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Letter from PHE and NHS Test and Trace to school and college leaders

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To all school and college leaders,

As schools and colleges return for the autumn term and you welcome back pupils and students, we understand that this may raise some concern about the risks of transmission of coronavirus. Along with all schools and colleges across the country, we know you are putting in every effort to follow the guidance and ensure that children and students can return safely as the new term starts. To aid this work we wanted to write with further advice with regards testing and shielding.

Testing

The Department for Education has worked closely with Public Health England (PHE) and NHS Test and Trace to ensure that we are doing all we can to minimise the potential risks of spread. A key part of this is the appropriate use of testing to help identify people who are positive and subsequently their contacts. We have made testing available throughout the country and anyone with symptoms can book a test online or over the telephone through 119 to get the certainty they need to protect themselves and those around them.

Crucial to our overall support for schools and colleges is ensuring that everyone with coronavirus symptoms has access to a test as soon as they develop those symptoms. It is vital that we learn from the recent Scottish experience, where the return of schools saw a huge increase in demand for tests from people without coronavirus symptoms. We want to avoid a similar surge in test demand as England's schools and colleges return to ensure that we continue to prioritise our testing capacity for those with symptoms and to avoid children, students and their families self-isolating unnecessarily.

To ensure we identify those with coronavirus while avoiding a huge increase in demand for tests from people without coronavirus symptoms, we ask that you recommend to your pupils, students and staff who feel unwell, that they get tested if:

- they develop one or more of the main coronavirus symptoms:
 - a high temperature
 - a new, continuous cough
 - the loss or change of their sense of taste or smell, or
- they are recommended to get tested by a healthcare provider (e.g. GP or nurse)

If a pupil, student or staff member develops one or more of the main coronavirus symptoms described above, only they should be tested. There is no need for their households to have a test, unless they are also symptomatic. Unless a pupil, student or staff member has one of the three main coronavirus symptoms, they should only be tested if instructed otherwise by the local authority, health protection team or their GP. As schools and colleges across England return, pupils and students may feel unwell for example with a sore throat, stomach upset or a headache. These pupils and students don't need to book a test but may need to stay off school or college and seek medical advice through their GP or pharmacist as usual.

Please do communicate this to the parents of the children at your school and the students at your college; we know that they listen to you and trust your advice. Can you please also share this letter with your school nurse or relevant trained first aiders. Directors of Public Health and local PHE Health Protection teams are on hand to support you on this most vital mission to get our children and students back to school and college, learning happily and safely.

Shielding pupils

We now know much more about coronavirus (COVID-19). Except in areas with local lockdown restrictions shielding advice was paused on 1 August 2020 which means that even the small number of pupils and students who will remain on the shielded patient list can also return to school or college, as can those who have family members who were shielding.

Specialists in paediatric medicine have reviewed the latest evidence on the level of risk posed to children and young people from coronavirus (COVID-19). The latest evidence indicates that the risk of serious illness for most children and young people is low. In the future, we expect fewer children and young people will be included on the shielded patient list and far fewer children and young people will be advised to shield whenever community transmission rates are high.

However children and young people will only be removed from the shielding patient list by their GP or specialist, following consultation with the child or young person and their family, and other clinicians where appropriate. So children or young people who received a shielding advisory letter early in the epidemic will be encouraged to talk this through with their GP or specialist at their next appointment. For those few children or young people who do need to remain on the shielding list for the longer term, details will be retained so that they and their families can be assured they will be contacted again should community transmission rates rise in the future.

Therefore, schools and colleges should welcome back children and young people who have previously been shielding unless they are:

- in a local lockdown area with specific shielding restrictions, or
- have been advised to self-isolate because they, their family or a close contact have COVID-19 infection, or
- they have recently been specifically advised to remain off school or college – for example with a new serious diagnosis such as active cancer

Yours,

Yvonne Doyle, Medical Director and Director of Health Protection, Public Health England

Susan Hopkins, Interim Chief Medical Adviser of NHS Test and Trace