



**Rt Hon Gavin Williamson CBE MP**  
Secretary of State

Sanctuary Buildings Great Smith Street Westminster London SW1P 3BT  
tel: 0370 000 2288 [www.education.gov.uk/help/contactus](http://www.education.gov.uk/help/contactus)

28 August 2020

Dear colleagues,

As we begin the start of a new academic year, this year more than ever I am filled with admiration for all that you do for children and young people up and down the country. When I last wrote to you at the end of the summer term, I expressed my gratitude for all that you had done to support your pupils through the disruption caused by the coronavirus (COVID-19). Since then, you have continued to go above and beyond to support them over the summer and prepare for their full return this autumn. I hope that you and your colleagues have also found some time to rest and relax. I continue to be immensely grateful for all that you are doing and will continue to do.

I also wanted to take the opportunity to apologise to you and your students for the problems which arose over exam results. We had worked hard with Ofqual to construct the fairest possible model in the extremely challenging circumstances created by the pandemic, which meant that running exams was not possible this summer. Unfortunately, it became clear that in England – as in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, which had put in place similar arrangements – the process of allocating grades had resulted in more inconsistency and unfairness than could be reasonably resolved through an appeals process. Ofqual therefore concluded that it was better to offer young people and parents certainty by moving to centre assessment grades, and whilst I supported that decision, I very much regret the distress that has been caused to students and their parents, and the additional pressure which it has placed on teachers and other school and college staff. I am grateful to you for all the work that has gone into supporting your students through this challenging time.

### **Welcoming back all children and young people full-time**

We are all aware of the importance of getting all of our children and young people back into education. The Chief Medical Officers and Deputy Chief Medical Officers of England, Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales recently set out clearly [the evidence of risks and benefits to health from schools opening](#), concluding that the risk of long-term harm from COVID-19 due solely to attending school is low while the risk of long-term harm from not attending school is high.

We all know the impact that time out of education can have on children's outcomes. That is why the return of all pupils to school and college this term is a national priority. The guidance published by the Department for Education on 2 July set out the actions you should take to minimise the risk of transmission of

coronavirus (COVID-19) in your school or college, including the Public Health England endorsed 'system of controls'. Thank you for all the work you have been doing to put these measures in place, to reduce risks and to reassure you staff, parents, children and young people about the return to school.

This new term will feel different, but I know you will be working to make it as positive an experience as possible. As you implement the measures set out in the system of controls in a way that works for your individual circumstances, it will be important that you continue to minimise contact between pupils and staff by grouping children and young people by class or year, and maintain distance where possible. Your knowledge of the needs of your schools and communities will allow you to make informed judgments about how to balance delivering a broad and balanced curriculum or study programme with the measures needed to manage risk, whilst giving confidence to parents and pupils that school or college really is the best place for our children and young people to be.

As well as encouraging regular handwashing, enhanced cleaning and ensuring good respiratory hygiene, secondary schools (and schools with pupils in year 7 and above) and colleges will have the discretion to require face coverings in communal areas where social distancing cannot be safely managed, if they believe that it is right in their particular circumstances. In local intervention areas, schools and colleges should implement this approach for all students in year 7 and above, staff and visitors. Face coverings should not be worn in the classroom, where other measures can be taken to reduce the risks, and where their use will likely hinder teaching and learning.

The safety and wellbeing of you, your staff and your pupils has always been my priority. All staff, pupils and their families will continue to have access to testing if they develop COVID-19 symptoms. You will be provided with a small initial supply of home test kits to provide to children and staff who develop symptoms while at school or college and who may otherwise be unable to access a test. Every school or college that has been attended by someone who tests positive will receive direct support and advice from their local Public Health England health protection team. You will also receive a small amount of personal protective equipment (PPE), including clinical face masks, aprons, gloves and visors, as well as the hand sanitiser needed to put on and take off PPE. This one-off supply is being provided free of charge by the Department of Health and Social Care to help build resilience across the education sector to respond to any suspected cases of coronavirus (COVID-19) in the small number of cases where it might be needed. The instances where it is needed is set out clearly in the guidance.

The detailed guidance for schools is available here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/actions-for-schools-during-the-coronavirus-outbreak/guidance-for-full-opening-schools>

While we all look forward to welcoming every child and young person back to school and college, we also need to plan for the possibility of local interventions. In the event of local restrictions, we have been clear that schools should remain open as far as possible, and plan to say more about this shortly.

All of this effort to reduce risks and make schools and colleges as safe as possible is important in securing the return of all children to full-time education.

On 17 August, the government launched a 'Back to School' campaign which seeks to reassure parents and explain measures that schools are taking to reduce the risk of transmission. Please continue to communicate clear and consistent expectations around attendance and the steps you are taking in your school to families and pupils.

On behalf of my colleagues across Government, I say thank you again for all of your efforts, your resilience and your service to our country's children and young people as we continue to respond to and recover from the COVID-19 pandemic.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Gavin Williamson', written in a cursive style.

**Rt Hon Gavin Williamson CBE MP**  
**Secretary of State for Education**