



Rt Hon Nadhim Zahawi MP

Secretary of State

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It was an honour to have been appointed Education Secretary back in September, and such a great privilege to work with the carers, early years practitioners, teachers, support staff, lecturers and social workers working in, and with, our nurseries, schools, colleges and universities.

My commitment is to pursue and support excellence for every child and every learner. That means academic excellence and skills that lead to brilliant jobs but also, the surrounding support and care that allows every child to take advantage of those opportunities and make the most of them. To appropriate your own language, I believe that the work we are doing in this Department will also help extend a ladder of opportunity across the education system, from adapting summer exams to providing devices. I look forward to working with you and the members of the Education Committee to help take this agenda forward.

As my predecessor did, I would like to continue to regularly update you on the Department for Education's response to coronavirus (COVID-19). We have now met our commitment on the rollout of devices and our attendance figures are now published bi-weekly, so the letter will move to a monthly update. This letter covers the period between 8 September to 16 December 2021. We will, of course update you again after the Christmas recess.

Omicron

On 29 November a number of new measures were introduced in education settings following the emergence of the Omicron variant in the UK. Further Plan

B measures were announced on 8 December, these and the accompanying guidance issued are set out further in the letter below.

The 29 November changes were:

- Face coverings should be worn in communal areas of universities, colleges and schools by staff, visitors and pupils or students in year 7 and above.
- Close contacts of suspected or confirmed Omicron cases in all educational and childcare settings will be required to isolate for 10 days (in line with the rest of the population) regardless of age or vaccination status. Education and childcare settings are not expected to undertake contact tracing.
- All educational and childcare settings should continue to encourage regular LFD testing for staff and students 3-4 days apart, and continue to use increased testing (e.g. daily) for contacts of (non-Omicron) cases where recommended by a Director of Public Health to manage an outbreak or in areas of high prevalence.
- All secondary schools have been asked to prepare to test their pupils once on-site – using LFD tests – on return in January.

I know that this is a significant additional ask, but testing continues to play a vital role in keeping COVID-19 out of schools. Testing all pupils in school boosts testing participation and will help reduce transmission after a period of social mixing over the holidays.

These measures were introduced as a precaution while more information is gathered and assessed on the variant's transmissibility and any possible effect on our vaccines. Since 29 November we have, however, learned more about the new variant and the move to Plan B from 12 December.

JCVI issues advice on second doses for 16 to 17 year olds

On JCVI advice, we are already vaccinating 16 to 17 year olds with a second dose of the Pfizer vaccine. For those not in an at risk group, the second vaccine dose should be given 12 weeks or more following the first vaccine dose. If a parent / guardian or child are at at high risk from COVID-19, they are eligible for a second dose from eight weeks after the first dose (via a GP surgery or a walk-in site with a letter from a GP).

All adults aged 18 to 39 years should be offered a booster dose, in order of descending age groups, to increase their levels of protection.

On 8 December, the Prime Minister announced that all adults over 18 should be offered a booster vaccination before the end of December. Booster doses should be given no sooner than three months after the primary course.

DfE's Spending Review settlement

Since my appointment as Secretary of State, I have made our Spending Review

settlement my number one priority and I am very pleased with the deal we now have.

We need to tackle the impact of the pandemic head on, by ensuring all students catch up on lost learning as soon as possible – while continuing our ongoing important work to raise education standards in schools by improving the quality of teaching and supporting every school into a strong trust.

Nearly £2 billion over the Spending Review 2021 period will be dedicated to supporting young people to catch up on missed learning. This takes the overall investment dedicated towards pupils' recovery to almost £5 billion. This includes an additional £1 billion of funding directly to schools to support catch-up.

COVID-19 Response: Autumn and Winter Plan 2021 & Plan B Measures

As you are aware the government has published the 'COVID-19 Response - Autumn and Winter Plan 2021' setting out plans for autumn and winter 2021/22 in England. It includes the government's "Plan A" - a comprehensive approach designed to steer the country through autumn and winter 2021/22. It also outlines a "Plan B" which would only be enacted if the data suggests further measures are necessary to protect the NHS. It includes plans to continue testing in secondary schools, further education and higher education for the rest of this term, as well as extending eligibility for a free flu vaccination to secondary school children.

The education contingency framework which provides guidance on the principles for managing local outbreaks of COVID-19 in all education and childcare settings. It covers all types of measures that settings should be prepared for and provides an overview of the support local authorities can expect from regional and national teams. We have kept the contingency framework up to date throughout the period covered by this letter, with the latest update being on 27 November. We have asked education and childcare settings to revisit their plans for managing COVID-19, outlining how they would operate if any of the measures described within the contingency framework needed to be introduced.

The full plan can be found at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-response-autumn-and-winter-plan-2021>

As you are aware, following the emergence of the more transmissible Omicron variant the government has moved to Plan B as published in the Autumn and Winter Plan 2021. This has been necessary because the data suggested that further measures are needed to protect the NHS.

Given the pressures on school staff, we also announced that the COVID-19 workforce fund had been extended to 18 February 2022.

This meant further actions for all education sectors, for example for schools on testing, certification, ventilation, managing a recommendation that some staff could work from home and actions for extremely vulnerable children and adults. New guidance was issued to all sectors on 9 December and a full list can be found further below.

Adaptations in 2022 summer exams to ensure fairness for students

GCSE, AS and A level exams in England next summer will be adapted to maximise fairness and help students reach their potential.

Following a public consultation, on 30 September, the government and Ofqual have confirmed changes such as a choice of topics in some GCSE exams like English literature and history; advance information of the focus of exam content, to help students focus their revision; and support materials like formulae sheets in maths.

These plans recognise the disruption caused to this year group's education as a result of the pandemic, while balancing the need to return to exams as the fairest possible form of assessment. With exams set to return, Ofqual has also set out its approach to grading, following the last two years which saw an overall higher proportion of students receiving top grades compared to pre-pandemic years.

Next year will be a transition year to reflect the recovery period, with grade boundaries to be set by exam boards reflecting a midway point between 2021 and 2019, so that more students get higher grades in 2022 than before the pandemic. This approach will provide a safety net for this year's students as well as a step back to normality, with results expected to return to the usual grade profile by 2023.

Care leavers and disadvantaged pupils to benefit from £126 million investment in new laptops and tablets

The department has announced an expansion of the *Get Help with Technology* programme through a new £126 million funding programme.

The investment means a range of students and learners will receive new devices to support their education and help keep them connected to peers and professionals, including:

- up to half a million more disadvantaged children and young people in England
- up to 10,000 devices for children with a social worker and those leaving care
- children who have recently arrived from Afghanistan, to help them to adjust to life in England and support their education.

Additional devices will be provided to schools and colleges to help give children and young people who are not in school or college due to Covid access to lessons, keeping them connected to their classmates and teachers.

Update on the rollout of devices

The government has provided over 1.3 million laptops and tablets to help schools, colleges and other FE institutions throughout the coronavirus pandemic.

The scale of deliveries was increased following the announcement on 5 January 2021 about a national lockdown and restricting attendance in schools and colleges but has since decreased following the return to schools on 8 March.

On 14 December we published the latest figure of 1,679,785 devices having been delivered since the start of the scheme. The latest full data on laptops and tablets is available at <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/laptops-and-tablets-data>

Attendance

The department's analysis from week 50 data indicates that 88.9% of pupils were in school on Thursday 9 December with 99.9% of state-funded schools open. Data for attendance in education and early years settings during the coronavirus outbreak for week 50 can be found here: [Attendance in education and early years settings during the coronavirus \(COVID-19\) pandemic, Week 50 2021 – Explore education statistics – GOV.UK \(explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk\)](https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/explore-education-statistics/attendance-in-education-and-early-years-settings-during-the-coronavirus-covid-19-outbreak/2021-week-50)

The department's analysis from week 48 data indicates that 89.3% of pupils were in school on Thursday 25 November with 99.9% of state-funded schools open. Data for attendance in education and early years settings during the coronavirus outbreak for week 48 can be found here: [Attendance in education and early years settings during the coronavirus \(COVID-19\) pandemic, Week 48 2021 – Explore education statistics – GOV.UK \(explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk\)](https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/explore-education-statistics/attendance-in-education-and-early-years-settings-during-the-coronavirus-covid-19-outbreak/2021-week-48)

The department's analysis from week 46 data indicates that 91.5% of pupils were in school on Thursday 11 November with 99.9% of state-funded schools open. Data for attendance in education and early years settings during the coronavirus outbreak for week 46 can be found here: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/attendance-in-education-and-early-years-settings-during-the-coronavirus-covid-19-outbreak/2021-week-46>

The department's analysis from week 44 data indicates that 88.2% of pupils were in school on Thursday 21 October with 99.9% of state-funded schools open. Data for attendance in education and early years settings during the coronavirus outbreak for week 44 can be found here: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/attendance-in-education-and-early-years-settings-during-the-coronavirus-covid-19-outbreak/2021-week-44>

The department's analysis from week 42 data indicates that 90% of pupils were in school on Thursday 14 October with 100% of state-funded schools open. Data for attendance in education and early years settings during the coronavirus outbreak for week 42 can be found here: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/attendance-in-education-and-early-years-settings-during-the-coronavirus-covid-19-outbreak/2021-week-42>

The department's analysis from week 40 data indicates that 89.5 % of pupils were in school on Thursday 30 September with 99.9% of state funded schools open. Data for attendance in education and early years settings during the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak for week 40 can be found here: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/attendance-in-education-and-early-years-settings-during-the-coronavirus-covid-19-outbreak/2021-week-40>

The department's analysis from week 38 data indicates that 91.9% of pupils were in school on Thursday 16 September with 99.9% of state funded schools open. Data for attendance in education and early years settings during the coronavirus outbreak for week 38 can be found here: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/attendance-in-education-and-early-years-settings-during-the-coronavirus-covid-19-outbreak/2021-week-38>

Other key updates

In addition to the above, please see below recent key updates from the department.

The department has published guidance on:

- Academic mentors. The guidance describes how schools and academy trusts can apply for subsidised tutoring as part of the national tutoring programme to help pupils catch up on missed learning. The guidance can be found at <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/academic-mentors>
- Tuition partners. The guidance provides information on how schools and academy trusts can apply for subsidised tutoring as part of the national tutoring programme to help pupils catch up on missed learning. The guidance can be found at <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/tuition-partners>

The department has updated guidance on:

- School attendance. The guidance covers registers and attendance codes (including circumstances due to COVID-19), school hours and term dates and improving school attendance. The guidance can be found at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/school-attendance>
- Entry testing for admission to state-funded selective schools during the COVID-19 pandemic. The guidance can be found at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-assessment-processes-for-selective-school-admissions>
- Special schools and other specialist settings during the COVID-19 outbreak. The guidance can be found at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/guidance-for-full-opening-special-schools-and-other-specialist-settings>
- Protective measures for providers of community activities, holiday or after-school clubs, tuition and other out-of-school settings offering provision to children during the COVID-19 outbreak. The guidance can be found at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/protective-measures-for-holiday-or-after-school-clubs-and-other-out-of-school-settings-for-children-during-the-coronavirus-covid-19-outbreak>

- COVID-19 operational guidance for higher education providers. The guidance can be found at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/higher-education-reopening-buildings-and-campuses>
- Actions for FE colleges and providers during the COVID-19 pandemic. The guidance can be found at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-maintaining-further-education-provision>
- Transport to schools and colleges during the COVID-19 pandemic. The guidance can be found at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/transport-to-school-and-other-places-of-education-autumn-term-2020>
- Actions for early years and childcare providers during the COVID-19 outbreak. The guidance can be found at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-early-years-and-childcare-closures>
- Actions for schools during the coronavirus outbreak. The guidance can be found at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/actions-for-schools-during-the-coronavirus-outbreak>
- Help with technology for remote education. The guidance provides information about the support available for educational settings and local authorities for remote and face-to-face education, and access to social care. The guidance can be found at <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/get-help-with-technology-for-remote-education>
- Coronavirus financial support for education, early years and children's social care. The guidance can be found at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-financial-support-for-education-early-years-and-childrens-social-care/coronavirus-covid-19-financial-support-for-education-early-years-and-childrens-social-care>
- What measures education and childcare settings should be prepared to introduce to manage COVID-19. The guidance can be found at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-local-restrictions-in-education-and-childcare-settings>

- Recovery premium funding. The guidance provides information on the additional funding in the 2021 to 2022 academic year to support schools with education recovery following COVID-19. The guidance can be found at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/recovery-premium-funding>
- Providing school meals during the COVID-19 outbreak. The guidance can be found at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-free-school-meals-guidance>
- The initial supply of COVID-19 home testing kits for pupils, teachers and staff for schools and further education providers. The guidance can be found at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-test-kits-for-schools-and-fe-providers>
- Information for parents and carers about attending schools, nurseries and colleges during COVID-19. The guidance can be found at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/what-parents-and-carers-need-to-know-about-early-years-providers-schools-and-colleges-during-the-coronavirus-covid-19-outbreak>
- Responsibility for exams. It is for schools, colleges and exam centres and covers who should enter students for exams, the health arrangements for exams and the support DfE is providing. The guidance can be found at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/responsibility-for-autumn-gcse-as-and-a-level-exam-series>
- Guidance for parents and carers of children attending out-of-school settings during the COVID-19 outbreak. The guidance can be found at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/guidance-for-parents-and-carers-of-children-attending-out-of-school-settings-during-the-coronavirus-covid-19-outbreak>

The Education and Skills Funding Agency has updated its guidance on:

- COVID-19 2021 qualifications fund for schools and colleges. The guidance can be found at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/dfe-exam-support-service-claiming-costs>
- Senior mental health lead training grant funding for eligible state-funded schools and colleges. The guidance can be found at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/senior-mental-health-lead-training-grant-funding>
- School-led tutoring. This guidance provides information about accessing grants to source own tutoring provision to support education catch up. This guidance is for school leaders, school staff and governing bodies in eligible schools and academy trusts, as well as local authorities. The

guidance can be found at
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/school-led-tutoring-conditions-of-grant>

Ofsted has updated its guidance on:

- The latest information and guidance about Ofsted's inspection work in schools and early education settings. The guidance can be found at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/schools-and-early-education-inspection-update-academic-year-2021-to-2022>

Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission has updated its information on:

- Inspections of local area services for children and young people with special educational needs and/or disabilities. The guidance can be found at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/local-area-send-inspections-information-for-families>

On 9 December 2021, following the Prime Ministers announcement on 8 December 2021, we updated the guidance to education settings as follows:

- Actions for schools during the coronavirus outbreak includes actions school leaders should take to reduce the risk of transmission of coronavirus (COVID-19) in their school. The guidance can be found at: [Actions for schools during the coronavirus outbreak – GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/actions-for-schools-during-the-coronavirus-outbreak)
- The guidance for school leaders, teachers and school staff during the COVID-19 outbreak was also issued on 9 December and can be found at [Guidance for schools: coronavirus \(COVID-19\) – GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/guidance-for-schools-coronavirus)
- Similarly, actions for other sectors and specialisms can be found at the following links:

[Actions for early years and childcare providers during the coronavirus \(COVID-19\) outbreak – GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/actions-for-early-years-and-childcare-providers-during-the-coronavirus-outbreak)

[Special schools and other specialist settings: coronavirus \(COVID-19\) – GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/special-schools-and-other-specialist-settings-coronavirus)

[Actions for FE colleges and providers during the coronavirus pandemic – GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/actions-for-fe-colleges-and-providers-during-the-coronavirus-pandemic)

[Higher education providers: coronavirus \(COVID-19\) – GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/higher-education-providers-coronavirus)

[Protective measures for holiday or after-school clubs and other out-of-school settings for children during the coronavirus \(COVID-19\) outbreak – GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/protective-measures-for-holiday-or-after-school-clubs-and-other-out-of-school-settings-for-children)

Guidance for parents and carers of children attending out-of-school settings during the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak – GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)

Providing apprenticeships during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic – GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)

- Also on 9 December, Ofqual published the National Reference Test (NRT) results and contextual analysis, which can be found at: Ofqual publishes NRT results and contextual analysis 2021 – GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)

Further guidance and updates were issued on 10 December.

- These covered transport to schools and colleges which can be found at Transport to schools and colleges during the COVID-19 pandemic – GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)
- On test kits and their use in children's homes at Coronavirus (COVID-19) test kits for children's homes
- On children's social care services at Coronavirus (COVID-19): guidance for children's social care services
- On advice for parents and carers at What parents and carers need to know about early years providers, schools and colleges during COVID-19

On 14 December we updated guidance on gov.uk for each of the sectors to reflect that **Daily Testing of Covid Contacts (DTCC)** is now recommended for contacts of COVID-19. This covered early years and childcare, schools, holiday and out-of-school activities, special schools and other specialist settings, transport to schools and college, FE colleges and providers, HE providers, and what parents and carers need to know about these arrangements.

- Also, on 14 December, we issued guidance for schools, colleges and exam centres on who should enter students for exams, the health arrangements for exams and the support DfE is providing. The guidance can be found at: Responsibility for exams – GOV.UK (www.gov.uk).

On 15 December we published some minor clarifications on daily testing, including for children's care social services.

- Also, on 15 December we published information about funding to support schools facing significant staff absences and financial pressures with the costs of staff cover for the period from 22 November 2021 to 18 February 2022, with the extension of the COVID-19 school workforce fund. This guidance can be found at Coronavirus (COVID-19) workforce fund for schools – GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)

On 16 December we announced funding (COVID-19 workforce fund for colleges) to support colleges and special post-16 institutions with the costs of staff absences from 22 November until spring half-term 2022. This guidance can be found at [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) workforce fund for colleges – GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/coronavirus-covid-19-workforce-fund-for-colleges)

- Also, on 16 December we issued information on priority appeal payments, eligibility and making a claim for schools, colleges and other exam centres. The guidance can be found at [Priority appeals centre payments – GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/priority-appeals-centre-payments). Guidance for schools, colleges and exam centres and for the private candidate support grant was also updated to reflect that the claims service for DfE 2021 qualifications funding was now open.

Finally, Ofqual has provided a rolling qualifications update for schools, college and training providers.

- This updates on information on vocational and technical qualifications which have been disrupted by COVID 19, with the guidance found at [Ofqual: rolling update – GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/ofqual-rolling-update)

I hope you find this information useful.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'N. Zahawi', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Rt Hon Nadhim Zahawi MP
Secretary of State for Education