out of school unless it has been agreed. This will be crucial if we are to minimise the effect of the pandemic on every child's long-term educational development.

I have already announced a £1 billion Covid catch up package to help children make up lost ground, including a £650 million catch up premium for state-funded primary, secondary and special schools and a £350 million National Tutoring Programme for the most disadvantaged pupils.

I am confident that by adopting this carefully planned return in September, we will be in a good position to recover and rebuild our education system and ensure that none of our children lose out. By working together we will make sure that their hopes and dreams for the future are not going to be knocked off course.