Promising practices on keeping schools safe during COVID-19 – ESARO Learning series

Risk-adjusted strategy to school closure/opening in South Africa

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South Africa is for now the only country in the Eastern and Southern Africa region to have developed a comprehensive framework for systematic national assessment of risks based on which safe school reopening and operations are planned. This document is a deep dive into the promising practice, highlighting the outcomes, success factors and challenges.
The decision to adopt a risk-adjusted strategy stems from the government’s approach of dealing with COVID-19 by regularly assessing the pandemic situation in the country at national level to determine and adapt public health measures, including restriction of movement between provinces. The COVID-19 response is informed by the Ministerial Advisory Council (MAC) for COVID-19, a core team of experts which reviews evidence on COVID-19 and submits reports with recommendations to the National Coronavirus Command Council (NCCC). The NCCC, an intersectoral forum of technical experts and political principals representing the different sectors, advises Cabinet which makes the final decision on the national COVID-19 response, including on national school closure and opening.

In line with the country’s Disaster Management Act, the DBE adapted the risk-differentiated approach to ensure continuation of learning and provide a conducive environment for a safe return to school. The process involved extensive consultations with relevant sector stakeholders including principal’s associations, school governing bodies, teacher unions and civil society organisations (e.g., association for children with disabilities).

For the education sector, the strategy provides a framework for the safe return to school based on an assessment of the level of risk. The different risk/alert levels have been set based on a weighing between the spread of the virus and the response capacity and preparedness of the health system in the provinces.

An ongoing feedback loop and monitoring of infection rates inform decisions to remain at a particular risk level, ease restrictions further, or return to a higher level of restriction. This feedback loop includes incidence rates at local level and number of cases in schools monitored by the Department of Health (DoH). The main criteria to determine the risk level emanates from the health dataset updated every two weeks outlining the number of infections per 100,000 individuals in a district. For example, 0-60 positive cases per 100,000 corresponds to ‘vigilance’ level, while above 100 positive cases per 100,000 is considered as ‘high hotspots’. Schools are also mandated to report on daily COVID-19 cases to district levels which report to provincial and national level. Data on cases is also correlated with the response capacity and preparedness of the health system to respond to a fluctuation of cases. The two components (number of cases and health system capacity) inform the 5 risk levels, which range from ‘vigilance’ (low virus spread, high health system readiness) to ‘high risk hotspots’ (high virus spread with moderate readiness). The information is visualized and made available in real-time in an interactive DBE dashboard where data is disaggregated by province and district, education level and grade. This dashboard shows the extent of the infection in the area and the number of schools at risk, which informs the decision on the school attendance and the level of support needed.

Based on an assessment relevant data, the NCCC analyses the risks on the health and education sectors and advises on subsequent mitigating actions. Each risk level triggers appropriate, context-adapted public health measures and mitigating actions in school settings. For the education sector, moving from a risk level to another has an impact on closure/reopening, school attendance and modality of learning (with a differentiation between primary and secondary schools), including phased reopening and rotational attendance (day or week rotation).

For example, at ‘vigilance’ level, the mitigating actions include primary and special school learners attending school daily, while secondary schools use differentiated timetabling according to capacity and resources to maintain physical distancing of at least 1 meter. At ‘high hotspot’ level, mitigating actions include rotational attendance for all schools, arranging for support programmes for learners who stay at home and for daily lessons to be collected and completed homework returned.
Vigilance
Low virus spread, high health system readiness
- Primary and special school learners attend school daily. Secondary schools use differentiated timetabling according to capacity and resource to maintain physical distancing of at least 1m.
- Provide Online/Virtual Learning
- Learners receive NSNP meals or food items through various modalities implemented in provinces
- Re-arrange School day Programme/Timetable to accommodate different grades/learners attending school on alternate days as well as platooning/shift arrangements to comply with social distancing.

Emerging Hotspots
Moderate virus spread, with high readiness
- Primary and special school learners attend school daily. Secondary schools use differentiated timetabling according to capacity and resource to maintain physical distancing of at least 1m.
- Arrange for Learner Support Programmes for learners who are at home. Provide work and manage feedback.
- Work with Home Education Associations to support learners who enrolled for Home Education.
- Provide Online/Virtual Learning
- Learners receive NSNP meals or food items through various modalities implemented in provinces.
- Re-arrange School day Programme/Timetable to accommodate different grades/learners attending school on alternate days as well as platooning/shift arrangements to comply with social distancing.

Hotspots
Moderate virus spread with moderate readiness
- All School: rotational attendance.
- Arrange for Learner Support Programmes for learners who are at home. Provide work and manage feedback.
- Work with Home Education Associations to support learners who enrolled for Home Education.
- Provide Online/Virtual Learning
- Learners receive NSNP meals or food items through various modalities implemented in provinces.
- Re-arrange School day Programme/Timetable to accommodate different grades/learners attending school on alternate days as well as platooning/shift arrangements to comply with social distancing.

High Risk Hotspots
High virus spread with moderate readiness
- All School: rotational attendance.
- Arrange for Learner Support Programmes for learners who are at home. Provide work and manage feedback.
- Work with Home Education Associations to support learners who enrolled for Home Education.
- Provide Online/Virtual Learning
- Learners receive NSNP meals or food items through various modalities implemented in provinces.
- Re-arrange School day Programme/Timetable to accommodate different grades/learners attending school on alternate days as well as platooning/shift arrangements to comply with social distancing.

OUTCOMES

In theory, this strategy allows for evidence-based, differentiated, localized risk mitigation measures and decentralized decision-making based on an assessment of risks. The below outlines how the strategy has been implemented at the national, provincial and local levels.

At the national level: This framework was mainly used to determine nationwide school closure when cases were rising across the country. Virus transmission due to interprovincial travel was one of the key reasons for closing schools nation-wide and prevented decentralized/regional decision making on the issue.

At the provincial level: Since the President announced nationwide school reopening, provinces have been using this framework to assess their level of risk and determine the adequate school reopening modality. Depending on the caseload and readiness of schools to prevent and manage the virus, some provinces have reopened schools with 100% attendance, while other provinces have opted for partial attendance on a rotational basis.

At school level: Individual schools have also used this framework to decide to close their premises partially or fully when local COVID-19 clusters were detected. The framework provides a reference for schools to assess their modality of education delivery based on their implementation of Infection Prevention and Control (IPC) measures and the local COVID-19 context. Some schools opted for temporary closure or rotational attendance with blended learning – based on the availability of their resources, the quality and quantity of their WASH (Water and Sanitation and Hygiene) infrastructure and their ability to implement safety measures (e.g. physical distancing).

At school level, mitigation measures are proposed by the school management and governing body to the district office and endorsed by the provincial office.

In addition, the development and implementation of the risk adjusted strategy at national level has allowed for a more systematic and standardised engagement, communication/reporting, and response across all key stakeholders of the education sector and in all levels of governance (national, provincial and district). It has also increased efficiency and effectiveness in complying with COVID-19 regulations in schools.

Furthermore, the implementation of the risk adjusted strategy has strengthened collaboration between DBE and DoH in jointly reviewing and adjusting the education sector response to COVID-19, in particular the SOPs for schools. Since the onset of the pandemic in South Africa and the first publication of the school reopening SOPs in June 2020, SOPs have been updated in October 2020, November 2020, January 2021, February 2021 and August 2021. These updates were based on the national epidemiological situation, emerging evidence and learnings on virus transmission, and schools’ ability to implement IPC measures. An easy-to-use guide (abridged version) of the updated SOPs were developed for learners, teachers and non-teaching staff to ensure understanding and compliance. The guide also addressed emerging concerns of parents/caregivers, school staff and learners on vaccinations, safe school transport, etc.
**Success factors**

- Functional mechanisms and tools to monitor, regularly report, compile and analyse data on the COVID-19 situation in the country and in schools in a timely and mandatory manner allowed for evidence-based decision-making and planning. At the same time, assessment of readiness of the health and education systems at local level allowed for necessary refinement of school SOPs and guidelines. Regular updating of the risk-adjusted strategy according to the changing context (e.g., apparition of the Delta variant) has also been a notable success factor.
- Overall, an evidence-based, national strategy helped in securing buy-in and commitment from all key ministries involved in the COVID-19 response, including the Departments of Basic Education, Health, Social Development, Water Affairs and Local Government. This allowed for effective coordination and implementation of the mitigating measures recommended in the strategy. This collaboration has been upheld by a shared will not to have teaching and learning interrupted where infection rates remain manageable and to only close schools as a last resort.
- Frequent public communications from the DBE and a consultative and inclusive approach towards civil society, teachers’ union, parents’ association and principals’ associations has also been key. It increased ownership of the strategy and cooperation to implement relevant measures in the context of changing risk levels.

**Challenges**

- The risk-adjusted, differentiated strategy remains limited in its operationalisation: As long as national closure is decided at presidential level, provinces and schools cannot decide to reopen even if the local number of cases is low. It is only when nationwide school reopening is decided at the presidential level that provinces and schools can determine their modality for reopening and education delivery.
- The systematic implementation of mitigation measures related to each level of risk remains a challenge due to limited capacities and resources of some schools to enforce IPC measures such as physical distancing.
- Adapting the school attendance and learning modality to the risk level poses equity challenges. All schools do not have the same capacities to ensure effective continuity of learning and of multisectoral services (e.g., nutrition) for all students, including the most marginalized, during school closure or partial reopening.

**Conclusion**

The risk-adjusted strategy for schools allows for a systematic, evidence-based adjustment of the public health measures according to a clear framework to prevent and contain COVID-19 in schools. Effective collaboration of all relevant ministries (Education, Health, Social Development, Water Affairs, Local Government) as well as the involvement of school-level stakeholders in the development of this approach allowed for widespread buy-in and successful implementation of the risk-adjusted strategy. This framework also contributed to creating understanding from parents/caregivers and community members on the steps to be taken to effectively respond to COVID-19 in the education sector.

**Recommendations**

For countries interested in adopting this measure, consider the following recommendations:

- Systematic assessment of the level of risks based on a clear framework (building on existing mechanisms where possible) to ensure evidence-based adjustment of mitigating measures.
- Strong political leadership with systematic monitoring and communication from the national to the provincial level to ensure consistency of information disseminated to all stakeholders and of the implementation of the strategy in all provinces.
- Involving key school stakeholders (teachers, principals, parent associations) in the development of the framework (in deliberations, information sharing, …) to establish shared responsibility and secure buy-in at local level and adoption of the strategy at local level.
- Collaborating with civil society to include representation from all groups and consideration of the specific needs of all children (e.g., association for children with disabilities).

**Further reading**

- South Africa’s risk-adjusted, differentiated strategy (Powerpoint Presentation)
- Interactive dashboard on the situation of COVID-19 and schools: [https://sa-educ.maps.arcgis.com/apps/opsdashboard/index.html#/0b17b68994b2a8466c53d66b1934](https://sa-educ.maps.arcgis.com/apps/opsdashboard/index.html#/0b17b68994b2a8466c53d66b1934)
- SOPs for schools in the COVID-19 outbreak in South Africa (currently under review)
- Guide to the SOPs for school administrators (simplified SOPs)
- Risk-level adjusted curriculum repackaging (2020)
- Circulars No 1 of 2020: Containment/management of COVID-19 for schools and school communities

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