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Returning safely to schools

This guidance provides considerations for decision-makers and educators on how or when to reopen schools in the context of Covid-19. These decisions have important implications for children, parents or carers, teachers and other staff, communities and society at large.

What to consider when deciding to reopen schools

Ideally there should be standard operating procedures or checklists, issued nationally, to help in planning to reopen schools. Where decisions have to be made more locally, this guidance offers some considerations for local education authorities and school leaders. The planning should take into account the local situation, the school's ability to maintain control measures, behavioural aspects, hygiene practices and physical distancing.

The local situation

Discussions should be guided by the following points:

- the existence of movement restrictions and availability of safe transport
- the accessibility and reliability of local information on Covid-19 trends
- the ability of public health officials to detect and respond quickly to new cases
- coordination with local public health authorities (e.g. with information to trace contacts if a case or outbreak occurs in the school)
- the number of staff at risk of severe disease because of their age or underlying medical conditions
- the number of students with underlying conditions
- or special needs.

School setting and ability to maintain Covid-19 prevention and control measures

When schools are fully or partially open, Covid-19 prevention and control strategies should be maintained.

School resources and infrastructure

- policies and resources for appropriate hand and respiratory hygiene, distancing and limiting crowding
- access to rooms large enough for desk-spacing or extension of the school's infrastructure, even temporarily, to provide the space required

- feasibility of reducing class sizes, or alternating the use of facilities daily or weekly by class groups
- adequate materials and supplies for handwashing
- access to a nurse to facilitate the care of sick children.

Support for educators and school staff

- policies and procedures for the safety of all school personnel, including high-risk individuals
- capacity to train school staff on safe school operations
- ability to implement flexible or partial tele-schooling approaches
- sufficient teacher capacity to support changes to school timetabling
- feasibility of asking teachers who are at higher risk of severe illness from Covid-19 to support distance teaching instead of in-person teaching.

Behavioural aspects

To assess the school's readiness for safe adjustments, consider the following:

Reconfiguring school resources

- ability to adapt classrooms to help students comply with recommended measures
- adjustment of any outdoor activities during recreation to adhere to recommended measures
- willingness and ability of students, parents and teachers to support tele-schooling or other distance learning strategies.

Age-based considerations

- adequacy of supervision for students of different ages to adhere to recommended measures, including recreation times and breaks between classes
- suitability or priority for tele-schooling or face-to-face instruction, by age group
- provisions to ensure safety and protection in online, virtual spaces.

To enable behaviour change, staff may need health education and training sessions. Visual and verbal cues and reminders (e.g. posters) can encourage students to maintain desired behaviours.

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Recommended measures

The following strategies and adaptations should be in place wherever possible:

Hygiene and environmental cleaning

- Educate everyone in the school about Covid-19 prevention, including hand hygiene, respiratory hygiene, mask use if mandated, Covid-19 symptoms and what to do if feeling sick. Advise non-contact greetings.
- Create a schedule for frequent hand hygiene, especially for young children, and provide sufficient alcohol-based sanitiser or soap and clean water at entrances and throughout the school.
- Schedule cleaning of the school environment daily, including toilets, frequently touched surfaces such as door handles, desks, toys, supplies, light switches, doorframes, play equipment, teaching aids used by children and book covers.
- Assess how to limit exposure, or direct physical contact, in physical education classes, sports or other physical activities and play.
- Increase frequency of cleaning in sports facilities and changing rooms, provide hand hygiene stations at entrances and exits, establish one-way circulation of students and limit the number using the changing room at one time.
- Establish respiratory and hand hygiene and physical distancing measures for seating in school buses. This may lead to a need to increase the number of school buses per school. If possible, keep bus windows open. Give tips to students on safe commuting to and from school, including those using public transport.
- Develop a school policy on wearing a mask or a face covering in line with national or local guidance. Provide sufficient medical masks for those who need it, such as school nurses and children with symptoms.

Physical distancing at school

- Maintain a distance of at least one metre between everyone present at school. Please note – the one metre distance is a recommendation by WHO. Please check with your local government guidelines to ensure this is correct in your area or region.
- Increase desk spacing (at least one metre between desks), stagger breaks and lunchbreaks (if difficult, one alternative is to have lunch at desk).
- Limit mixing of classes for school and after-school activities. For example, students in a class will stay in one classroom throughout the day, while teachers move between classrooms; or classes could use different entrances, if available, or establish an order for each class to enter and leave the building or classroom.
- Expand the school timetable, with some students and teachers attending in the morning, others in the afternoon, others in the evening.
- Consider increasing the number of teachers, if possible, to allow for fewer students per classroom (if space is available).

- Advise against crowding during school pick-up or day care, and if possible avoid pick up by older family or community members (e.g. grandparents).
- Minimise shared break times: alternate when and where classes take lunch.
- Discuss how to manage physical education and sports lessons.
- Move lessons outdoors or ventilate rooms as much as possible.
- Create awareness to ensure the students do not gather and socialise when leaving the school and in their free time.

Tele-schooling and distance learning

- Initiate or continue tele-schooling, or similar method, where necessary and possible (e.g. some student groups could take online classes, learn from home through homework assignments, blogs, engage in at-home physical activity).
- If tele-schooling is not possible, invite students to take text-books home or arrange to deliver assignments. Consider radio or television broadcasts of lessons, arrange a buddy system for homework with older siblings at home, or with friends by telephone
- Ensure age-appropriate and frequent follow-up and support for children out of school and avoid penalising or stigmatising such students

Screening and managing sick students and school staff

- Enforce the policy of "staying at home if unwell" for students or staff with symptoms. If possible, connect with local organisations to provide home care support and ensure communication between home and school.
- Create a checklist for parents, students and staff to decide whether students or staff can go to school. The checklist could include:
  - underlying medical conditions and vulnerabilities
  - recent Covid-19 illness or symptoms
  - special circumstances in the home environment
  - special considerations regarding school transport as needed.
- Waive the requirement for a doctor's note to excuse absences when there is community transmission of Covid-19.
- Consider daily screening for body temperature and history of fever or feeling feverish in the previous 24 hours on entry into the building for all staff, students and visitors to identify people who are sick.
- Ensure students who have been in contact with a Covid-19 case stay home for 14 days. School officials should notify public health authorities of any positive Covid-19 case.
- Establish procedures for students or staff who have symptoms of Covid-19 or are feeling unwell in any way to be sent home or isolated from others.

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Communication with parents and students

- Inform parents about the measures the school is putting in place and ask for cooperation to report any cases of Covid-19 that occur in the household. If someone in the household is suspected to have Covid-19, keep the child home and inform the school.
- Explain to the students the reason for school-related measures, including the scientific considerations and highlighting the help they can get through schools (e.g. psychosocial support).

Additional school-related measures

- Ensure that school entry immunisation checks are in place. Check vaccination status for outbreak-prone vaccine-preventable diseases (e.g. measles) and remind parents to ensure their children are up-to-date with all relevant vaccinations. For school-based immunisation programmes, ensure there is a plan for catch-up vaccination if needed.
- Boarding schools and other specialised institutions should extend these considerations to residential facilities, lecture halls, laboratories and other learning facilities.

Monitoring schools after re-opening

As protective school measures are applied, it is important to monitor a range of factors such as:

- Effectiveness of tele-schooling interventions:
  - How well has the school been able to develop tele-schooling strategies?
  - What proportion of children were reached?
  - What is the feedback from students, parents and teachers?
- The effects of policies and measures on educational objectives and learning outcomes.
- The effects of policies and measures on health and well-being of children, siblings, staff, parents and other family members.
- The trend in school drop out after lifting the restrictions.

Inclusive and early collaboration between the school and the community is needed to develop and implement necessary measures. It will be important to maintain flexibility and modify approaches as needed, and to ensure learning and sharing of good practice.

This document is based on guidance first published by the World Health Organization, 2020.
tinyurl.com/WHO-Covid-19-schools

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