



Special schools in lockdown

Should every pupil with an Individual Development Plan (IDP) in a special school come into school?

No, not every pupil will be able to come in. There is no 'one size fits all' approach for special schools but it is important to reduce community transmission so the number of pupils attending special schools must be reduced, as with mainstream schools.

The NEU thinks that head teachers in special schools will need to work with families to establish which students can be safe at home. It is important to get the numbers coming into special schools as low as possible during the lockdown. In many special schools during the last lockdown, rotas were arranged for pupils coming into school to offset the mental health pressures of being at home and allow students to access therapies.

The NEU is advising special schools to use rotas and part-time, in-school provision during the lockdown to keep numbers of students in school lower and to offer additional and timely face-to-face support to students and families who need it most.

Is every student in a special school with an IDP counted as 'vulnerable'?

The NEU is advising that not all pupils with a IDP need to be educated in school, given the urgent need to break the transmission of Covid-19. Despite the Welsh Government advice, which defines every student with Additional Learning Needs as vulnerable, we are advising that it will not be possible for every pupil with ALN to attend their special school. Where the special school has links to regular supply teachers or can recruit supply teachers with the relevant specialist skills, we are advising that special schools use supply teachers to increase teacher numbers and reduce ratios and class sizes.

The NEU advises that special schools should update individual student risk assessments in discussion with classroom staff and the family to decide whether a student should come into school but that the numbers of students attending need to be reduced across the school.

Vulnerable students will encompass students who are medically vulnerable and those who are socially vulnerable or identified as children in need, with a social worker involved with the family. Pupils who are medically at greater risk from catching and being ill from Covid-19 should be at home accessing remote learning. Pupils where families will really struggle to cope with the student at home should be given priority to attend, where possible, or where there are significant concerns for the student's mental health or wellbeing; or safeguarding concerns. This is a balancing act and the head teacher should work closely with the staff in the school to establish appropriate numbers of students, with safe and appropriate staffing levels.

The NEU is advising special schools to use rotas and part-time, in-school provision during the lockdown to keep numbers of students in school lower and to offer additional and timely face-to-face support to students and families who need it most.

How should special schools approach prioritising who should attend?

Special schools should only be open for children of critical workers (where neither parent is able to work from home), those who are at a safeguarding risk and pupils for whom, after an individual risk assessment, the school deem it more beneficial to be in school for at least some of the time. This would include assessment of mental health considerations, the need for access to therapies, and the student's individual needs, for example, if the student lives in an environment with little space and where regular movement is crucial for the child or young person.

It is important to keep student numbers in school as low as possible to reduce transmission of Covid-19.

Where the special school has links to regular supply teachers or can recruit supply teachers with the relevant specialist skills, we are advising that special schools use supply teachers to increase the teacher numbers and reduce ratios and class sizes.

The NEU is advising special schools to use rotas and part-time, in-school provision during the lockdown to keep numbers of students in school lower and to offer additional and timely face-to-face support to students and families who need it most.

What about staff?

Only the special school staff needed to support pupils in school should be on site and all others should work from home. In the last lockdown, many special schools operated rotas for both students and staff and this should be used again this time.

Staff who are clinically extremely vulnerable (CEV) in a special school should have the same protections as those in other schools and be enabled to work from home. All staff working in special schools should request an updated risk assessment for the spring term 2021. These are minimum standards for keeping everyone safe and ensuring reasonable working conditions.

If you do not feel safe in your workplace you should discuss your concerns with local officer who can advise you on the next steps.

PRU under lockdown

Should every student in a pupil referral unit (PRU) come into school?

Although most students in PRUs and alternative provision have been defined as 'vulnerable' in the Welsh Government January 2021 advice, the NEU believes that schools need to work with families to establish whether students need to be in school all week, whether some could attend using a rota or part-time system or some could learn from home.

There is no 'one size fits all' approach for alternative provision and the NEU recognises the complex needs of these students. However, it is important to reduce community transmission and protect staff and student health and so the NEU is advising that the numbers attending PRUs must be reduced, as with mainstream schools.

The NEU advises that PRUs should update individual student risk assessments in discussion with staff and parents/carers to decide whether a student should come into school. We advise that the numbers attending need to be reduced overall across the school, using rotas and part-time provision.

Our head teacher is saying that the Welsh Government advice says all pupils in PRUs are vulnerable?

Students who are medically at greater risk from catching and being ill from Covid-19 should be at home, accessing remote learning, with pastoral support put in place. Even if all students have an IDP, and/or are vulnerable, the NEU is advising that not all can attend as usual.

Students where parents/carers will really struggle to cope should be given priority or where there are significant concerns for the student's mental health or wellbeing; or safeguarding concerns. We recognise that this is a very difficult balancing act and the head teacher should work closely with staff to establish safe numbers of students, with appropriate staffing levels. The NEU believes that your right to work in a safe work environment must not be compromised.

We think head teachers need to interpret the Welsh Government January advice in light of their health and safety obligations. We fully recognise the complexity around bringing in appropriately qualified supply teachers to create smaller groups. However, where a PRU or alternative provision setting has links to regular supply teachers or can recruit supply teachers with the relevant specialist skills, we are advising that heads should employ additional staff to increase teacher numbers and reduce ratios and class sizes.

The NEU is advising PRUs and alternative provision settings to use rotas and part-time in-school provision, where possible, to reduce numbers of students in school and to offer elements of face-to-face support and respite for parents/carers who need it the most.

I do not feel safe in my PRU because so many students are still attending this spring term. What are my options?

Only the staff needed to support the students in school should be on site, and all others should be enabled to work from home.

Staff who are clinically extremely vulnerable (CEV) or 28 weeks pregnant or more in a PRU should have the same protections as those in other schools and be enabled to work from home. All staff working in PRUs should request an updated risk assessment for the spring term 2021. Here is a link to our summary of measures <https://neu.org.uk/advice/coronavirus-dos-and-donts>

If you think matters are not safe in your setting, contact your NEU rep, hold a virtual meeting to discuss your concerns and make representations to your head teacher. If you do not have a school rep, contact the NEU locally for support and advice.

FAQs

Can I wear a mask/face covering in school when I am working closely with a ALN child?

The NEU's position (in line with HSE advice) is that any member of staff should be permitted to wear a mask or face covering should they wish to do so. In this instance, this may be because of concerns about working closer than the recommended safe distancing with a child supporting their learning due to special educational needs or disability.

Use the questions in the joint union checklist and the special school checklist supplement to discuss with your school leaders the safest way of working with ALN pupils.

More broadly, the latest Welsh Government advice states that in classrooms where contact groups exist and other control measures are in place the marginal benefit that may be gained by the use of face coverings has to be balanced with the likely negative impact on the learning experience, including hearing and social communication. Face coverings are therefore not recommended for use in the classroom. In secondary schools, face coverings should be worn by adults and pupils in all areas outside of the classroom. Face coverings should also be worn by pupils in year 7 and above on dedicated school transport.

Some of our pupils need personal care (changing etc). What can staff do to keep safe when doing this?

Whenever intimate personal care is provided staff must wear gloves and aprons; this should be considered a priority for personal protective equipment. Whether staff wear facemasks for undertaking personal care should be considered in individual risk assessment and discussion with the staff team. Some special schools, who are screening pupils by taking their temperature on arrival consider, in conjunction with school nurses, wearing masks to be unnecessary. However, advice from medical professionals in your school may differ. It is important that this is negotiated with staff providing personal care so that all staff remain safe.

It should be noted that the Welsh Government have confirmed that if you provide personal and intimate care to pupils with complex needs, you will be included as part of the priority list with social care workers in the vaccine roll-out.

Most of the children in our school use dedicated school transport. How can we make sure they are safe?

Local authorities and schools should be working together to make arrangements for the safe use of dedicated school transport including carrying out risk assessments for different pupils and journeys as well as for drivers and escorts. Protocols for social distancing and agreed use of face coverings should be discussed as well as cleaning arrangements for vehicles.

The NEU joint checklist for schools includes questions to ask about safety on dedicated school transport.

I am an educational psychologist. How can myself and others, such as specialist teachers, keep safe when we are moving between schools?

The Welsh Government advice states that peripatetic staff and specialist teachers can move between schools. The NEU recommends that you ask to see the safety precautions that each school has in place before attending. Where possible you may be able to continue some work using remote sources, particularly where medically vulnerable children continue their learning from home.