



Rt Hon Gavin Williamson CBE MP
Secretary of State

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To all MPs

20 March 2020

Dear Colleague,

CHANGES TO OPERATIONS OF SCHOOLS AND OTHER EDUCATION PROVIDERS AS A RESULT OF CORONAVIRUS

On Wednesday, I announced that after schools shut their gates on Friday afternoon, they will remain closed until further notice. This will be for all children except those of critical workers and where children are vulnerable.

The scientific advice shows that these settings are safe for this small number of children to continue attending – but asking others to stay away will help us to slow the spread.

We are facing extraordinary circumstances. I know the situation has become increasingly challenging for staff in all our schools, colleges, nurseries and universities. I said before that if the science changed we would act - we are now at that stage.

The spike of the virus is increasing at a faster pace than anticipated and it is crucial that we continue to consider the right measures to arrest this increase and to relieve the pressure on the health system. It is also clear that schools are finding it increasingly difficult to continue as normal, as illness and self-isolation impacts on staffing levels and pupil attendance. I want to provide parents, children and staff with the certainty they need.

Examples of these critical workers include NHS staff, police, and delivery drivers who need to be able to go out to work. Vulnerable children include those who have a social worker and those with Education, Health and Care Plans. Looking after these children will enable schools to support the country through this extremely challenging time. Please see further advice on critical workers here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-maintaining-educational-provision/guidance-for-schools-colleges-and-local-authorities-on-maintaining-educational-provision>.

We will give schools the flexibility to provide meals or vouchers to children eligible for free school meals. Some schools are already doing this, and we will reimburse the costs. As soon as possible, we will put in place a national voucher system.

We are asking local authorities to keep both residential special schools and colleges open wherever possible as these settings are invaluable in providing support for some of our

most vulnerable children. In addition, we want to keep the majority of day special schools and colleges open.

Special schools, colleges and local authorities are advised to make assessments on a case by case basis of the health and safeguarding considerations of pupils and students on an Education, Health and Care Plan. We trust leaders and parents to make these decisions.

Given the unprecedented asks we are making of our critical workers at this time, we will also be asking these settings to look after their children and vulnerable children during the Easter holidays, if possible.

I will ensure school leaders have the flexibility they need to face this challenge, which will not be an easy one to manage. We will work with the Treasury on the financial implications of these institutional closures. We will put in place new measures to reimburse schools for the reasonable, additional costs that they face in order to stay safely staffed as a result of the coronavirus outbreak.

In order to allow schools and other settings to focus on this new operational model and the support they can give to young people, we are removing various duties. Ofsted has ceased all routine inspection of early years, schools, colleges and children's social care services. I can confirm that we will not go ahead with assessments or exams, and that we will not be publishing performance tables for this academic year. We will work with the sector and Ofqual to ensure children get the qualifications they need.

My Department is working closely with local authorities, representatives of schools and headteachers, regional school commissioners and bodies such as Ofsted and Ofqual about how to deliver this change as effectively as possible.

I know that many universities and other higher education institutions are already taking necessary steps to keep their staff and students safe and where possible keep providing education. I am confident vice-chancellors are best placed to make decisions for their institutions and my Department continues to support them in doing so.

This is a testing time for the whole nation, but by asking schools and other settings to look after the children of critical workers, and the most vulnerable, we will be directly saving lives. The wellbeing of staff, children and parents is the absolute priority for me and my Department. We are completely committed to ensuring that every child receives the best education possible and will be working with the BBC and others to provide resources for children to access while at home. Further guidance for parents and carers can be found here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/closure-of-educational-settings-information-for-parents-and-carers>.

As I said in my statement, I know that our education providers have the full support of the House and that you will do what you can to support schools and other providers in your own constituencies through this period of change, for which you have my thanks.

Our school leaders are central to the country's response to this current crisis and I am reassured by their readiness to step up and to take the lead in supporting families through this difficult time.

All of those who work in our schools, colleges and universities are, alongside our NHS staff and other critical workers, central to our efforts as a country in battling this virus and I know you will join me in thanking them wholeheartedly for their support.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Gavin Williamson', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Rt Hon Gavin Williamson CBE MP
Secretary of State for Education