**Updated Covid-19 Guidance to Schools following the mid-term break 2022**

This note is to inform schools of the new public health advice from 28th February 2022.

On 17th February 2022, NPHET reviewed the remaining public health measures including the infection prevention control measures and restrictions in school settings.

Having closely considered relevant epidemiological data and other matters as set out in their letter of 17 February 2022, the Government has accepted the recommendations of the NPHET to remove remaining restrictions relating to mask-wearing and physical distancing in schools.

If members of staff or students wish to continue wearing face masks or coverings, they may do so.

Continued use of good infection prevention and control measures such as hand washing, respiratory hygiene, and ventilation is advised.

Critical components of the collective response in relation to COVID-19 continue to apply including self-isolation if symptomatic (even if fully vaccinated/boosted) or if having a positive COVID-19 test.

***In general, schools should now resume normal school routines and normal teaching and learning activities*.**

The requirement to stay at home if you have symptoms remains – for students and staff alike. One of the key messages to manage the risks of COVID-19 is to do everything practical to avoid the introduction of COVID-19 into the school. If infection is not introduced, it cannot be spread.

**Hand Hygiene**

Schools should continue to promote good hygiene. Hand hygiene can be achieved by hand washing or use of a hand sanitiser (when hands look clean).

Funding will continue to issue to schools for the purchase of PPE, including hand sanitiser.

**Face coverings/mask wearing**

It is no longer a requirement for staff or pupils/students to wear a face covering/mask in school. Staff and student/pupils can continue to wear a face covering/mask if they wish to do so on a personal basis and schools should continue to make masks available on request as they are currently doing.

Funding to support the purchase of PPE, including masks, will continue to be made available to schools.

**School transport and Face coverings/mask wearing**

With effect from Monday 28 February the wearing of face coverings/masks on school transport will no longer be mandatory but will continue to be advised.

All other measures relating to hygiene (including the provision of hand sanitiser and additional cleaning of services) and pre-assigned seating will remain in place subject to further review.

**Cleaning and Hygiene in schools**

The Department of Education has provided additional funding to schools to support the enhanced cleaning required to minimise the risks of COVID-19.

This funding will continue for this academic year and will be reviewed in advance of the start of the next school year.

**Physical Distancing**

Physical distancing has been implemented in primary schools mainly by structuring pupils and their teachers into class bubbles (i.e. a class grouping which stays apart from other classes as much as possible) and discrete groups or “Pods” within those class bubbles, to the extent that this was practical.

It is recognised that this has impacted on teaching and learning and the normal socialising and mixing between and within classes and year groups. As the general requirement for physical distancing in society no longer applies, schools are no longer required to maintain class pods and bubbles.

This will facilitate a return to team teaching, sports, singing and music, breakfast clubs and inter schools’ activities. Use of changing rooms, PE halls and lockers, staff rooms etc. can resume where there has been limited access in this regard.

Where schools implemented staggered drop offs or pickups or breaks, these are no longer necessary.

**Return to Work Form/ Return to School Form**

Schools no longer need to request staff or pupils/students to complete a Return to Work form or a Return to School form after school holidays/breaks.

**Antigen testing arrangements for children in primary schools**

As part of the transition arrangements the HSE will continue with the current processes to support the provision of antigen tests to primary schools, special schools and childcare settings.

The Antigen Free phone number is: 1800 110055 or parents may order antigen tests online via www.hse.ie/schooltest.

The call centre opening hours will be altered slightly and from next week onwards will be 8:45am to 6:00pm Monday to Friday (excluding bank holidays).

The online portal will remain operational 24/7 and will shortly be available through Irish as well as English.

Participation in antigen testing a voluntary, therefore it is not necessary for parents to share information with the school about whether they have requested antigen tests and nor to confirm negative antigen tests

Children who are well should continue to come to school whether they participate in antigen testing or not.