

# **PRACTICAL GUIDE ON OPENING OF SCHOOLS IN THE CONTEXT OF COVID-19**

## **INTRODUCTION**

As we are in the 2<sup>nd</sup> year of the pandemic, opening of schools has become an urgent need (1). Implementation of practically feasible, scientifically proven multilayered protective measures is extremely important to minimise Covid-19 spread across the school (2). Therefore, Sri Lanka College of Microbiologists, a professional body which deals with infectious diseases, decided to develop an evidence-based practical guide applicable in Sri Lankan context to minimize Covid-19 transmission in schools. This guideline aims to mitigate possible outbreaks of Covid-19 in schools in order to facilitate in-person schooling as it plays an important role on the long-term prospects of our future generation.

## **KEY COMPONENTS OF COVID 19 PREVENTIVE MEASURES**

Universal mask wearing, physical distancing, adequate ventilation, hand hygiene, respiratory etiquette, vaccination of eligible students, teachers and staff, practicing “stay at home when sick” policy and surface cleaning and disinfection are the key preventive measures to be practised in schools. This guide lists down the practical measures to implement these key components, a pre-opening check list for schools (Annexure 1) and a model poster on respiratory etiquette (Annexure 2).

### **UNIVERSAL MASK WEARING**

- All students and staff should wear masks within the school premises.
- Students and teachers can adhere to one mask which covers the nose and mouth adequately rather than wearing layers of masks.
- Students and teachers should be encouraged to practice talking loud and clear while wearing the mask.
- Three-layered cloth mask or surgical mask is acceptable for students.
- Students should have a clean dedicated bag (preferably a paper/cloth bag) to keep their mask while eating.



- Students should be encouraged to bring a clean spare mask to be used in case the former mask gets wet or falls off.
- School should ensure availability of masks at school canteens/cooperative shops.
- Used surgical masks should be discarded in appropriate bins with lids.
- Schools can display posters to emphasise correct usage of masks.
- Teachers should frequently do demonstrations, especially for primary grade children, about how to correctly wear, remove and dispose masks.

### **PHYSICAL DISTANCING**

- Students, teachers, support staff and parents should practise physical distancing of at least 1 m as much as possible.
- To facilitate adequate physical distancing, the schools should have a self-assessment to decide the number of students/support staff/teachers and parents who can be present in the school at any given time depending on the available space and infrastructure.
- Schools can consider the following measures to reduce the number of students in a class to facilitate physical distancing:
  - Dividing the classes into groups and conducting in-person classes for each group in an alternative manner.
  - Conducting in-person classes alternatively for different grades.
- Schools should promote teachers to conduct outdoor classes. Low cost, easy-to-make open huts are useful for conducting outdoor classes.
- Schools can practise staggered opening and closing of school hours and using different gates for different grades to minimise crowding during peak hours at the school entrances.
- Similarly staggered interval time will also be useful to minimise crowding at washrooms.
- Students and teachers should practise physical distancing while eating and should not share food.
- Schools should avoid routine checking of temperature at the gates as it creates unnecessary overcrowding.



- Schools should avoid common assembly to avoid crowding as well as mixing of different grades of students.
- Assembly can be conducted via a common communication system.
- Teachers and support staff also can follow a roster-based schedule to minimise crowding in staff areas.

### **ADEQUATE VENTILATION**

- Windows of classrooms/office rooms/staff rooms should be kept open whenever possible.
- Unnecessary partitions in the classrooms/staff rooms/office rooms should be removed.
- Exhaust fans can be fixed at appropriate places to improve ventilation of classrooms as well as in the office and staff rooms
- Outdoor classes should be encouraged.
- Air conditioners should be preferably switched off.

### **HAND HYGIENE**

- Hand hygiene is a continuous process and therefore insisting students to perform hand hygiene at the entrance will only cause unnecessary crowding at the entrance rather than achieving the true purpose.
- Schools should make arrangements to have more hand hygiene facilities scattered in the school premises, preferably separate hand hygiene stations for each block, rather than having it at the entrance only.
- Students should be encouraged to bring their own serviette/s to wipe the hands after washing.
- Clean water and soap should be provided for hand hygiene stations.
- Drain water from hand hygiene stations should be managed properly without causing accumulation.
- Students except the primary school children should be encouraged to bring their own hand sanitizers.



- Schools can display posters of correct ways of cleaning the hands near the hand hygiene stations.
- Teachers should do frequent demonstrations especially for the primary grade students, about how to wash hands with soap and water.
- Teachers should also educate the students about the hazards of inappropriate use of alcohol-based hand sanitizers:
  - Not suitable to drink
  - Highly flammable
  - Should not be sprayed into eyes

### **RESPIRATORY ETIQUETTE**

- Students, teachers, support staff and parents should be instructed about practising respiratory etiquette. The poster of respiratory etiquette is annexed (Annexure 2).
- Clear sign boards displaying respiratory etiquette including “Not spitting outside” can be displayed at the school gates as well as inside the premises.

### **MANAGING SYMPTOMATIC STUDENTS AND STAFF**

- Parents should be frequently emphasised on the importance of not sending symptomatic children even if they have mild symptoms.
- Parents should be advised to take their symptomatic children for testing.
- Parents should inform the class teacher if a child is tested positive to facilitate contact tracing in the class.
- School authorities should inform the Medical Officer of Health (MOH) in the area regarding the positive case to facilitate contact tracing in the school.
- Teachers should also be emphasised on the importance of not attending school when they have symptoms.
- Teachers and support staff should be vigilant and identify symptomatic students during the school hours.



- Students once positive with Covid-19 should not be retested for next 3 months unless symptoms warrant medical attention.
- Students, teachers and support staff should be frequently emphasised on the importance of caring of sick students without discrimination while adhering to infection prevention measures.
- Schools should have a separate sick room facility to keep children with respiratory symptoms detected during the school hours. These sick rooms should be well ventilated and well-lit preferably with separate washroom facilities. Staff attending the symptomatic students in the sick room can wear an isolation gown, surgical mask, face shield and perform hand hygiene.
- Area MOH and Public Health Inspector (PHI) can facilitate rapid antigen testing of symptomatic students/staff to identify positive cases as early as possible.
- Parents should also be instructed not to send children to school if a household member is suspected or confirmed to have Covid-19 and on quarantine.
- Teachers and support staff should not attend to school if a household member is suspected or confirmed to have Covid-19 and on quarantine.

### **COVID-19 VACCINATION**

- Teachers and support staff should be encouraged to get the Covid 19-vaccines provided by the local public health team without delay.
- Parents should be encouraged to vaccinate their children according to the national policy.
- Parents should also be encouraged to get vaccinated against Covid-19.
- Schools should have a record of vaccination status of the staff and students.

### **SURFACE CLEANING AND DISINFECTION**

- Schools should ensure cleaning of touchable surfaces in classrooms/staff rooms/office rooms at least once a day with general purpose disinfectant (GPD).
- Cleaning of washrooms with GPD at least twice a day should be done, e.g. at mid-day and at the end of the day.



- Cleaning staff should be provided with appropriate personal protective equipment (heavy duty gloves and masks)
- Students should be encouraged to use the toilets in a correct manner.
- Provision of water for toilets should be maintained.
- Spraying of disinfectants should not be encouraged at any circumstance.
- Shoe baths at the entrance or any other places have NO role in control of Covid-19 and therefore should not be encouraged.
- Schools should plan general cleaning before opening the schools considering the risk of Covid-19 as well as Dengue. Schools should also consider the number of parents and supporting staff present at a time for this purpose.

## **SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS**

### **EXTRA CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES**

- Any activities which require close contact of student such as choir, group sports, swimming etc. should be avoided.
- Starting extracurricular activities can be considered in a stepwise manner considering the prevalence of Covid-19 in the community.
- Activities which can be conducted online, e.g. Chess, debates, quizzes, etc. should be encouraged.

### **USING CANTEEN, LIBRARY, COMPUTER UNITS AND OTHER SHARED AREAS IN THE SCHOOL**

- Physical distancing measures should be practised if these facilities are open.
- Alcohol-based hand rub should be available to facilitate frequent hand hygiene.
- High touch surfaces of these shared areas should be cleaned at least twice a day.

### **SCHOOL TRANSPORT**

- Symptomatic children should not be accepted to travel in the school transport service.



- Drivers and helpers should be vaccinated against Covid-19.
- Drivers and helpers should wear masks appropriately.
- Air conditioners should be switched off and windows should be opened.

### **CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS**

- Children with special needs should be encouraged to get vaccinated.
- Parents should provide recommendations from a qualified medical practitioner for children who are unable to use facemasks.
- Teachers who attend to these children should be encouraged to wear face shields.

### **STEPS TO BE TAKEN FOLLOWING DETECTION OF POSITIVE CASES WITHIN THE SCHOOL.**

- Proper contact tracing should be done with the help of local public health team.
- Advice from the local public health team should be followed regarding quarantine.
- Cleaning of classroom can be done using 0.1% Hypochlorite solution.

### **HOSTELS**

- Grade cohorting should be encouraged whenever possible within the hostels.
- Using dining areas in the hostel can be minimised by providing packet lunch.
- Sick rooms with separate bathrooms should be identified to keep symptomatic children.
- Students can be encouraged to use outdoor areas to study and play rather than gathering inside the rooms.

### References:

1. WHO. (2021, June 11). *School reopening Can't wait*. World Health Organization. <https://www.who.int/westernpacific/news/commentaries/detail-hq/school-reopening-can-t-wait>
2. CDC. (2021, July 9). *Science Brief: Transmission of SARS-CoV-2 in K-12 Schools and Early Care and Education Programs - Updated*. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. [https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/science/science-briefs/transmission\\_k\\_12\\_schools.html](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/science/science-briefs/transmission_k_12_schools.html)



## **Annexure 1:**

### **CHECKLIST FOR SCHOOLS PRIOR TO OPENING**

- Has the school decided the number of students, teachers, staff and parents who can be present at a time in the school premises?
- Has the school reviewed all the classrooms, staff rooms and office rooms and identified areas of inadequate ventilation?
- Has the school identified possible ways to improve ventilation of identified classrooms with inadequate natural ventilation?
- Has the school identified possible outdoor areas to conduct classes?
- Are all the classrooms arranged in a way that students and teachers can maintain at least 1m distance?
- Are the hand hygiene facilities adequate for the number of students, teachers and staff to be present in the school?
- Are the cleaning staff aware about cleaning and disinfectant protocols?
- Has the school identified the entry/exit gates for different grades of students and staff?
- Has the school prepared a staggered opening, closing and interval time for students and staff?
- Has the school informed the parents about the time schedule?
- Are there adequate sign boards on respiratory etiquette, hand hygiene and wearing masks?
- Has the school identified a designated sick room and sick room staff?
- Does the school have contact details of area public health team (PHI and MOH)?
- Does the school have easy communication channels, e.g. WhatsApp groups with parents?





**Annexure 2:**



 **Cough Etiquette**



**When you cough  
or sneeze use  
a tissue or  
your sleeve**



**Bin your tissue  
after use**



**Wash your  
hands**