

Guidance from the Department of Education on Schools Pathway for COVID-19: The Public Health approach

School reopening is now underway following months of intensive planning and effort by school management and staff. The Department of Education has been working with education partners and wider stakeholders to support the system to meet the challenges of reopening and keeping schools open during this very difficult time. The Department has the responsibility to ensure that school reopening has been informed at all times by the latest public health advice and essential to that has been the engagement and communication with the Department of Health and the HSE. As you are aware, the guidance issuing from this Department as part of the Roadmap for Reopening has been underpinned by the recommendations of the Health Protection Surveillance Centre and the Chief Medical Officer.

We all want to keep the school system open and operating as fully as possible as we continue to live with the Covid-19 pandemic. The Department of Health and the HSE has been working to develop a Schools pathway document for Covid-19, setting out the Public Health approach to managing isolated confirmed cases of Covid-19 within the school community, and also the principles that will underpin the management of outbreaks or potential outbreaks and the aligned testing strategy within an educational facility. Their document, which will be published later today is attached here for your information.

Please note the following key points:

- The response to confirmed cases or outbreaks of Covid-19 in the community or in a school is the responsibility of and will be led and managed by **Public Health HSE**. All decisions as to appropriate actions following a confirmed case or outbreak will be made by their teams in the context of a full Public Health Risk Assessment procedure according to the principles set out in the document attached. Any actions to be taken by the school will be communicated directly by Public Health HSE. School management will be informed as and when such actions such as exclusion of children or staff; partial or full closure, are deemed necessary on public health grounds. If the school is not so informed, it has **not been deemed necessary** by Public Health.
- It is inevitable that with confirmed cases of Covid-19 circulating within the community, there will be suspect or confirmed cases amongst pupils and staff attending, or working within, educational facilities.
- However, children will also continue to display symptoms of many other circulating respiratory viruses. It is known that young children often have a persistent cold. A child with a blocked or runny nose, but no fever can attend school but if they require paracetamol or ibuprofen, they must stay at home for 48 hours and parents or guardians should contact the GP to assess whether a test is required.
- If a child displays symptoms which **may** be consistent with Covid-19, the school should contact their parent or guardian and ask them to collect their child as soon as possible. The child should be cared for appropriately by a staff member whilst they are waiting to go home. The isolation space should be cleaned and contact surfaces disinfected when vacated. The staff member who has cared for the child with symptoms during this time does not need to go home unless subsequently advised to by Public Health HSE.
- At this stage, **no further action** by the school is required.

- In particular, schools are asked to note that they should **not** inform other parents or staff members that a pupil or staff member has gone home due to their symptoms. Other pupils or staff do **not** need to be removed from class, including siblings or other household members.
- When the GP of the child or staff member has assessed the symptoms to be consistent with Covid-19 infection, e.g. fever OR a new cough, shortness of breath, deterioration of existing respiratory condition OR symptoms of aguesia or dysgeusia (essentially loss of or changes to the sense of taste) and the person is referred for a test, at this point the person becomes a suspected Covid 19 case and household members including siblings should be withdrawn from school by their parent or guardian.
- Where no evidence of Covid-19 is detected by the test, the child or staff member should remain at home only until he or she is clinically well enough to return to school (unless specifically requested by HSE to do otherwise). In particular, all diarrhoea symptoms need to have been resolved for 48 hours prior to return to school. Household members can return to school immediately following the receipt by the parent or guardian or staff member of a “not detected” result.
- When a case has been confirmed, the Medical Officer of Health and teams will liaise directly with the school and inform them of the confirmed case as necessary and will undertake a Public Health Risk Assessment to inform any further actions and recommendations.
- Core to this assessment will be the likelihood of onward transmission from the confirmed case and will be informed by an urgent discussion with the school to establish any appropriate isolation for identified staff or pupils. Every school setting is unique and therefore the risks will be unique too, for example they will vary according to whether they are e.g. Special educational needs settings, primary or secondary or boarding schools and other factors specific to each school. This may include the effectiveness of the implementation of recommended HPSC risk mitigation measures and a range of other considerations.
- The definition of close contacts within a school will be variable and determined by a risk assessment that will take account of individual factors within each school or class. **It will not be automatically assumed that a whole class will be deemed as close contacts.** Close contacts will be directly notified by the HSE and advised to restrict their movements and present for testing on day zero and day seven. Close contacts will restrict their movements for 14 days even in the event that Covid 19 is not detected in both of these tests.
- **There is no blanket policy to test entire classes or years.** The testing strategy will be aligned to the Public Health Risk Assessment which may recommend widespread swabbing within a class or school under HSE mass testing procedures.
- In the event of an outbreak, Public Health will determine between a range of possible interventions, from exclusion and testing of a small group or pod of pupils up to and including closure of an affected facility.
- All schools are required to have a summary of key information to assist Public Health in their Public Health Risk Assessment ready to be provided on request.

All schools should prepare a summary outlining the following information to be ready for immediate provision to the public health authorities to support the management of Covid-19.

- A brief description of the school (type, numbers of staff and students and special features).
- A list of staff and students with appropriate contact telephone numbers.
- A broad description of classrooms.
- An outline of the staff and students movements around the school, between lessons and breaks.
- An up to date list of “pods” and “bubbles”.