

CoVid 19 - Corona Control

Guidelines for School & College re-opening

Drafted by

**The Expert Committee
IMA Kerala State Branch**

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Introduction:

The lockdown has played a major role in flattening the epidemic curve, thereby saving thousands of lives. At this point, it appears that the virus has largely been confined to individual households, with minimal or no community spread in the state. However, we do not know the extent of asymptomatic spread. As lockdown is about to be lifted, relaxation in restrictions will follow. The influx of NRI's and Keralites from other states will also happen at the same time. It is under these circumstances that we formulate guidelines for school reopening in the state.

The committee has carefully studied similar scenarios in multiple countries and has made these observations, followed by our conclusion.

1. Asymptomatic infection is a major threat, the extent of which is unknown in India due to lack of widespread testing. If schools are reopened too soon, the virus will be able to travel from one household to the other using schoolchildren as a medium. A few of these children will be carrying the virus, but without symptoms. In a classroom, children sit together over a period of several hours. As they pass on the infection to their classmates, the classroom effectively becomes a convenient hub for the virus to penetrate deep into the community. From the individual homes of students, it will spread to offices, markets and other homes as the adults go to work.

2. When the child gets back home from school, they will mingle freely with the high-risk group, including grandparents and pregnant women. Virus will thus spread freely. Reverse quarantine will be impossible in such a setting.
3. Containment measures like social distancing, hand washing and masks will be difficult to get successfully implemented in crowded classrooms, and vehicles of transport.
4. While planning the academic year, it is important to estimate the manpower required to track down and quarantine the contacts if there were an outbreak in a school. Several thousand people will need to be tracked down. The logistics and man-hours involved for such a feat is imaginable. In addition, test kits are already in short supply, and will likely get exhausted if such an event occurred.
5. The consequences of a wrong decision can be severe and cannot be undone in a pandemic setting. The expert committee's decisions are made based on information available at the present time, and are customized to the local conditions in the state of Kerala. Preserving lives and safeguarding the vulnerable population are given top priority.

Conclusion:

Considering the above facts, restarting of classroom sessions in school and college will need to be postponed for at least a few months, and distance-

learning implemented in the interim. Essential public exams could be held, observing strict norms of social distancing.

When can we reopen for regular classroom classes?

It will depend on several factors that might happen in the future. Broadly speaking, once the uncertainty about community spread clears in the coming months, new treatments arrive or the virus dies a natural death, these decisions can be reconsidered. At this point, we are in the middle of an unprecedented global crisis where preventing deaths is the highest priority, and long-term predictions are impossible.

The following section includes guidelines for

- 1) Distance Education
- 2) Public Exams and
- 3) School Re-opening

**Guidelines for distance education,
for the immediate future**

1. Instead of calling it a crisis or loss, we could use this as an exciting opportunity to include contemporary practical topics that are useful for the child's future such as language skills, communication skills, ethics, Indian constitution, civic sense, altruism, epidemiology, basic virology, public health, new methods of learning, technology, practically useful statistics, art, road safety, fire safety, CPR, first aid, approach to geriatric population, cyber safety, agriculture, horticulture, nutrition and safe healthy food and numerous others that might not have been included in the school curriculum in sufficient detail.

2. In addition, contemporary health topics like hand washing techniques, reverse quarantine and social distancing can be conveyed to teachers, students and parents. Government can utilize VICTERS channel (VICTERS is for ‘versatile ICT enabled resource for students’), the TV channel owned by Dept of education for taking interactive as well as non-interactive classes. All schools already have access to this channel. Experts from IAP (Indian Academy of Pediatrics) and IMA (Indian Medical Association) can help with implementation of this program.
3. Children as a group are smarter than adults with mobile technology. Those without internet access can meet in small groups at a classmate’s home for distance learning. The school curriculum can be rearranged to fit this platform until regular classes resume.
4. Their screen time (time spent on mobile phones and television) should be kept to the required minimum.
5. Children get plenty of free time at home. Teachers should motivate them to practice dancing, skipping, zumba, etc.
6. Online quiz competitions on general knowledge will encourage newspaper reading.
7. ‘Covid diary’ writing may be encouraged. When school reopens, these could be judged by teachers and prizes given.
8. Online classes should not be purely academics. Extra curricular activities should be included as discussed above.
9. Children may hold virtual mobile phone app-based group meetings with their friends to discuss their matters. Otherwise children may get depressed as they miss their companions for several months.

10. Routine immunization of children should be continued.
11. Risk of obesity due to chances of overeating and lack of physical activity should be addressed. Games like table tennis, shuttle badminton where the number of players is less are to be recommended where facilities are available. Large groups must be avoided.

Guidelines to be followed for Public examinations:

1. All students must be considered COVID positive, to make sure the precautions are 100%. Isolation class rooms must be available if a child develops any respiratory symptoms during the class hours, for the safety of others.
2. Physical distancing during exams: minimum two metre distance in 360 degrees between children must be maintained. This means there must be empty benches in front as well as behind each student, regardless of how well the student might feel. Masks must be worn at all times.
3. A map of all the rooms and the names, dates, timing and order of seating of children in each room must be meticulously maintained by each school. This will be necessary to correctly track contacts if an outbreak was reported in the local community in the future. Schools must know the protocols of contact tracing and quarantine procedures. Reasons behind student absenteeism should be found out without delay.
4. During exams, all desks and benches to be sanitized after each session.
5. Please also see the next section for general guidelines.

Guidelines to be followed for School and College reopening:

Note: The date for school/college reopening will be announced only later, when the risk of spreading infection is substantially lower than at present. These guidelines are being written in advance to allow sufficient time for preparation. Some rearrangements are required to prevent interclass mingling, and to promote social distancing while in the same class.

1. Before reopening, each Grade and section (e.g. STD 8P, 8Q etc.) must be divided into two batches (A batch and B batch) consisting of maximum 20-25 children per batch. This will help with social distancing. At least one metre gap between students is mandatory while seated in the classroom for regular classes.
2. Classes to be conducted from Monday to Friday only on shift basis henceforth (until further guidelines). A Batch: Morning shift 8 AM to 12.00 PM B batch: Noon shift - 12.30 AM to 4.30 PM If Saturday classes are necessary, they may be conducted only online.
3. Ensure physical distancing during labs and PT periods. Special attention to be paid to the entrance to school and classroom, to promote hand hygiene and avoid crowding.
4. Different (staggered) interval/break time to be made for each class (e.g. Grade 8-10 at 10.15 AM, Grade 9-10 at 10:45 AM)
5. Prevent mingling of students of different classes. If mingling occurs between classes, there is a chance of wider spread of virus throughout the school and to the students' families. Besides, it will make tracking and quarantine measures impossible if an outbreak happens in the future. On the other hand, if the

outbreak occurs in only one class, then only those students need to be quarantined.

6. School lunch breaks involve a risk of children mingling. For private schools, since there is only a half-day session, there is no lunch break — and children can have their lunch at home. For government schools with mid-day meal programs, meals will continue to be provided, but there will be no official lunch break. Instead of eating lunch at the school premises, the children may carry their mid-day meal home in their own tiffin boxes.
7. **Transport arrangements:** If school buses are used, physical distancing protocols recommended by the health department should be implemented in buses. For instance, it is likely that schools may be advised to operate buses with a one student per seat rule. It is important to anticipate issues regarding the health and safety of drivers and cleaners. Drivers and accompanying school staff in vehicle must clean the vehicle and high-touch areas such as handles, seats and windows with disinfectant on a regular schedule daily. For private transport, crowding is not permitted, and must be notified in advance to parents so that they can make arrangements.
8. School assembly and other common meetings to be conducted through overhead or classroom speakers. This will reduce mingling between classes.
9. As far as possible, retain the same class-teacher and same students as last year, in the corresponding new grades. This is an exceptionally stressful period for children, and doing so will ensure students are comfortable and familiar with their peers and class-teacher. In other words, please avoid shuffling of students and their class-teachers.

10. Schools should identify and procure recommended professional protective equipment including gloves, face masks, hand soap, hand sanitizers and disinfectant. The correct method of hand washing and use of masks should be demonstrated by the teachers. All staff and students should wear cloth facemasks of sufficient thickness and thread count. Guidelines are available at Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Government of India. Masks must be worn at all times and washed every day. Wrong use of mask is only to be expected, and must be corrected.
11. Adequate water supply should be ensured for hand washing and cleaning. Students must be shown how to minimize water wastage while handwashing.
12. Strict instructions to be given to parents to NOT send children to school if they have fever, cough, sore throat or any illness, until they have fully recovered. They must be readmitted to their respective classrooms only with medical certificate.
13. NRI visitors: Any child who lives in a home where an NRI is visiting must be on strict quarantine for 28 days. They should not attend exams or classes. Parents must make alternative arrangements if NRI relatives are visiting, so that children and NRI will not be under the same roof, even for a visit.
14. Revamp toilet facilities and wash areas to maintain strictest standards of hygiene. Ensure adequate liquid handwash availability at all times. Girl students especially, must be provided with proper sanitary facilities, with separate bins for sanitary napkin disposal. Toilets must be cleaned thoroughly after each shift.
15. School canteens to remain closed. All snacks to be brought from home.

16. PTA meetings to be done online or through any telecommunication channel.
17. Mandatory timed water bell and toilet bell to be rung at specific times to ensure children do not get dehydrated or develop urinary tract infections.
18. Certain degree of leniency maybe exercised for grading students test marks and attendance this year.
19. Mental health support: The isolation brought about by social distancing can exacerbate children's depression and anxiety. As students return, schools must have counselling support to address the numerous causes of trauma that result from economic hardship from a parent losing his or her job, domestic abuse, violence, neglect or the death of family members. Counselling services should be appropriately revamped.
20. Students with disabilities. The impact of non-availability of occupational, physical and speech language therapy and mental health services during the period of school closure period is significant among this population. They need more time and effort to cope. These children should be helped at individual level depending on their need of assistance.



Dr. Abraham Varghese, Kerala State IMA President
receiving a copy of the report of the Expert Committee from
Dr. S.S. Kamath on 13 May 2020.
Dr. M. Narayanan and Dr. Rajeev Jayadevan are present.