



COVID-19 Science Report: Exit Strategies Appendix – Safe Reopening of Schools

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Safe Reopening of Schools

Risks in Children and Schools

The current data around the world show that children make up a smaller than expected proportion of known COVID-19 case.¹ Compared to adults with COVID-19, smaller proportion of children with COVID-19 show severe symptoms or fever. The lack of big COVID-19 clusters in schools internationally also suggest that the risk of infection and transmission amongst children in schools seems to be low. However, it should be noted that many countries had closed schools and childcare centres even before going into partial or full lockdowns.

A possible explanation of these observations is that children have lower risk of getting infected with COVID-19. A study that looked at testing of close contacts found that children were as likely to be infected as adults.² The viral load in children has also been shown to be just as high as in adults and seniors, and the distribution patterns of viral load in children population do not seem to be different from adults or seniors.³ An alternative possibility, then is that there is a higher likelihood of asymptomatic cases in children, thereby leading to lower detection and testing in children, and an underestimation of the actual infection and transmission risks in children.

Schools are major hubs of highly intermeshed encounters and social interactions. Even with lower risks in children, it does not equate to no risks, and continued frequencies of risk episodes with low risks would still result in a sizeable total risk. Caution should be taken to avoid blind spots and delayed action to new research findings and new outbreaks.

Caution, however, should not lead to paralysis, and schools cannot remain closed forever because of the risks. Risks of COVID-19 in children and schools need to be balanced with the risks to long-term mental health and development for a generation of children if schools continued be put on halt for prolonged periods of time. Considerations also need to be made for the children that belong to vulnerable groups and that would be most impacted by prolonged school closures, such as students in the US that rely on free school meals.

The reopening of schools can raise issues in the areas of safety, and also ethical issues of privacy, autonomy, vulnerability, proportionality, and health disparities.⁴ These issues not only impact children and their families, but would also affect teachers and school staff. In the safe reopening of schools, governments have to do their due diligence in assessing the risks and context, ensure detailed protocols and guidance are in place to assure the practical implementation of measures, and be able to take swift decisive actions when new events occur and when more knowledge is gained on the virus.

Measures Around the World

Many countries have closed schools and childcare centres as they went into full or partial lockdowns. Now as countries start to relax measures as they exit from lockdowns, children are returning to reopened schools. Countries around the world have implemented various combinations of safe measures in the reopening of schools. Here we review these measures by categories instead of by countries in order to present them as a menu of options and to review their popularity, practicality, and pain in implementation.

Staggered Return and Schedules

Reopening of schools have been staggered by grades, usually starting with only a few first and reviewing before more grades return. The rationale of this approach is to limit the number of students returning to schools all at once, iron out the implementation issues with other measures with smaller number of students first, and wait to review the impact of the first phase of reopening on infection rates.

Some countries/cities, such as Shanghai,⁵ Japan,⁶ Singapore,⁷ Australia (Queensland⁸ and Victoria⁹), Germany,¹⁰ Austria,¹¹ Luxembourg,¹² have implemented such a measure starting with graduating and/or new batch students, to minimise further disruption to their education. Some countries, such as New Zealand,¹³ England,¹⁴ France,¹⁵ and Austria¹⁶ started with younger students that are presumably with lower risks, before moving on to older students. Some other countries/cities, such as Wuhan,¹⁷ Hong Kong,¹⁸ South Korea,¹⁹ Vietnam,²⁰ and Luxembourg²¹ went in the reverse direction and started with older students first.

After the return of students, schedules are staggered across grades and within class, with restrictions of the number of students in a classroom as well. Countries such as Czech Republic,²² Belgium,²³ and France²⁴ are keeping the number of students in classroom to no more than 15 and 10, respectively. In South Korea, schools in higher risk areas are strongly advised to not have more than two-thirds of students in classrooms but instead adopting a shift-like attendance schedule.²⁵ Recent new cases in May 2020 have led to Seoul metropolitan area adjusting guidelines for kindergartens, elementary, middle, and special education schools to only allow admitting one-third of their student population.²⁶

In Wuhan,²⁷ as well as in Luxembourg,²⁸ each class is split into two groups, where one half is physically at school with the teacher one week, while the other half is attending school virtually or doing revision at home or in a childcare facility, and the halves alternate. For Luxembourg, the teacher will hold the same course two weeks in a row. In The Netherlands, class sizes and school hours are split into half, with students spending a half of their school hours learning from homes.²⁹ In Belgium, children are divided into morning or afternoon shifts, and only on certain days of the week.³⁰

Within each school, students from different grades and/or classes can also have their entry and exit times, as well as meal and break times staggered, such as in Wuhan,³¹ Singapore,³² Luxembourg,³³ and France.³⁴ This helps to space out the crowds using public transportation during morning and afternoon peak hours, and also reduces the interactions of students within the school and in corridors. In Singapore, different grades alternate weeks in being in school.

The result of such staggered alternating schedules could be difficult to keep track and manage, and pose difficulties for parents. Working parents would also need to make such new flexible arrangements for child care to ensure coverage.³⁵

Surveillance with Active Testing

Active COVID-19 testing exercises, separate from the regular policy for the rest of the country, might be done specially for students and/or school staff. This would be part of proactive screening and surveillance of essential workers that have high levels of interactions with others.

In Wuhan, all grade 12 and grade 9 students as well as school faculty must take nucleic acid testing before the first batch of schools reopen on May 6.³⁶ In Singapore, prior to reopening pre-schools, 16,000 staff were tested, leading to detection of 8 cases.³⁷ In Victoria, Australia, school staff had a two week period in May to voluntarily undergo testing prior to school reopening.³⁸ In Western Australia, 80 schools are participating in the Detect programme for

voluntary swab testing of students and staff. The swab used in this programme had been modified to be more shallow-reaching and less invasive than that regularly used in the community.³⁹

In Neustrelitz, Germany, some schools have introduced a self-administered testing by CENTOGENE.⁴⁰ The test costs about 40 Euros, which is currently covered by donations.⁴¹ Students and teachers are to take the test twice a week, with students that tested negative not having to wear masks, and can wash hands in toilets where queues are shorter.⁴² In Poland, all children day-care staff have to undergo testing, but not secondary school staff.⁴³

Temperature Screening

Wide-scale temperature screening in schools have also been introduced as part of measures for detecting fever, a symptom of COVID-19. This can be done with thermal scanners or portable infrared thermometers at entrances before students and school staff enter the school premises, such as in Wuhan,⁴⁴ Shanghai,⁴⁵ Hong Kong,⁴⁶ South Korea,⁴⁷ and Vietnam.⁴⁸ Alternatively, temperature screening can be done with every student and school staff having individual thermometers for regular mandated monitoring of temperature.

The accuracy of portable infrared thermometers, particularly outside of well-controlled clinical settings, have been questioned.⁴⁹ They can also cause delays and potentially long lines for entries.⁵⁰ The exercise of temperature screening has also been questioned in light of asymptomatic infections,⁵¹ with considerations that children are less likely to exhibit fever symptoms. The Australian Health Protection Principal Committee (AHPPC) in their guidelines has recommended that wide-scale temperature checks should not be conducted as there is limited evidence in their effectiveness.⁵²

Physical Distancing

Physical distancing can be done not just during classroom-based learning, but also with other school activities and the use of common areas such as school cafeterias, gymnasiums, corridors, and restrooms. Students from different grade levels can get restricted to particular floors or school buildings, without crossing or mixing, helping further minimise interactions of students across grade levels and across classes. Within the classrooms, cafeterias and gymnasiums, an almost standard common measure around the world has been for students to be seated or maintain a distance of 1 to 2 metres apart from each other.

In Wuhan, school lunch will be sent to students in classrooms to be consumed there instead of in the school cafeterias.⁵³ Lunchboxes that are disposable get thrown in a designated bin after lunch, while reusable lunchboxes get placed in a bin to be sent for disinfection. Similarly, in Finland, school meals are consumed in the classroom and there are no joint meals in the school cafeteria unless used in turns in stages.⁵⁴ In Tokyo, Japan, students already usually have school lunch in classroom, but will now move to getting boxed school lunches rather than having students serve food to each.⁵⁵

In some countries, such as Estonia,⁵⁶ The Netherlands⁵⁷ and Belgium,⁵⁸ younger children do not need to or may be eased into not having to keep a physical distance apart from each other. The distancing rules, however, remain in place between students and their teachers, between teachers themselves, and between teachers and parents.⁵⁹ New Zealand has dropped from Emergency Level 3 to Level 2, thereby have removed the measures of physical distancing and restrictions of groups of students mixing.⁶⁰

Young children learn through play and social interactions with their peers, which would not be possible with physical distancing. Ensuring adherence to keeping physical distance for young children, particularly those in kindergarten and below, can be deemed an unfeasible

policy.⁶¹ Teachers, parents, and students in Finland are also sceptical that physical distancing can be enforced.⁶²

Masks and Face Shields

The use of masks and face shields have been highly debated, and countries have taken different approaches in the general public, and now in schools. For countries that have implemented mandatory wearing of masks in public, most are also mandating the wearing of masks in schools. The use of masks and/or face shields can be effective in preventing transmission from stopping spray of droplets from those that are infected, particularly when used en masse thereby including those that are asymptomatic.⁶³ This could be especially important for teachers, who are spending long periods talking to and teaching the students. However, the safety of mask wearing for young children has also been debated as they could cause breathing difficulties and the masks and elastics could be a choking or strangulation hazard.⁶⁴ Prolonged wearing could be uncomfortable and cause skin irritations for children and lead to even more face touching.

In Wuhan, students must wear masks throughout the day, can only remove them during lunch, and would need to carry an extra mask with them as back up as well.⁶⁵ Outside of Wuhan, the rest of the Hubei province with low numbers of cases can opt not to wear masks in school.⁶⁶ In Singapore, mandatory wearing of mask or face shields are required for all children 2 years old and above, and school staff.⁶⁷ However, when speaking to a class or in a lecture-style setting, teachers can wear face shields without masks if they can maintain a safe distance.⁶⁸ In South Korea, clear booth-like plastic shields have even been set up on tables in classrooms and school cafeterias.⁶⁹

Some countries might not require mask wearing, but have advisories for certain situations. In Belgium, preschool teachers are not advised to wear masks when around children but only around other adults, primary school students are not required to wear masks, while secondary school students and adults are strongly advised to wear masks if distancing cannot be observed.⁷⁰ In Czech Republic, similarly, it is not necessary for kindergarten teachers, pedagogical staff, and students to wear masks during school lectures if a minimum distance of 1.5m is maintained.⁷¹ In Luxembourg, wearing of masks will be allowed in classes (and made compulsory during commuting),⁷² but will not be required by children under 6.⁷³

Some countries, however, have active advisories against wearing of masks. In Australia, the AHPPC in their guidelines has recommended that “Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), for example medical face masks, is not required to provide regular care for children or young people who are well”.⁷⁴ Sweden overall is not encouraging wearing of face masks.⁷⁵

Disinfection and Ventilation of Classrooms

Apart from deep cleaning and disinfection before schools reopen, schools around the world are also increasing the frequencies of cleaning and disinfection, particularly with high touch surfaces. The UK Department for Education has provided guidelines recommending that schools ensure that any surfaces touched are cleaned several times a day.⁷⁶ They have also recommended the removal of all soft toys and hard-to-clean toys. It has been reported that Western Australia spent \$43 million on additional cleaning in schools.⁷⁷ Estonia has mandated that outdoor training equipment has to be disinfected at least every 24 hours.⁷⁸

Due to the increased transmission risk in an enclosed space with others for prolonged periods, recommendations have also been made to improve ventilation of classroom settings. In Wuhan, schools will not use air-conditioning,⁷⁹ while in Germany⁸⁰ and as

recommended by the UK Department for Education,⁸¹ windows will be kept open for ventilation. The Japanese Ministry of Health also released guidelines for school to open windows to thoroughly ventilate classrooms before reopening, and to ensure that classrooms maintain being well-ventilated.⁸² In both Denmark^{83,84} and Belgium,⁸⁵ schools are recommended to conduct their lessons and activities outdoors where possible.

Limitation of Activities

Physical education and sports activities have also either been modified to focus on non-contact individual activities, or cancelled altogether. In Singapore, physical education classes will resume, with physical distancing, and without need for masks during strenuous exercises.⁸⁶ In France, contact sports, ball games, and games that involve passing of objects are not allowed.⁸⁷ In Luxembourg⁸⁸ and Austria,⁸⁹ physical education classes have been cancelled. In parts of Australia⁹⁰ and New Zealand,⁹¹ contact sports will resume.

In The Netherlands, older students aged 13 to 18 may participate in organised sports training and exercise activities together under supervision with physical distancing.⁹² They were first allowed to be held outdoors, before allowing to be indoors if following the guidelines. In Estonia, sports training and exercise activities can also be carried out if a maximum of 50% of capacity is used and the group does not have more than 10 participants.⁹³ Children's summer camps and students' work camps will also return with restriction of no more than 300 people, no more than 20 people in a group, and disinfection requirements according to guidelines.

Triggers and Contingencies

When a new confirmed case of COVID-19 infection is a person associated with a school, be it a student or school staff, different steps unique to schools can be taken. Without a major outbreak across the country/city, schools can remain open. Different levels of strictness in steps taken can be triggered by different levels of severity of the outbreak. In South Korea, schools have been closed since February 2020, and the eagerly-awaited reopening of schools after nearly 3 months had just started when new outbreaks led to 500 schools closing.⁹⁴

In Taiwan, the guidelines for triggers for school closures due to infection has been very clearly listed since February 2020.⁹⁵ Schools with one case, be it a teacher or student, would lead to the affected classes being suspended for 14 days. If there are two or more cases, the entire school will be shut for 14 days. If in a township or city, one third of schools are shut due to having cases of infections, then all the schools in the township or city will be closed.

In Singapore, for a school with a confirmed case, close contacts of the case will be quarantined or issued 14 days leave of absence, and the affected school to closed for a day for deep cleaning and disinfection.⁹⁶ The Ministry of Education will closely monitor the situation to assess risk of potential localised cluster in schools and will take further measures if necessary, avoiding the national closure of schools.

In Vietnam, for a school with a confirmed case, local health authorities will reach out to the close contacts of the case.⁹⁷ Teachers, students, and parents have to leave the school building immediately until further notice, and the school undergo disinfection under the guidance of ministry of health.

In New Zealand, for a school with a confirmed or probable case of COVID-19, the school must be closed for 72h for contact tracing, and potentially remain close for another 14 days.⁹⁸ Distance learning will be made available for students that cannot attend school.

In Finland, for a school with a confirmed case, the physician responsible for infectious diseases in the municipality or hospital district will investigate transmission chains, and those determined to have been exposed will be tracked down and quarantined for 14 days. Those infected with COVID-19 must stay away from school for at least seven days from the onset of symptoms or longer until they have been asymptomatic for at least two days.⁹⁹

In Luxembourg, for a school with a confirmed case, the school will not be closed, and only people in direct contact with the case will be tested and isolated.¹⁰⁰

Additional Considerations

Fears and Anxieties

The prolonged school closures due to COVID-19 can take a toll on the mental health for some children. The routine of school can serve as anchor and comfort for children with mental illness or special needs.¹⁰¹ The disruptions to this routine, along with lack of social support from interaction with peers amidst a pandemic, can also exacerbate anxieties.¹⁰² Returning to school can be difficult for those facing social anxiety that have been worsened from lockdowns and social isolation. A significant proportion of children have also been reported to develop fear of leaving home for fear of catching COVID-19.¹⁰³ Special considerations and active mental health support for the children and their family would thus be needed as schools reopen.

Parents can also worry about their children and their return to school, even with all the measures taken to ensure that risks of transmissions and infections are low in the school setting. In a survey of Belgian parents in May 2020, at least 54.2% thought it was not safe for children to return to school.¹⁰⁴ As Italy exits from their lockdown, they currently have no plans to open schools until September after the summer break is over.^{105,106} In Australia, there have been conflicts between the federal government and Victoria state government on decisions of school closure.¹⁰⁷ The lack of clarity and clear communication between the South Australian government and citizens can further add to the confusion.^{108,109}

In various countries/cities, such as Shanghai,¹¹⁰ Hong Kong,¹¹¹ Germany (Saxony),¹¹² and France, parents can choose not to send have their children be in school and instead have learning from home. South Korea's Education Minister Yoo Eun-hae announced allowing an increased number of permissible "absentee days" so that students can have the choice to stay home.

The Singapore government, however, has taken a different stance, standing firm that return to schools will not be made voluntary despite parents' concern, as it is not good for morale of students and teachers.¹¹³ The Education Minister Ong Ye Kung assured parents that their children will be in safe, and warned that keeping children at home for too long would bring about serious negative impact on socioemotional and mental wellbeing. Pre-schools in Singapore have chosen to build confidence in parents through remote parent-teacher conferences to address their concerns.¹¹⁴ Video calls to the young children are made by teachers wearing masks to get the children used to the look. They also sought to build good habits in the young children by getting them accustomed to washing hands and wearing masks before they returned to schools.

Similarly, schools in Shanghai also ramped up their efforts of mental easing and preparation for students and parents. Students and parents are eased into the curriculum, and online meetings are conducted to update on new rules and operations in schools when they reopen.¹¹⁵ In Luxembourg, the Ministry of Education posted a video that provided a message targeted at both lower school students and parents to inform them on the returning to schools

in light of COVID-19. ¹¹⁶ Additional staff were also hired for primary schools to alleviate the concerns that both parents and teachers might have with the reopening of schools.¹¹⁷

Conclusion

No one measure is effective and can guarantee that schools will be free of COVID-19. Most countries have chosen to have use a combination of measures without going to the extremes of doing everything in the strictest level and being overly burdensome. The combination of measures that work best for schools in the specific context of the country/city would require some form of low-risk trial and error. The key is to identify what can be practically implemented, and done so in the long-run in a sustainable cost-effective fashion, as we continue to live in a world with COVID-19.

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