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5 July 2021

Dear Parent/Carer

### **Update on Covid-19 in schools**

I am writing to you to update you on the situation with Covid-19 and its impact on our schools and schools across the country. Many of your children have experienced significant disruption in recent weeks, caused by the need to self-isolate if they are the potential contact of a positive case. We share all the concerns and frustrations of pupils/students and parents when this happens, and we are doing everything we possibly can – within the guidance and advice we are given - to minimise the impact. Given the rapidly changing situation, it seems sensible to write to you directly, on behalf of all the schools in The Education Alliance trust and give you as much information as I possibly can.

### **Current situation**

As you will be well aware, infection rates are rising rapidly again across the country, driven by the much more transmissible Delta variant. While we are all delighted and relieved by the apparent success of the vaccine programme in breaking the link between the virus and hospitalisations, we are very concerned at how quickly the virus is spreading amongst the unvaccinated population, particularly young people of school age and just above. Between 15 June and 29 June, in Yorkshire and Humber, the number of new cases per 100,000 rose from 54 to 229 in ages 5 to 9, from 122 to 510 in ages 10 to 14 and from 240 to 717 in ages 15 to 19. All of the communities our schools serve have seen significant increases and in a number of schools we are dealing with significantly more cases than at any time since the beginning of the pandemic.

You will be aware that when a pupil or student tests positive, schools are required to contact parents and to ask possible contacts of the case to self-isolate. Given the rapid rise in cases, it is no surprise that there has been a huge rise in the numbers of pupils and students being asked to isolate. The latest available figures, up to 24 June, show that there were 400,000 pupils not in schools in England due to Covid-related reasons. It is likely the next published figures will be much higher. In our own trust, we have seen huge differences between schools in the numbers of cases and the numbers of pupils/students being required to self-isolate. We are enormously concerned about the disruption this is causing to young people's education and we are also concerned that some young people are being hit much harder than others. Talking to young people, many are finding it increasingly difficult to understand why they are still confronted with this disruption and uncertainty. I share their concerns.

### **Track and trace**

There has been a great deal of discussion and media speculation in recent weeks about the policy of requiring contacts of positive cases in schools to isolate. Some of the media coverage has been misleading, inaccurate and unhelpful, including suggestions that schools are interpreting guidance wrongly. Since the beginning of the pandemic, schools have been required to undertake all track and tracing activity for every single positive case. They have been required to do this whenever the



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positive case is reported, whether that is during a school day, at the weekend or during the first few days of a school holiday. All our school leadership teams have become very experienced in this and have become expert in understanding whatever the latest version of government guidance says. However, Headteachers do not simply “interpret” guidance as some have suggested through the media. Every time there is a case, they spend considerable time talking to the public health or Department for Education helpline and take very specific advice as every case is different. Headteachers do not just have to consider who a student has been sitting near in lessons, but how they have travelled to school, how they have spent lunchtime and social time, any extra-curricular activities they have been involved in and whether they have siblings or friends in other year groups who might be contacts. At all times they try to balance the need to keep people safe and prevent the further spread of the virus, along with the need to keep as many young people in school for face-to-face teaching as possible. At times, tracing all contacts and awaiting contact back from PHE can take several hours; when there is more than one case at a time it can take several members of staff several hours. Where full tracing cannot take place in time for the start of the next school day, we sometimes have little choice but to ask more pupils than we would like to stay at home and learn online for a short period of time.

### Measures we are taking

Since the full re-opening of all our schools in September 2020, we have had a wide range of measures in place to try to minimise the possible spread of the virus in schools and to manage the disruption of education. In primary schools, we have been able to keep pupils in their class bubbles and maintain distance from other bubbles. This means that usually in a primary school, where there is a positive case, an entire bubble is required to isolate as they have spent full days together in the same classroom, but the case rarely affects another bubble. The situation in a secondary school is very different. It was never possible to keep bubbles to 30 students as it would be impossible to deliver the range of subjects in a secondary curriculum, at the right level, for all students. Indeed, government guidance has always recognised this. Instead, secondary schools are asked to keep year groups separate, something we have worked hard to do, re-timetabling at the start of the year to a 3-period day to minimise contact between year groups at lesson changeover time as well as reducing the number of different class contacts they may have from 5 to 3.

Throughout the last year, we have been in regular contact with public health teams and have reviewed our risk-assessments regularly. We have responded to the more transmissible Delta variant by retaining face coverings in communal areas and increasing ventilation further in rooms where possible. All our school leaders have worked tirelessly this year to keep everyone as safe as they possibly can and have responded rapidly whenever there has been a shift in guidance. I am enormously grateful for everything they have done.

### School events

One of the biggest disappointments this year is that school events have not all been able to go ahead as planned. Extra-curricular events, visits and end of term activities are such an important part of school life and after everything our young people have had to put up with over the last 18 months,



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these events are more important than ever. Our schools have not taken the easy option and simply cancelled all events. Instead, they are working daily to respond to the changing situation, adapting plans where possible, and only cancelling as a very last resort; often after the hardworking of organising the event has already been done. Please be assured that any event that can safely and reasonably take place within existing guidelines will take place. Where events are cancelled it is because they cannot take place safely. Again, I am grateful to all our school staff who are deeply committed to trying to keep as much as possible going for our young people.

### **September and beyond**

We are all desperate to get back to more normality for our young people and to avoid further disruption to their education. We await a several significant announcements from the government on how schools will be asked to operate from September. We need to hear if the policy on isolation will change; if it does, we will need to know if more testing is to be introduced. We await further information on catch up funding and plans; and crucially, we need Ofqual to bring forward plans for what exams will look like next summer and how students who have been badly hit by self-isolation will be catered for. Rest assured, that as soon as we have this information, we will share it with you and what it means for your children.

As well as offering summer school for some pupils during the summer break, we are developing our plans for additional tutoring and a programme of educational recovery. We are undertaking an analysis of how much disruption each young person has faced through self-isolation so we can tailor our plans accordingly. We will be in touch when we have more information, but please be aware that we know who has missed what and will respond accordingly. As we have said throughout this pandemic, we are absolutely determined that none of our pupils and students miss out on any future opportunity because of what they have had to go through over the last 18 months.

### **Finally**

The last few weeks have been some of the most challenging of the pandemic for schools and the next 3 may be more difficult still. It is important that we try to be as open as we can with you and be honest about the situation we are facing; it is in that spirit that I have written to you. We are frustrated that disruption to education across the country is as significant as it is right now, and we are doing everything we can to minimise it but it is becoming increasingly difficult by the day. We are in regular contact with local public health teams in the East Riding and Hull. These colleagues have been extremely helpful, providing expert advice every time we have a case, as well as endorsing and supporting the actions of our schools.

I recognise there are a wide range of opinions on the current policy of self-isolation for young people, face coverings and other issues, and I respect those deeply held views on all sides. At present, self-isolation is the policy that all schools are required to follow, and I am enormously grateful to all our trust Headteachers and their leadership teams who are working diligently and professionally, handling each case individually and making all decisions in conjunction with public health and/or Department for Education teams.



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Throughout the pandemic, we have been grateful for the overwhelming support from parents and for your patience and understanding in times of real difficulty. I hope the next couple of weeks will bring better news for young people and schools in terms of what September will look like.

Throughout the pandemic, young people have been extraordinary in their patience and acceptance of measures put in place to keep older people like us safe, and I am proud of all young people in our schools. Whatever the future brings, you have my word that we will do everything we possibly can to keep them safe, teach them well and give them every possible opportunity in school and in their futures.

Wishing you and your families all the very best

Yours faithfully,

Jonny Uttley  
CEO



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