

# Coronavirus crisis

## What you need to know:

### Face masks and personal protective equipment (PPE) in schools and colleges



#### Ten points on the wearing of face coverings to reduce the risk of transmission and on circumstances where medical masks and other personal protective equipment (PPE) may be appropriate.

- 1** Face coverings which are not medical standard masks are not intended to protect the wearer. They are intended to reduce the risk of transmission of Covid-19 if the wearer has it.
- 2** The latest advice from the Department for Education (DfE) states that generally face coverings are not recommended in education settings but that schools and colleges have the discretion to require their use in indoor areas where social distancing cannot be maintained and it is seen as the right thing to do. In areas of [national intervention](#), however, where transmission rates are high, the guidance states that in schools/colleges where year 7 pupils and above are educated face coverings should be worn by adults and pupils when moving around indoors, including in corridors and communal areas.
- 3** The NEU believes that this position is unclear and that the approach taken in Scotland and Northern Ireland should be adopted, ie that face coverings should be worn in communal areas in all schools/colleges (not just those in areas where transmission rates are high) and that this should not be a matter of individual discretion for head teachers.
- 4** The NEU believes that, while the DfE advice remains in place, any students or members of staff who choose to wear a face covering for purposes of personal or collective reassurance should be permitted to do so. The NEU expects schools and colleges to respect this reasonable position. This reflects the [Health and Safety Executive's advice](#) that if staff choose to wear face coverings, this should be supported by employers. Should any head teacher seek to prevent the wearing of face coverings, the NEU will support members who wish to secure a reversal of that position.
- 5** In certain circumstances, school and college staff may require medical face masks and other PPE to reduce the risk of transmission of Covid-19 by students. Where risks cannot adequately be controlled in other ways, [the law requires](#) that PPE must be supplied by employers. Risk assessments in relation to certain types of work with students (in particular those with multiple or profound special needs) might require the provision of PPE such as medical face masks, face visors, aprons and gloves.
- 6** The [\(DfE\) position](#) is that such PPE is only needed in a very small number of situations - where an individual child, young person or other learner becomes ill with Covid-19 symptoms, and only then where a distance of 2 metres cannot be maintained, and where a child, young person or learner already has routine intimate care needs that involve the use of PPE, in which case the same PPE should continue to be used.

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- 7** The NEU disagrees with this position and believes that the DfE has failed to fully understand the risks to staff working in settings such as specific learning disability and profound and multiple learning disabilities and also in other early years and SEND settings, where close personal contact with pupils who cannot control behaviour such as spitting, coughing or sneezing, or whose behaviour or learning needs to be physically managed, creates airborne risks which cannot be controlled in other ways. Cleaning and laundry staff and anyone administering first aid or medical care should also be provided with appropriate PPE as necessary following a risk assessment.
- 8** The NEU therefore advises that staff working in such circumstances should be provided with PPE. Where PPE is needed it must be appropriate for the individual and training must be given in its proper use and disposal (hearing aid users cannot wear ties around the ears, while British Sign Language users or those who need children to see their mouth will need clear masks).
- 9** Risk assessments should also consider the need for appropriate PPE to be provided for staff who are defined as clinically vulnerable, including pregnant women, or those who have vulnerable family members, before their return to work in school. The NEU advises that extremely clinically vulnerable staff and women in the third trimester of pregnancy should be permitted to work from home and this advice is not affected by any offer to provide medical grade PPE to such staff.
- 10** The NEU emphasises that other safety precautions such as washing hands and enhanced cleaning may not be sufficient to protect staff and students. Proper consideration must therefore be given to schools' and colleges' policies on the wearing of face coverings and provision of PPE.