



The ‘Covid Class of 2020’: Returning to school with SEND

This article forms part of a series on the impact of coronavirus in the education sector.

The government has committed to schools fully re-opening in September. All schools and educational settings will be planning risk control, operational and support measures to minimise the infection risk. But returning to school at a time of uncertainty and adaptation brings particular considerations for children and young people with Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND).

Government guidance

The DfE has issued [guidance on the full re-opening of schools](#) in September, which covers expectations for children with SEND in mainstream schools. It has also produced Guidance entitled “[Supporting children and young people with SEND as schools and colleges prepare for wider opening](#)”, which is intended to support specialist settings to prepare for September.

Both sets of Guidance recognise that some children and young people with SEND will need specific help and preparation for the changes to the routine that virus containment measures will involve.

Back to school

All children and young people considered vulnerable and / or who have EHC plans are expected to attend their educational setting from September, provided it is appropriate for them to do so. It may not be appropriate if, for example, a risk assessment advises against attendance or if there are shielding concerns for the child or young person or in their household.

Where a pupil cannot attend their setting due to clinical or public health advice, settings are expected to immediately offer access to remote education and to monitor this activity. The DfE Guidance, “[Help children with SEND continue their education during coronavirus](#)”, and the resources it references, will be relevant for pupils who are unable to return in September.

While parents and young people may be anxious or concerned about returning to school, the focus is to be on supporting them with the return and providing reassurances that there are plans to reduce risk.

Preparing for the transition

Partial school closure has been disruptive for all pupils and may have an impact on behaviour across the board. Many children and young people will have found lockdown difficult socially and emotionally and may be anxious and fearful about return. For children and young people with SEND, this time may have been extremely difficult and many will need specific help and preparation for this change to routine.

The Guidance asks teachers and SEND coordinators to plan to meet needs, for example through using social stories or arranging parent and pupil school visits before term starts. It is expected that schools and educational settings contact parents and young people to involve them in planning for return in September. Schools and SENCOs may also want to think about the sensory environment of the school and take additional steps to make classrooms sensory-friendly to ease the transition back.

Right at the start of lockdown, local authorities were asked to carry out a risk assessment for all children and young people with an EHC plan to determine whether they would be able to have their needs met at home in a safe environment. These will likely prove useful to schools planning for individuals' return.

The Whole School SEND consortium is offering training on supporting pupils with SEND returning to mainstream school and on transition to other settings, which may prove useful to schools thinking about how to best support their returning pupils.

SEND provisions in September

Change can be daunting for children with SEND and going back to school this coming term will be a particularly big transition period. Even where a child or young person had been attending their setting before the summer holidays, school in September may not look like it did before term ended.

Of course, schools and settings are facing unprecedented circumstances and a degree flexibility and adaptation can be expected. But the DfE has set clear expectations for some aspects of school life that will be important to returning pupils with SEND.

Most importantly, there is an emphasis in the Guidance on keeping provisions for SEND in place. Specialists, therapists, clinicians and other support staff, in both mainstream and specialist settings, are expected to go back to providing interventions as usual. Schools and settings have also been told that they can resume non-overnight educational visits, including trips connected with preparation for adulthood. That said, it is recognised that there may be some changes to staff deployment and schools may need to use staff flexibly in mainstream settings. But the Guidance requires schools to make sure appropriate support is available for SEND pupils and that any redeployments should not be at the expense of pupils with SEND.

The Guidance also states that children with dual placements should be able to continue to attend both settings. Again, this might require adjusted arrangements to minimise the risk of greater contact that children will need to be prepared for. Schools and setting should note that it is clearly stated that pupils should not be isolated as a solution to the risk of greater contact. However well-intentioned such measures may be from a virus containment perspective, this could of course risk a huge negative impact on a pupil already adjusting back to a new normal.

So while it has been clearly communicated that those with SEND should not be losing out in September, it will be important to keep a careful watch to make sure that children and young people with SEND are not more acutely disadvantaged as a result of adaptations.

A sticky point in government planning for September has been whether PPE should be worn in schools. While this might protect staff and minimise the risk of catching or spreading covid-19, the visual and practical impact of this equipment could be disconcerting for pupils –particularly those with SEND. The [government guidance](#) is that PPE in educational settings should not normally be needed. Even face masks, which are currently required in public indoor settings for those over the age of 11, will not be expected in schools. Unless children show symptoms of coronavirus, the only PPE that would routinely be worn in the school or setting should be worn when class returns. So while returners won't need to be prepared for teachers in visors, gloves or plastic suits on return, other risk-containment measures may well be in place that children and young people can be prepared for.

Communication between pupils, parents and schools to prepare and manage expectations as to what the school environment will look and be like on return can be important to helping children transition back.

What will happen to EHC plans?

Generally speaking, the DfE doesn't think repeating a school year because of coronavirus will be necessary. But in a small number of individual cases, it may be appropriate to extend a child or young person's EHC plan. In most cases, it is envisaged that this will consist of an individualised programme for just a term or half a term. An extended plan will need to be on the decision of the local authority following a review of the young person's needs. Parents and young people can appeal to the SEND tribunal if they disagree with the LA's decision.

There will also be some young people who have turned 19 during the partial closure period. Unfortunately, school funding regulations will not usually allow for those over 19 to remain in their educational setting, unless the Secretary of State for Education gives exceptional approval. If the local authority decides that a young person will be best served by remaining in a school setting, they must apply under the normal rules through the established Education and Skills Funding Agency process.

Catch up support

The Government has announced a £1b package to provide extra support to pupils to help make up for lost teaching time, which is to be paid as a one-off grant to all state-funded primary, secondary and special schools in the up-coming academic year. There is also a National Tutoring Programme being rolled out, which is intended to deliver one-to-one tuition to the most disadvantaged and vulnerable young people.

Returning to school will be difficult for everyone, and communication and cooperation between children and young people, families and schools will be important to helping children and young people transition back.

If you want to chat to our specialist 3 Hare Court education team about back to school preparation, SEND provisions or regarding any wider queries, please get in touch via clerks@3harecourt.com.

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