

Some notes on school measures in a few countries to limit infections

Martin Gustafsson

6 June 2020

I wanted to get my own sense of what schools are told to do in a few countries to limit infections, drawing from original guidelines and policies. My focus was four areas where I expected a lot of variation across countries: (1) physical distancing arrangements for the school as a whole; (2) physical distancing in the classroom; (3) the use of special equipment such as PPEs and infrared thermometers; and (4) the rights of at-risk teachers to stay away from work. It seems these are areas where there would be more variation, and also more policy controversy. Other areas, such as banning large extra-curricular gatherings and steps to take when someone is infected are less controversial, and essentially everyone seems to use similar guidance.

My findings appear in the table two page down. Here are some over-arching conclusions:

- Global bodies such as UNESCO, the WHO and the World Bank should ideally be doing the kind of across-country comparisons I am attempting here. While UNESCO plus World Bank have jointly issued a framework for re-opening schools (UNESCO, 2020), they have not made comparisons of what countries are doing. I think that is a pity. The DBE has attempted to fill this gap through bilateral fact-finding discussions with officials from a few countries (I know of Norway, the Netherlands and China).
- I wanted to get information from as many developing countries as possible, but this turned out to be more difficult than I thought, in part because it appears so many Latin American countries are still at a stage when they are at least not publicly making preparations for re-openings. South Africa has more in this regard, as seen in for instance the DBE's *Coronavirus orientation guidelines for schools*. This surprised me a bit. South Africa seems to have embraced the messages from, for instance, the World Bank and UNESCO, around the need to re-open schools, to a greater extent.
- As seen in the table, there is a lot of variation. Whatever South Africa does, we are likely to find someone else who is doing something very similar. This can facilitate justifying what is done. With respect to the critical matter of between-learner distance in the classroom, one finds everything from 'space desks as far apart as is possible' (Sweden) to a fairly hard rule that everyone must be 2 metres apart (Spain). With respect to body temperature screening, positions range from it is not necessary (England) to it must be done daily within the classroom by the teacher (Singapore). With respect to the right of at-risk teachers to stay away from schools, positions range from virtually no rights (Sweden), to rights for teachers with a small range of co-morbidities (England), to rights for teachers based on a larger range of co-morbidities *and* age (Spain).
- One suspects that a part of the reason for the large variation in responses to a virus which is the same everywhere, is that there has not been sufficient analysis of how exactly the science of the virus should shape policy (obviously differing country contexts would be a further reason for variation). International organisations have certainly not provided much in the way of detailed guidance regarding the science. So far, the only country I have come across which has an official document interpreting the science and its school policy implications is Sweden¹. Of course, in Sweden, with its very non-restrictive approach to Covid-19, risks are higher and this type of official document becomes more necessary to justify the policy. However, it should be noted that the Swedish official document is quite recent (29 May), so for much of the pandemic this type of justification has been absent.

- What is striking for me is that many countries apply the same rules to all levels, from lower primary to upper secondary. That seems wrong to me, especially given the evidence around different levels of transmission for different ages.
- What are some things the current DBE guidelines appear not to have considered, which may be worth including in future guidelines? The staggering, even by 15 minutes, of start and end times in the school day seems like an excellent way of reducing congestion in and around the school premises. Staggering breaktimes also seems like a good idea. Actively promoting walking and cycling, as an alternative to taxis and buses, seems important. Being clear that somewhat different rules are necessary for different levels of the schooling system seems vital.

	Physical distancing and timetabling for the school	Physical distancing in the classroom	PPEs and temperature screening	Labour rights of at-risk teachers
UNESCO etc. framework	Guidance (not level-specific) is to stagger start and end times, and implement shifts to reduce attendance at any one time ² .	Nothing explicit.	Nothing.	Both age and underlying medical conditions should be considered with respect to teacher attendance.
United States (CDC)	Staggering the start and end of the school day to reduce congestion in and around the school grounds is recommended. School buses should use alternate seats only ³ .	It is recommended that desks be 1.8 metres apart, where feasible (presumably for all grades), that learners all face the same direction when seated.	Body temperature screening, if possible, is considered useful. The use of cloth masks by teachers and learners, especially older learners, is encouraged.	Flexible leave policies are recommended, including for cases where teachers must care for ill or young family members at home.
England	Guidance for all levels is to stagger breaks, and encourage walking to school. Only for grades 10 to 12 is staggering attendance to reduce class sizes recommended ⁴ .	At the primary level, classes should be split so there are no more than 15 children in a class. Teacher assistants can look after some classes. It is acknowledged that keeping young children the expected 2 metres from each other all the time is not feasible, though for the secondary level desks should be two metres apart. It is accepted that due to subject teaching, there will be more mixing among secondary learners.	Guidance is not to use PPEs as they are deemed unnecessary in the school setting, and possibly dangerous for younger children. Routine body temperature screening of learners is not deemed an effective way of limiting infections.	Only teachers fulfilling criteria for 'clinically extremely vulnerable', as determined by a medical doctor, have the right to be absent from school to avoid infection ⁵ . Age is not an explicit criterion.
Singapore	End-of-phase cohorts should attend school on all days, while other learners will come to school half the time on a	Desks should be a metre apart.	Temperature screening on entry to the school applies only to visitors, though within the classroom teachers should	Nothing found, not even on Singapore Teachers' Union website.

	Physical distancing and timetabling for the school	Physical distancing in the classroom	PPEs and temperature screening	Labour rights of at-risk teachers
	rotational basis, though after some weeks everyone should be returning on a full-time basis. The start and end of the school day should be staggered to reduce congestion. Breaks must be staggered ⁶ .		conduct this screening of learners. Masks or shields should be worn by learners, except when they exercise, and teachers should wear a mask or shield when they teach.	
Sweden	The staggering of the start and end of the school day, and of breaks, may be introduced by the principal ⁷ .	Guidance is to increase the distance between desks, if possible ⁸ .	Nothing.	There is no provision for at-risk teachers to stay away from work, something which the teacher union is trying to change ⁹ .
Spain	Walking and cycling to school should be encouraged. On school buses, only members of the same household may sit next to each other ¹⁰ .	A distance of at least 2 metres between everyone is required. Use of outdoor spaces to help complying with this is recommended.	Schools are required to provide teachers with PPEs (details not given) ¹¹ . Masks on learners are required within scholar transport, and within the school wherever a distance of 2 metres cannot be maintained. Temperature screening in the school is not required, but parents are required to monitor the temperature of learners every morning.	In regulations covering all labour, a range of conditions, including hypertension, diabetes and being over 60, are said to represent a high risk. However, a final decision around non-attendance at work rests with a labour department official, who must first explore possibilities for risk reduction in the workplace for the individual in question ¹² .

References

UNESCO (2020). *Framework for reopening schools*. Paris.

¹ <https://www.folkhalsomyndigheten.se/publicerat-material/publikationsarkiv/c/covid-19-hos-barn-och-unga--en-kunskapssammanstallning/> (Google translates to English)

² UNESCO, 2020.

³ <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/schools-childcare/schools.html>

⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-implementing-protective-measures-in-education-and-childcare-settings/coronavirus-covid-19-implementing-protective-measures-in-education-and-childcare-settings>

⁵ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/guidance-on-shielding-and-protecting-extremely-vulnerable-persons-from-covid-19/guidance-on-shielding-and-protecting-extremely-vulnerable-persons-from-covid-19>

⁶ <https://www.moe.gov.sg/news/press-releases/arrangements-for-schools-and-institutes-of-higher-learning-at-the-end-of-circuit-breaker>

⁷ <https://www.skolverket.se/regler-och-ansvar/coronaviruset-och-covid-19---regler-for-skolor-och-forskolor/coronaviruset---fragor-och-svar-utifran-skollagstiftningen#Rekommendationenomdistansundervisningforgymnasieskolanochkomvuxtasbort> (Google translates to English)

⁸ <https://www.folkhalsomyndigheten.se/smittydd-beredskap/utbrott/aktuella-utbrott/covid-19/verksamheter/information-till-skola-och-forskola-om-den-nya-sjukdomen-covid-19/forebyggande-atgarder-i-for--och-grundskola/> (Google translates to English)

⁹ <https://www.lararforbundet.se/artikelsidor/corona-i-skolan-fraagor-svar#riskgrupper-och-gransdragning> (Google translates to English)

¹⁰ <https://www.educacionyfp.gob.es/dam/jcr:52e023fd-339f-48af-96f1-ddd6ad77c4fd/20200514-medidas-sanitarias-para-reapertura-centros-fase-2-final.pdf>

¹¹ <https://www.boe.es/eli/es/o/2020/05/09/snd399/con> (Google translates to English)

¹² <https://www.msrebs.gob.es/profesionales/saludPublica/ccayes/alertasActual/nCov-China/documentos/PrevencionRRL COVID-19.pdf>