



## Education Report: Increasing bubble sizes in Alert Level 3 Step 2 regions

<b>To:</b>	Hon Chris Hipkins, Minister of Education		
<b>Date:</b>	4 November 2021	<b>Priority:</b>	High
<b>Security Level:</b>	In Confidence	<b>METIS No:</b>	1276269
<b>Drafter:</b>	Francesca Schiau	<b>DDI:</b>	463 0989
<b>Key contact and number:</b>	Ben O'Meara	<b>DDI:</b>	463 8704 9(2)(a)
<b>Messaging seen by Communications team:</b>	No	<b>Round robin:</b>	No

### Purpose of report

- This report seeks agreement to increase bubble sizes for Alert Level 3 Step 2 regions from:
  - 10 to 20 for licensed early childhood services, students in years 0 to 10 in registered schools and hostels; and
  - 10 to 25 for tertiary education organisations.
- This report also seeks agreement to lowering the physical distancing requirements in tertiary education exams from 1.5 metres to 1 metre.

### Proposed amendments

#### Increasing bubble sizes

1. The COVID-19 Public Health Response (Alert Level Requirements) Order (No 12) 2021 (the Order) requires education entities in Alert Level 3 regions to have systems and processes in place to keep children, students, and teachers, so far as is reasonably practicable, in groups that are appropriately sized and stable.
2. The current group or bubble size is 10. Limits on bubbles relate to minimising multiple contacts, thus reducing risk of infection and maximising time for contact tracing.
3. Since 26 October students in years 11 to 13 (and a small number of students in years 9 to 10 who have NCEA assessments) have also been able to go onsite for face-to-face learning.
4. The Auckland and Waikato regions currently operate under the COVID-19 'Steps Framework'. Auckland is at Step 1 but if health advice supports it, it is intended that the region move to Step 2 at 11:59pm on 9 November.

5. Parts of Waikato are already at Step 2. At Step 2 retail and public facilities like libraries, museums, and zoos can reopen.
6. While the northern part of Tai Tokerau is at full Alert Level 3 settings, the Order and the Direction issued by the Secretary for Education, permit students and staff to attend onsite in full alignment with the permissions for Auckland and Waikato, including that they currently have a limit of 10 students in bubbles onsite for years 0 - 10.
7. The current and future moves to Step 2 in Auckland and Waikato mean that more parents and caregivers need to go to work. This is creating demand on schools and early learning services to have more children and students attend.

*Licensed early childhood services (excluding playcentres, playgroups and licensed home-based services), registered schools and hostels*

8. We propose that the Ministry of Education update its sector guidance to allow education entities, including licensed early childhood services (excluding playcentres playgroups and licensed home-based services)<sup>1</sup>, registered schools and hostels (for students in years 0 to 10) in Alert Level 3 regions to expand their bubbles sizes so that they can accommodate a maximum of 20 children or students once they reach Step 2 of the Steps Framework. This does not include tertiary education organisations (TEOs). Settings for TEOs are discussed below.
9. The sector is supportive of increasing bubble sizes to accommodate the additional students who will arrive under Step 2 of Alert Level 3.
10. All other current restrictions will continue to apply, including that teachers, relieving teachers and staff would be limited to working with a single bubble in one service or school. Several bubbles can be operated by services and schools, but these have to be kept separate from each other, particularly when indoors. Early childhood services would also have to continue to meet the increased indoor space requirement of 3 square metres per child, currently in place at Alert Level 3.
11. The Ministry of Health considers that increasing bubble sizes to a maximum of 20 children or students is a low-risk approach. While increasing the maximum number of children or students per bubble may increase the risk of transmission, this risk is still low, as children do not tend to pass the virus on as much as adults.
12. With an increase in bubble size, there is also likely to be more interaction between parents, teachers and children at pick-ups and drop-offs. This can be mitigated through reiterating existing advice around staggering pick-ups and drop-offs, parents wearing face coverings and maintaining physical distancing from those not in their household.

*Tertiary education organisations*

13. We also propose that the Ministry of Education update its sector guidance to allow TEOs in Alert Level 3 Step 2 regions to run classes, labs, workshops, tutorials, noho, and meetings of up to 25 people.
14. The tertiary education sector has told us that this increase would make a significant difference to its ability to operate effectively. It will also better enable school students to return to secondary-tertiary learning onsite at a tertiary provider. This will mitigate the

---

<sup>1</sup> Under Alert Level 3 playcentres and playgroups are not allowed to operate. Bubbles do not currently apply to licensed home-based services at Alert Level 3, with the number of children in the home limited by regulatory requirements. This would remain in place for Step 2 of Alert Level 3.

current disparity between levels of access to education where, as outlined under paragraph 3, senior secondary students have been able to return to school sites for face-to-face learning, but the current tertiary bubble size is a barrier for secondary-tertiary learners to access learning on site at a TEO.

15. The Ministry of Health considers that the risk of increased bubble sizes to 25 in tertiary settings is mitigated where measures such as face coverings, physical distancing, record keeping for contact tracing, staying at home if unwell etc. are applied. We would make the public health requirements clear in our guidance. Further, most students and staff will be within an age bracket that is eligible for vaccination and this option will only be available where remote delivery is not possible.

### Lowering physical distancing requirements in tertiary exams

16. We are also proposing, following feedback from the sector, that recommended Alert Level 3 distancing requirements for tertiary exams is decreased from 1.5m to 1m, to facilitate examinations that cannot be done remotely. The Ministry of Health advises that given the nature of the activity and mitigations through face coverings, and vaccination rates among tertiary students, the risk of reducing the physical distance is managed.

### Implementation

17. The changes proposed in this paper will be set through guidance to the education sector.

### Recommended Actions

---

The Ministry of Education recommends that you:

- a. **agree** that the Ministry of Education update its sector guidance to allow education entities in Alert Level 3 regions that are at, or will move to, Step 2 to increase their bubble size to a maximum of 20 children and students

**Agree / Disagree**

- b. **note** that education entities in recommendation (a) include licensed centre-based early learning services (but exclude playcentres, playgroups and licensed home-based services), registered schools, and hostels, but exclude tertiary education organisations

**Noted**

- c. **note** that bubble requirements are not applicable to schools with students in years 11 to 13 (including those students also onsite in years 0 - 10)

**Noted**

- d. **note** that teachers and staff (including relievers) will continue being limited to working with a single bubble as far practically possible, and in one education service

**Noted**

- e. **agree** that the Ministry of Education update its sector guidance to allow tertiary education organisations in Alert Level 3 regions that are at, or will move to, Step 2 to run classes, labs, workshops, tutorials, noho, and meetings of up to 25 people, where remote delivery is not possible

**Agree / Disagree**

- f. **agree** that the Ministry of Education update its sector guidance to allow tertiary education organisations in Alert Level 3 regions may hold exams with a physical distancing requirement of 1 metre

**Agree** / Disagree

#### Proactive Release Recommendation

- g. **agree** that the Ministry of Education release this report once you have considered it.

**Agree** / Disagree



Ben O'Meara  
**Group Manager**  
**Te Puna Kaupapahere | Policy**

4/11/2021



Hon Chris Hipkins  
**Minister of Education**

5 / 11 / 2021