PRACTICAL TIPS FOR SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS TO HELP GUIDE THE REOPENING OF SCHOOLS AS SAFELY AS POSSIBLE

SCHOOLING IN TIME OF COVID-19
Practical tips for school administrators
to help guide the reopening of schools
as safely as possible

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INTRODUCTION

Protecting children from COVID-19 in school requires an effort from the entire community, including national and local governments, school administrators, teachers, parents/caregivers and students. To reopen schools as safely as possible and keep them open during the COVID-19 pandemic, consistent implementation of effective strategies to prevent COVID-19 transmission during all school-related activities is critical.

This guide outlines practical tips to support school administrators in implementing safety measures and creating a safer learning environment for children. The decision to reopen schools should be guided by the best interests of children and the guidance of the local government and public health authorities in each country.
SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS PLAY A CRITICAL ROLE TO ENSURE THE REOPENING OF SCHOOLS AS SAFELY AS POSSIBLE

- Empower the school community to practice preventive behaviours, and communicate about school policies and guidelines to students, parents/caregivers, teachers and other educational staff clearly and transparently through credible and relevant channels (e.g. e-mail, social networks, etc.)
- Make sure measures and supplies to reduce COVID-19 transmission are in place to enable uptake of healthy behaviours. This includes access to soap and clean water or alcohol-based hand rub for hand cleaning, procedures for staff or students feeling unwell, protocols on physical distancing, ventilation and good hygiene practices.
- Establish easily accessible and inclusive two-way communication channels to listen and gain insights on parents/caregivers, teachers and students' concerns and needs for informed decision-making.
- Consider the safety and well-being needs of all learners, especially children from vulnerable and marginalized communities, children with special educational or health needs or children with functional disabilities, who may need further support to return to school and learn safely.
- Adhere to policies that contribute to students’ education and safer reopening of schools.
- Continue to communicate learners’ needs and the importance of school reopening to authorities who make decisions about school reopening.
- Ensure that teachers understand their role, contribute to making the schooling safer, and provide a role model for healthy behaviours through constant and consistent communication.
TIPS TO HELP YOU GUIDE THE SAFE REOPENING OF SCHOOLS

Create a contingency plan

It is important to have a contingency plan in place in case of any emergency. This plan should outline how you will ensure the continuation of in-person or remote learning in case of a COVID-19 outbreak at the school. Make sure you involve students, caregivers/parents, teachers, and other staff in developing this plan.

- Ensure the public health and social measures recommended by your local health authorities are implemented.
- Update/maintain up-to-date contact information of teachers, parents/caregivers and students to facilitate interactions.
- In the absence of school nurses, identify and train teachers/facilitators to advise children or staff with COVID-like symptoms, such as fever and persistent cough.
- Provide uninterrupted education, either in-person or virtually, in the event of a COVID-19 case or outbreak at the school.
- Adequately and timely respond to possible COVID-19 cases, ensuring parents are informed about any changes in the learning schedule and the need to isolate their children.

Maintain physical hygiene

Keeping a safe distance of at least one metre from each other helps to reduce the spread of COVID-19 transmission. It is important for everyone in the school to maintain a safe space between each other. Follow your local recommendation on physical distancing and make it easier for students and teachers to comply with this behaviour at school.

- Separate students' desks or spots on a bench if possible. You can add marks/stickers on the floor or bench to indicate the recommended distance.
- Ask students to stand apart from one another in fun ways: by practising “stretching their arms out” or “flapping their wings”, for example – they should keep enough space between each other to minimize contact.
- Turn desks to face in the same direction or place them in large circles rather than facing each other.
- If possible, create one-way routes in the hallways and staircase to keep students separated when passing.
- Stagger the use of communally shared spaces such as playgrounds, cafeterias and auditoriums. Use plastic chains, cones, painted lines, or rope to visualise different recess areas.
- If possible, stagger the start and end times (arrival and departures from school) according to the grades. Have designed to class with multiple entrances to avoid having students and families waiting/walking together.
**Promote hand hygiene**

Washing hands frequently is one of the easiest and effective ways to prevent the spread of COVID-19 transmission amongst students, teachers and other educational staff and help them stay healthy.

Cleaning hands frequently is one of the easiest and effective ways to prevent the spread of COVID-19 transmission amongst students, teachers and other educational staff and help them stay healthy.

- Encourage students to regularly wash their hands or apply alcohol-based hand rub when entering and leaving the school, before or after eating, after using a toilet or whenever they touch surfaces that are touched regularly or are visibly dirty.

- Encourage students to wash hands at key times with soap and water for at least 40 seconds or clean for at least 20 seconds with hand rub containing 60% to 80% alcohol. Explain why this is needed, but it doesn’t need to be a scary conversation. Sing a class-favourite song or choreograph a simple routine to make proper hand cleaning easy and fun.

- Remember to keep the alcohol-based hand rub out of the reach of young children. Also, advise the teachers to keep an eye on their students while they are using an alcohol-based hand rub.

- Place visual cues such as handwashing posters and stickers in bathrooms, cafeteria, communal spaces and highly visible areas.

**Promote vaccination**

Vaccination of teachers is critical to protect them from COVID-19 and reduce the risks of infecting others. It is one of the key interventions to regain continued access to education and social life at schools. Schools can promote COVID-19 vaccinations by providing accurate and relevant information and encouraging vaccine confidence.

- Engage teachers and other educational staff about COVID-19 infection and vaccination through frequent two-way communications through staff meetings, newsletters and e-mail updates.

- Organize information sessions with prominent doctors and public health experts about the latest updates on the COVID-19 vaccination.

**Improve ventilation**

Improvement in indoor airflow with proper ventilation is an essential component to maintain a healthy environment at schools. Increasing the circulation of outdoor air helps preventing the spread of any respiratory pathogen.
- Keep the windows open for clean and natural ventilation, if it is safe.
- If possible, consider keeping the classroom doors open.

Promote outdoor activities

Whenever possible and safe, move indoor activities outdoor. The risk of contracting COVID-19 is higher indoors, particularly when there is limited air circulation.

- Encourage teachers and students to use outdoor spaces when possible for instruction, meals and recess.
- Consider moving outdoors activities that lead to the release of high amounts of respiratory droplets like singing, recitation, sports, or exercising.

Follow your local guidance on the use of masks

Masks can be used as part of the comprehensive risk-mitigation strategies to reduce the transmission of COVID-19 in the school setting. Follow your national/local authorities’ advice on the use of masks. If masks are recommended, you may apply the following tips to ensure compliance:

- Children learn how to behave in schools by watching their teachers
- Mark facilities and equipment that will not accessible.
- Encourage teachers and school staff to be a role model and demonstrate the right way to wear a mask that fully covers your mouth and nose, and fits snugly on your face. Don’t touch the exterior surface of the mask.
- Advise teachers to wear masks, according to the guidance from your health authorities. Place puppets/dolls with masks at specific places throughout the schools, if appropriate.

Clean and disinfect

The COVID-19 virus can land on surfaces, and students and school staff can become infected if they touch those surfaces and then touch their nose, mouth or eyes. It is essential to clean and disinfect surfaces to reduce the risk of infection.

- Develop cleaning and disinfecting protocols, including what needs to be cleaned and how often to maintain a healthy school environment.
- Place red stickers on frequently touched surfaces such as doorknobs, handrails, elevator buttons, faucets, sinks, desks, light switches, play structures and railings.
- Clean more frequently and disinfect communal/shared spaces at regular intervals.
- Provide training to cleaning staff on the proper use of cleaning and disinfecting products.
Ensure clear, regular, consistent, timely and transparent communication

It is important to build a COVID-19 communication plan to provide students, parents/caregivers, and teachers and school staff with information on safer schooling and the importance of public health and social measures. Communication should be carried out to build trust, address and counter rumours and misinformation, as well as a stigma among education staff, teachers, parents/caregivers and students.

New evidence continues to emerge about COVID-19: the plan needs to acknowledge uncertainty, be adjusted on feedback from parents/caregivers, students, teachers and educational staff, and evolve in compliance with updated national, state and local guidance.

Use the following steps to structure the communication plan:

**Step 1: Define**

**Define your communication goal and audience**

- What is your communication goal?
- What do you want to accomplish?
- Whom do you want to reach?

**Step 2: Understand and listen**

**Understand and listen to your audience**

- What are the key drivers and barriers to their behaviours?
• What are their experiences with the pandemic and school reopening?
• What are their concerns for school reopening?
• Who do they trust?
• Where do they get information from?
• What might they already know and not know?

Step 3: Connect

Connect with your audience

- What questions could you ask to learn more about your audience?
- What channels exist for you to connect with your audience?
- Who are the trusted sources of information that you can engage with to reach your audience?
- How can you make the conversation engaging so people will want to continue to dialogue?
- What responses would you expect for your communication?

Step 4: Reflect and adapt

Reflect on what went well and what are the areas for improvement.

- What went well?
- What didn’t go as expected?
- What have you learnt?
- How could you improve?
- What still puzzles you?