



**National Guidelines for Safe Re-Opening of  
Education Institutes**

**Going Back to School Safely**

**August 4, 2020**

## **Objective:**

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to unprecedented disruption to education, impacting more than 40 million children enrolled in various education facilities across Pakistan. As the country recovers from the COVID crisis, Government in consultation with the provincial and area authorities as well as Higher Education Commission, Wafaq ul Madaris, Private School Associations and other stakeholders has announced re-opening of schools from September 15, 2020.

The most important task at hand is to prepare schools, students, teachers and parents for a re-opening of schools with minimum risk of transmission, and ensuring safe learning continuity. Schools will not only have to prepare the physical facilities to allow for a safe learning environment, but will also be cognizant of the learning losses suffered by children over a 6 month long closure of facilities. Health and Learning vulnerabilities both will require equal attention.

These guidelines provide a minimum set of standard operating procedures for managers, administrators and staff of education facilities, however since the context varies so much across Pakistan with small rural under-resourced schools, multi-grade and low-enrolment schools to high-resourced, high enrolment, large schools. This variation requires an adaptability and adjustment at the local level, while ensuring the key basic rules of COVID-19 pandemic are adhered to, these are:

1. Handwashing and Sanitization
2. Covering the face with mask
3. Maintaining physical distance
4. Self-isolation if any symptoms appear

The guidelines presented in this paper are based on global guidance for safe school reopening including the global Framework for Reopening Schools prepared by UNICEF, UNESCO, World Bank and UNHCR. The outline also relies on current knowledge of COVID-19 and the best health advice on preventing infection. The considerations outlined are also consistent with the Pakistan National Education Response and Resilience Plan for COVID-19 and guidance prepared by provinces/areas. The guidelines are based on three key principles:

1. Guided by the best interest of the child and overall public health considerations
2. Based on current assessments of benefits and risks of school reopening
3. Made in consultation with multiple stakeholders

Education Managers will have to ensure the guidelines are available with all school administrators and that there is teacher training and community engagement to ensure implementation of guidelines.

It is again reiterated that with the variety of contexts in Pakistan, there is no "one way" of school reopening, every school may have to adjust the guidelines ensuring minimum protocols are followed.

## **A. Before Schools Reopen:**

### **1. Assess the readiness of schools to re-open:**

- Sanitize/Clean the school at least a few days before the school is scheduled to reopen for all children.

- Schools that have been used as quarantine centers or isolation centers will require special disinfection, and a more thorough cleaning with the help of health and district authorities.
- Ensure availability of water for handwashing and handwashing stations located near entrance points for ease of access.
- Allocate non-salary budgets, school grants for a regular supply of soap and disinfectants for schools.
- Clean and hygienic toilets and their functionality needs to be ensured.
- Mandatory training of managers and teachers to ensure they are aware of school reopening protocols.

**2. School managers to engage with community and parent teacher committees (PTCs) or school councils (SCs):**

- Engage the community, PTCs and other such groups as partners and support groups, as well as to reassure them about safety measures.
- Make them aware about the protocols to be followed at the school level and encourage that the same should be done at home and community level.
- Parental guidance and supervision will be required for academic tasks as well, so active engagement is required with them to ensure home support is also available wherever possible.

**3. Actively engage teachers prior to school-reopening:**

- Teachers review the syllabi and timetables to adjust to reduced school year and prioritize key learning outcomes to be prioritized.
- Prepare plans for school calendar year and formative assessments.
- Consider options of self-learning, home-work assignments, worksheets, blended learning to cater for learning needs.
- Consider remedial program for children at risk (keeping gender and special needs in perspective).

**4. Make school specific guidelines for:**

- Cleanliness schedules at the school premises
- Teacher and student duty roster to monitor school cleanliness and health of staff
- Prepare guidelines for use of canteens/cafeterias, school transport, school grounds and sports facilities, morning assemblies, laboratory and library usage, and other such school routines.
- Prepare leaflets/instructions for making cloth masks at home for sharing with community and parents

**5. Assess logistics and transport continuity:**

- If schools operate a bus/van, the safe distance measures and disinfection protocols will apply to the bus as well.
- The school will need to reduce the number of children using the transport, and prioritize for children at risk of dropping out because of distance.
- This may require operating the bus only for students who live a longer distance away from school or children with special needs.
- Bus drivers will also practice all safety actions and protocols as indicated for other staff (e.g., hand hygiene, cloth face coverings).

## **B. After Schools Reopen:**

### ***Some considerations:***

- Schools may decide to reopen only for higher grades and should ideally refrain from opening K-2 classes immediately. This is especially important where schools have limited space availability and lack of teachers to cater to the needs of younger children.
- School may also like to cancel break time completely and stagger the time table in such a way that students come in for reduced hours and leave during break time.
- Teachers will have to be engaged at the school for a longer time duration to cater for staggered grades and shifts, however, this is a decision that may have to be taken based on local conditions. Policy in this regard should be in place.
- Schools with limited spaces, especially high enrolment schools or schools in buildings, other than custom built schools, will have to be very creative in the use of space.
- Schools will have to consider remedial teaching options for children who may struggle academically because of school closures.
- Day care facilities will need to be functional to support working parents. All safety protocols are applicable to Day care facilities as well. No masks for children younger than 2-3 years in a day care facility.

### **1. Protection of Personnel/students at facility entrance & exit points:**

- Schools to provide options of temperature check at entry points wherever possible.
- A school monitor (teacher, students or community volunteer) to be present at the school gate to support safe school entry in high enrolment schools.
- Maintain safe distance among students/individuals during entry and exit.
- Avoid crowding at the gate in high-enrollment schools by using multiple gates for student entry and exit wherever possible.
- Regularly educate staff and families about when they/their children should stay home, who are sick or who have recently had close contact with a person with COVID-19 and if they have tested positive and when they can return to school.

### **2. Hand washing and sanitization:**

- Instruct students and teachers to wash hands before coming to the classrooms and employ frequent handwashing during the day.
- Wherever possible provide sanitizers, or request parents to provide small sanitizer bottles for children. Low cost sanitization options can be practiced at the school level by using safe and cheap disinfectant solutions.
- Where sanitizers are not available, soap availability needs to be ensured.

### **3. Sneezing and Coughing Etiquettes:**

- Ensure staff and students know how to cover coughs and sneezes with elbows, and use tissues, handkerchiefs during sneeze/cough.
- No sharing of handkerchiefs among students.
- Ensure disposal of such materials in dustbins.

**4. Cloth Face Coverings and Face Masks**

- Use of face masks should be mandatory and students should be taught safe and clean use of masks.
- Where face masks are not available or affordable, schools should provide leaflets to parents to make low-cost face masks at home
- A teacher or a community volunteer can do a mask making demonstration activity at the school with low cost material to teach children and parents how to make masks at home
- Children/Staff with any underlying medical issue should not be forced to wear a mask, maintain a safe distance (6 meter apart) and sitting near a window or a well-ventilated area is encouraged for such children/staff.

**5. Reinforce messaging for safe procedures by putting up signs and messages outside and inside the school:**

- Post signs in visible locations (e.g., school entrances, library) that promote everyday protective measures.
- Ensure regular messaging for parents and caregivers about behaviours that prevent the spread of COVID-19.

**6. Social (Physical Distancing)**

- School Head and Teacher in-charge should take precautionary measures to avoid overcrowding in classrooms, laboratory and waiting area.
- Space seating/desks at least 6 feet apart, if large ventilated spaces are available and all children are wearing masks the distance can be slightly reduced.
- Turn desks to face in the same direction (rather than facing each other), or have students sit on only one side of tables, spaced apart.
- Create distance between children in school vans and buses (seat children one child per row, skip rows) when possible

**7. Ventilation:**

- Keep windows, vents and doors open
- Ensure ventilation systems operate properly and increase circulation of outdoor air as much as possible.
- Keep windows of the school vans/buses open.
- Wherever possible use halls and open spaces (weather permitting) for classes.

**8. Canteens and Cafeterias:**

- Younger children to bring food and water from home.
- Where it is not possible/feasible to close the canteens, all cleanliness protocols to be applied to the area and safe distancing of tables.
- Staff of canteen to wash hands regularly and use sanitizers.

**9. Shared objects and physical contact:**

- Discourage children from using each other's stationary and books.
- Strictly follow no-touch policy with children and discourage handshakes amongst the children as well.

**10. Co-curricular activities, morning assemblies and sports events:**

- During COVID-19 pandemic, schools should avoid all of the above to ensure adherence to safety protocols.

- Schools can engage children in debating, art competitions, writing competitions etc. if physical distancing and other protocols are adhered to and if academic calendar allows.

#### **11. Designated COVID-19 point of contact :**

- Designate a staff person to be responsible for responding to COVID-19 concerns. All school staff and families should know who this person is and how to contact them.
- The person should have some basic training by a health professional on COVID safety measures and response mechanisms.
- Each classroom should have a student monitor in class to ensure safety protocols are followed and observe signs of illness or distress amongst the students.

#### **12. Establish active engagement with parents and community:**

- Active engagement will be required for timely information sharing and implementation of safety protocols.
- Changes in any notifications regarding school closures, safety protocols. COVID-19 spread should be actively communicated to staff and parents, as well as older students.

#### **13. Leave (Time Off) policies and excused absence policies**

- Implement flexible sick leave policies and practices that enable staff and students to stay home when they are sick, have been exposed, or caring for someone who is sick.
- Staff and students with underlying serious issues (as verified by a medical doctor) should be encouraged to stay at home.
- In case of students, teachers can prepare homework and learning options and share with parents/caregivers.

#### **14. Staff training on safety protocols**

- Regularly train staff on all safety protocols.
- Conduct training virtually or ensure that social distancing is maintained during training.
- Training should include recognition of symptoms and safety measures to follow in case of such symptoms.

#### **15. Isolation Rooms/Areas**

- The school must identify an isolation room or designated isolation area where unwell students can be attended before referring to hospital or parents.

#### **16. Recess/Break**

- Recess/break will not be given to the students. They will have their lunch in the class maintaining social distance of 6 feet.
- School Head and Covid monitors (students) will ensure implementation of SOPs.

**17. Hostel / Accommodation Facility:**

- Hostel accommodations to be prioritized only for those who are from very distant regions, ideally recommend 30% utilization of hostel accommodation to ensure physical distancing.

**22. Staggering grades and opening schools in shifts:**

- Staggered reopening of institutions is recommended, starting with older children who can follow protocols easily. A gap of at least 3-4 weeks is suggested (although this will vary according to context), so as to monitor the implementation of protocols and safety measures and response of students and parents.
- The staggering of grades should be required for large classrooms through a rotational time table. If space and teachers are available the rotation can happen in different spaces or in morning and afternoon shifts. If both space and teachers are unavailable the rotation can be over a span of days (alternate days teaching).
- Smaller rural schools with low enrolments may want to open the schools for all children and all grades on the same day, depending on availability of staff.
- Physical distancing as suggested by the Ministry of Health Services, Regulations and Coordination is **6 feet** apart. Number of students in the class should be based on implementation of this protocol.
- Stagger arrival and drop-off times or locations by cohort or put in place other protocols to limit contact between cohorts and direct contact with parents as much as possible.

**23. Adjust Time Tables:**

- Time table to be adjusted in a way that different classes are discreetly scheduled thereby evading dangerous congestion.
- Schools to ensure at least 30 minutes in the morning and afternoon shifts prior to academic work to allow for safety measures to be in place (hands washed, masks in place as well as desk spacing).

**24. Innovative teaching methods and adjustments:**

- Managers and Teachers to review syllabus and prioritize key learning objectives important for children to ensure reduced time can be efficiently utilized.
- Schools may opt to teach only core subjects and topics for lower grades, ensuring continuity of skills required for higher grade levels.
- Include self-learning and blended learning techniques in the teaching methodologies to effectively cover the syllabus.
- Use technology based methods wherever possible (Teleschool, PITB content, free YouTube videos, Whatsapp, Khan Academy and other free learning sites.)
- Home based tasks will be important, especially in a staggered learning environment and will need parental guidance as well.
- Prepare for remedial learning for at-risk students and/or accelerated learning programs.

**25. Adjust Assessment methods:**

- In addition to adjustments required for syllabus and time tables, school will have to reconsider how students are assessed.

- Use portfolios, assignments, homework and worksheets to keep a record of children's performance and as a method of assessing children's academic progress.
- Children have missed a lot of academic work, schools should work closely with the internal and external boards of examination to adjust exam methods for the children and reduce pressure of exams and assessments.

In addition to the above protocols and guidelines schools and education facilities require comprehensive plan for continuous staff training and coordination, partnerships with stakeholders as well as a contingency plan in case of any emergency.

### **C. Teacher/Staff Training**

Regular teacher training will be an important requirement to ensure teachers adjust to the new methods of teaching, assessment and are able to provide social emotional support to all children, but especially children at risk.

School should dedicate a few hours/a day in a week to review learning progression and adjust academic planning accordingly.

Teachers will need to be provided access to sample worksheets, blended learning tools, to ensure they are able to include these in the teaching methods.

District authorities and school managers should actively engage teacher training personnel to provide hands on support for teachers where required through online methods, WhatsApp groups or other innovative ways.

### **D. Partnerships with Health Officials, District Authorities and Organizations working for Education**

Education managers will need to keep a close liaison with health and district authorities in the area so that they can seek guidance and help whenever required. A list of emergency numbers should be displayed prominently in the schools.

To tide over these difficult times schools may wish to reach out to organizations and private organizations that can support through technical and resource inputs.

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