PREPARING THE REOPENING OF SCHOOLS

Updated 15 May 2020

As part of its response to combat COVID-19, Ghana's Ministry of Education (MoE) temporarily shut down its schools. To reopen schools, effective guidelines to protect students, staff, parents and the larger society against COVID-19 spread must be developed and implemented. This note describes recommendations MoE should consider as they look to reopen schools and reviews related initiatives in other countries.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Overarching strategies

- Issue national and subnational health guidelines to ensure students and staff safety.
- Prepare critical financing plans to cover the additional costs that schools will face to ensure preparedness.
- Assess school WASH infrastructure readiness and availability of hygiene resources in schools.
- Establish an effective communication and coordination mechanism to build trust and consensus.
- Ensure continuity of learning, especially for vulnerable populations.
- Build system resilience.
- Develop robust health monitoring systems to ensure the timely identification of resurgence of community transmission.

Additional considerations

- The decision to reopen schools should depend on the compliance of robust infrastructure and health and sanitation protocols that could contain the spread of COVID-19. Unless these measures are effectively implemented, we would advise a lot of caution in the decision to proceed with school reopening.
- Authorities should allow for experimentation of different strategies to develop a more nuanced understanding of the most effective and feasible measures.

CONTEXT

In preparation for the reopening of schools across the country, the Ministry of Education should consider putting the following measures in place to minimize the risk of contagion for children and staff and curb the spread of COVID-19.

When deciding the best approach and timing to reopen schools, the government faces a tradeoff. On one hand, children returning to educational and childcare settings in greater numbers will allow more families to return to work. This might be especially relevant for developing countries where lower-income parents cannot afford to forgo work outside the home. In addition, school reopening is expected to have a positive impact on kids relying on schools for meals, students' learning and drop-out rates, as well as children and teenager's mental health. However, return to school carries the public health risk of a resurgence of infection among students, staff, and the broader community.

FOR WHICH SEGMENT OF TEACHERS AND STUDENTS?

The increase in the numbers of children and young people attending schools and colleges should be gradual. An initial selective reopening of schools, followed by a gradual increase in numbers, will make it easier to keep student groups small and dispersed.

Student prioritization might be conducted based on several indicators such as:

- **Specific educational groups:** Prioritize vulnerable children, the children of critical workers, and low-income students who are less likely to be equipped to benefit from the remote learning tools launched by the government and who are more likely to rely on school for non-academic support (such as school meals).[i]

- **Specific grades:** One alternative would be to prioritize pre-primary and primary schools as compared to high school and university students. This approach presumes a lower risk of infection and transmission in younger children, and a higher opportunity cost of not attending school in terms of student learning and parental ability to return to work (i.e. Denmark[ii]) . Another approach would be to target students in important transitional years –students presenting BECE and WASSCE tests (i.e. China[iii], Germany[iv]). This decision would imply that older students might be more prone to comply with social distancing measures and might be more compelling for systems with limited alternatives to provide a fair and accurate selection and certification process for students to move from one level of education to the next. [v]

- **Specific types of schools:** Exposure to COVID-19 might vary across types of school facilities. Governments can choose to delay the reopening of higher risk environments such as boarding schools and asses their preparedness on a facility-by-facility approach, factoring indicators such as size, capacity, current enrolment and the capacity to comply with hygiene guidelines. (i.e. Western Australia[vi])

- **Low-risk geographic areas:** Governments can reopen schools at the district level based on a high-frequency assessment of the progression of the epidemic and the trends in the number of new confirmed cases and the number of hospitalized patients. (i.e. Mexico[vii], Vietnam[viii], China[ix])

The phased approach should also apply to staff members. Teachers and staff who are at a higher risk of contracting COVID-19 —due to age or underlying medical conditions— should be identified in advance of school reopening and should be prioritized to stay at home. (i.e. Western Australia[x], Norway[xi])

WHAT PREVENTION AND CONTROL MEASURES SHOULD SCHOOLS ADOPT?

Health guidelines designed to limit the exposure to COVID-19 in schools and reduce the probability of transmission, alone, will not curb the spread of the disease. Therefore, these measures should be coupled with measures at home.

GUIDANCE FOR SCHOOLS

Infrastructure
- Section off common spaces, and adapt floor markings to direct foot-traffic flows and help students and staff maintain social distance. (i.e. Cook Islands[xii], Norway[xiii])
- Adapt portable hand-sanitizing and hand-washing stations at entrances and common areas to promote regular hygiene. [xiv]
- Space out tables and chairs in dining areas and classrooms, so they are 2 meters apart. (i.e. China, Denmark, Vanuatu, Greenland, Madagascar, Norway, Faroe Islands[xv], United Kingdom[xvi], Japan[xvii], Marshall Islands[xviii], Republic of Korea[xix])
- Engage school administrators to ensure that soap and water are available in schools. (i.e. Vanuatu[xx])
- Procure and distribute critical hygiene items (commercial detergents, chlorine, mop, buckets) and basic personal protection equipment (gloves, masks) for use by cleaning staff. [xxi]

Health and sanitation

- Remind and train students, teachers and staff on why, when and how to comply with infection prevention and control measures such as hand washing[1], social distancing, and other hygiene measures.[2] (i.e. Denmark[xxii], China[xxiii], Japan[xxiv], Marshall Islands[xxv], Tonga[xxvi], Vanuatu, Vietnam, Norway, Faroe Islands, Madagascar, Norway, United, Kingdom[xxvii], Cook Islands[xxviii])
- Train cleaning staff on safe disinfection practices. [xxix]
- Establish a sanitation and disinfection[xxx] schedule for school facilities (classroom, handwashing stations, toilets dining, playrooms, staff rooms, dormitories, laboratories) and frequently touched objects and surfaces (bells, playing materials, teaching aids and door handles). (i.e. Western Australia[xxxi], Republic of Korea[xxxii], China[xxxiii], Vanuatu, Greenland, Faroe Islands, Madagascar, Norway, Cook Islands[xxxiv])
- Ensure safe disposal of MHM waste and tissue used for cough/sneeze. [xxxv]
- Re-establish regular and safe delivery of essential services. (i.e. health services such as school feeding and vaccination campaigns).[xxxvi]
- Ensure that school meals are prepared and served under strict hygienic conditions.[xxxvii] (i.e. Greenland[xxxviii])
- Design behavior change campaigns to promote improved hygiene practices such as contextual – painted footpaths or arrows leading to the handwashing station— and visual –posters that show germs/virus on hands to evoke a sense of disgust in pupils, prompting them to wash their hands— cues. [xxxix](i.e. a Cook Islands[xl])
- Disseminate age and language appropriate messages[xli] on adequate hygiene at school and at home. (i.e. Marshall Islands[xlii])
- Supply students with a one-time hygiene kit to be used for hand hygiene before and after meals.
- Establish mandatory temperature checks[3] for students and staff. (i.e. Japan[xliii], Republic of Korea[xliv])
- Evaluate the consistent use of face masks. (i.e. Japan[xlv], Republic of Korea[xlvi], Madagascar[xlvii])
- Mandate sick students and staff to remain and home, and procure a space to quarantine symptomatic students and staff throughout the day. (i.e. Marshall Islands[xlviii], Norway[xlix])

Curriculum
- Develop pedagogical processes to assess progress and learning losses during school closure.[4]
- Plan[5] for recovery of instructional time, revise the school calendar and adjust learning priorities to ensure the curriculum is covered in a shorter academic year.[l]
- Ensure teachers are able to return to their duties and provide training to offer both psychosocial (including approaches to deal with gender-based violence) and academic support. (i.e. Norway[li], Cook Islands[lii])
- Provide teacher professional development so they can explore options for curriculum adaptation through peer learning groups on mobile platforms or remote learning tools.[liii]

School scheduling[liv, lv]
- Divide students into cohorts (i.e. by grade) and assign different cohorts different days to come to school to reduce the overall concentration of students and level of contact among students and staff to only those within their group. (i.e. Denmark[lvi], Norway[lvii])

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[1] Students and teachers should wash their hands frequently, after touching surfaces, coming out of public transportation or building, touching door handles, elevator doors and buttons, entering and coming out of toilets and bathrooms; before and after eating; hands must be washed systematically after blowing your nose, coughing (where possible, toilet tissue is recommended for blowing nose as it can be discarded immediately after use, instead of handkerchiefs), or sneezing; the appropriate technique and time taken to clean hands is also important (scrub your hands for at least 20 seconds).

[2] Avoid touching eyes, nose, and mouth without proper handwashing, cover your cough or sneeze with a tissue, then throw the tissue in the trash.

[3] Contactless thermometers are expensive, might be in short supply and might have high distribution costs attached.

[4] Consider designing and implementing remedial courses to mitigate learning losses.

[5] This can be done at a centralized level of schools can be given the autonomy to adjust the curriculum and calendar based on student learning levels, and how much in-school instruction schools are able to provide.

- Stagger school openings, starting with a few days a week[6] and adding days based on the positive progression of the epidemic. (i.e. Australia[lviii])
- Stagger start, close and break times of the school day to decrease the number of children and staff interacting with each other. (i.e. Western Australia[lix], China, Vanuatu, Norway[lx], Cook Islands[lxi])
- Create and enforce strict movement within schools, including hall movement restrictions, classroom movement restriction, lunchroom seating restriction and staggering class schedules to avoid overlap in hallways and classrooms. (i.e. Norway[lxii])
- Limit interaction between teachers. (i.e. Norway[lxiii])

Community engagement[lxiv]
- Ensure community engagement and use mobile platforms to establish effective communication channels with parents' and teachers' associations. (i.e. Cook Islands[lxv])

GUIDANCE FOR PARENTS

Vigilance
- Encourage parents and caregivers to talk with their children about COVID-19, symptoms and preventative measures in a way that children understand.
- Ensure children do not attend school if they or a member of their household has symptoms of COVID-19. Parents and caregivers should seek medical care if they notice their children or other household members are displaying symptoms similar to COVID-19.[lxvi]
- Encourage parents and caregivers to follow up with schools to ensure they are adhering to necessary preventative guidelines such as requesting updates on measures taken by each school.
- Encourage parents and caregivers to coordinate with schools to ensure timely information sharing and provision of support.[lxvii]
- Empower parents and caregivers to keep their children at home if they are considered extremely clinically vulnerable.[lxviii]

Preventative measures at home
- Strongly encourage parents or guardians clean and disinfect utensils, school uniforms and food containers at the end of each day.[lxix]
- Strongly encourage children practice good hygiene at home consistent with school initiatives to reinforce practices. Furthermore, parents and caregivers should be encouraged to be good role models by practicing proper hygiene.[lxx]
- Strongly encourage parents and caregivers equip their children with the necessary safety gear such as face masks and hand sanitizers. For schools that mandate children to wear protective gear, parents and caregivers should encourage children to start wearing the gear at home to get accustomed.

Preventative measures in public
- Encourage parents and caregivers to take their children to school or childcare on foot or by bike to prevent crowding in public transport.[lxxi]

RECOMMENDATIONS[lxxii]

As MoE plans for school reopening, we suggest that they focus on these overarching strategies:

- **Issue national and subnational health guidelines:** Formulate policies and protocols to inform hygienic practices for students and staff to ensure their safety. Policies and protocols may include: mandated

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[6] This approach would follow a flipped classroom design. Only a fraction of students will be able to enter the school enter each day, the rest will rely on continued distance learning on days when they are out of school

personal protective equipment (i.e. facemasks), daily temperature checks, daily sanitization of all surfaces, frequent supervised handwashing, required minimum distance between students in class, suspension of recess, sports, and other activities that bring students in close contact. Planning for school reopening should be done in consultation with Ministries of Health, Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection and other key public and private institutions (i.e. teacher unions).

- **Prepare critical financing plans:** Assess the financial impact of the pandemic on the education sector budget and prepare a financing plan to cover the additional costs that schools will face to ensure preparedness.
- **Assess education system readiness:** Evaluate school WASH infrastructure and availability of hygiene resources in schools. Develop a simple system to monitor and report functionality of WASH services in schools. This will allow the government to identify existing WASH in school capacities and potential gaps, both at the district and school level.
- **Establish an effective communication and coordination mechanism:** Promote local dialogue by engaging central authorities, local authorities, schools and parents, to build trust and consensus. Build effective feedback loops that enable communication between school authorities and parents and ensure the integration of this feedback to facilitate iterative policy design.
- **Ensure continuity of learning, especially for vulnerable populations:** Utilize distance learning platforms to phase in school reopening and supplement regular instructions to help students recover from any learning loss. The negative impact of school closures will disproportionately affect those who already experience barriers in accessing education. Authorities should explore special provision for vulnerable students (i.e. dropouts, females suffering from gender-based violence) when designing back-to-school policies to avoid widening the learning gap between vulnerable populations and other students.
- **Build system resilience:** Target infrastructure and resource gaps to contribute to school's preparedness to operate safely after reopening.
- **Develop robust health monitoring systems:** Conduct an ongoing assessment and re-assessment of the health status of staff and students' situations, to ensure the timely identification of resurgence of community transmission. (i.e. Western Australia[lxxiii], Tonga[lxxiv])

ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

- **The decision to reopen schools should depend on the compliance of robust infrastructure and health and sanitation protocols that could contain the spread of COVID-19.** Unless these measures are effectively implemented, we would advise a lot of caution in the decision to proceed with school reopening.
- **Additionally, it is important that authorities allow for experimentation of different strategies to develop a more nuanced understanding of the most effective and feasible measures.** A rigorous impact evaluation (i.e. Randomized Control Trial) design is suggested as a tool to compare different approaches and estimate their impact on relevant outcomes. This framework can be used to:
    - Study how varied approaches on school calendar and curriculum revision might impact student learning outcomes (i.e. centralized vs school autonomy approach).
    - Test different programs to promote better behavior (i.e. hygiene practices and social distancing) at home.
    - Compare different school scheduling strategies and estimate their impact on student learning outcomes.

CASE STUDIES

Globally, 16 countries[lxxv] have either partially or fully re-opened schools. These countries include eight in Asia-Pacific (Australia,[lxxvi] China, Cook Islands, Japan, Marshall Islands, Republic of Korea, Tonga, Vanuatu, Vietnam) four in Europe (Denmark, Netherlands,[lxxvii] Faroe Islands, Greenland, Norway, Germany) and one in Africa (Madagascar). Overall, countries have been using multiple strategies simultaneously (including hygiene promotion, minimization of physical contact and identification of symptomatic individuals) to ensure school operations can resume safely. The table below summarizes guidelines placed by other countries and provides links to resources they have developed for their reopening guidelines.

Table 1. Summary of reopening guidelines implemented by different countries[7]

Country	Date	Status	Temp Check	At-School Tests	Frequent Handwashing	Use of PPE	Thorough Ventilation	Frequent Cleaning	Staggered School Shifts	Limited Class Sizes	Limited Teaching Loads	Physical Distancing	Daily Messaging	Resources
Australia[8]	11 May	**Progressive :** Each state will partially reopen and gradually open more schools.	✔	✔	✔	✔		✔	✔	✔	✔	✔		[Government's Guidelines](#)
China	March – April	**Progressive:** Primary schools	✔	✔	✔	✔		✔	✔	✔		✔	✔	[Ministry of Education Guidelines](#)
Cook Islands	20 April	Countrywide			✔		✔	✔				✔		[Ministry of Education Announcement](#)
Denmark	15 April	**Progressive**: Daycare; Public schools, Grade 0 to 5; After school programs; Special schools and institutions– all grades; Last year of high school; A group of vocational education	✔	✔	✔	✔		✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	[Report on Government's Guidelines](#)
Faroe Islands	20 April	**Progressive:** Pre-schools; Primary schools (Grades 1-3); Some classes of final grade of high school; After-school recreation centers			✔			✔	✔			✔		[Ministry of Education Guidelines](#)

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Country	Date	Status	Temp Check	At-School Tests	Frequent Handwashing	Use of PPE	Thorough Ventilation	Frequent Cleaning	Staggered School Shifts	Limited Class Sizes	Limited Teaching Loads	Physical Distancing	Daily Messaging	Resources
Germany	5 May	Countrywide	✔	✔	✔	✔		✔	✔	✔		✔		[Report on Government's Guidelines](#)
Greenland	14 April (and later)	**Progressive:** Primary schools (Coastal schools) and all the educational institutions of the country under special instructions except in Nuuk (Capital)			✔			✔	✔			✔	✔	[Report on Government's Guidelines](#)
Japan	6 April	**Localized**	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔		[Report on Government's Guidelines](#)
Madagascar	22 April	**Progressive:** Grades 3 and 7 of lower-secondary and upper-secondary education			✔	✔		✔	✔			✔		[Presidential Announcement](#)
Marshall Islands	6 April	Country-wide	✔		✔			✔				✔	✔	[Ministry of Education Announcement](#)
Netherlands	11 May / 2 June	**Progressive:** Primary Schools (part time) / Secondary schools	✔	✔	✔	✔		✔	✔	✔	✔	✔		[Ministry of Education Guidelines](#)
Norway	20 April / 27 April	**Progressive** Pre-schools / Primary schools (Grades 1-4)	✔	✔	✔	✔		✔	✔	✔	✔	✔		[Report on Government's Guidelines](#)
Republic of Korea	20 May[9]	Countrywide	✔		✔	✔		✔				✔	✔	[Ministry of Education Press Release](#)
Tonga	14 April	Countrywide			✔			✔				✔		[Government Guidelines](#)

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Country	Date	Status	Temp Check	At-School Tests	Frequent Handwashing	Use of PPE	Thorough Ventilation	Frequent Cleaning	Staggered School Shifts	Limited Class Sizes	Limited Teaching Loads	Physical Distancing	Daily Messaging	Resources
United Kingdom	1 June	**Progressive:** Primary schools	✔	✔	✔	✔		✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	[Government Guidelines](#)
Vanuatu	14-20 April	**Progressive**			✔			✔	✔			✔		[Ministry of Education Announcement](#)
Vietnam	20 April Early May	**Progressive:** 9 and 12 grades (Ca Mau province – low risk) Ho Chi Minh City and others			✔			✔	✔			✔		[Report on Government's Guidelines](#)

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