

Reopening schools safely

At the start of each school year, colds often race through classrooms and to students' families. COVID-19 makes this familiar pattern far more dangerous. A single careless school could cause hundreds of illnesses and multiple deaths. Fearing that fate, students and teachers may avoid schools--and education suffers.

Fortunately, we know six key changes that can keep a school safe:

1. **Wash hands** with soap and water (or sanitizer) thoroughly as everyone enters the school, after using the toilet, and before eating
2. **Cough and sneeze into their elbow**, tissue or handkerchief
3. **Disinfect surfaces and reduce shared objects and food**
4. **Wear masks** of cloth or paper when outside the home
5. **Maintain a distance** of 1-2 meters apart
6. **Stay home** if they test positive for or have symptoms of COVID-19, or have spent time near someone with COVID-19.

How do we get there?

Creating a safe school starts by providing teachers with an engaging curriculum. Students will also need reinforcement with posters, messages from the principal, and so forth. Teachers will need training in the new materials. To set an example, principals and teachers must perform these safe behaviours.

But posters and lessons rarely change daily behaviours. **Routines** create more change than words. Schools must establish safe routines including:

1. **Wash hands**
 - **Schools:** Require that all students, staff and visitors wash hands with soap before entering. Some schools will need to build more handwashing stations or install sanitizer dispensers.
 - **Classrooms:** Have students line up to wash hands with soap before lunch and before returning to the classroom. A class captain can put soap or soapy water on each student's hands.
2. **Cough and sneeze into elbows:** Create norms that students and teachers will remind each other.
3. **Disinfect surfaces and reduce shared objects:**
 - **Schools:** Create a schedule for disinfecting surfaces and objects that many people touch. Track: "This classroom was last cleaned at ____ o'clock", etc. Have a checklist showing what "Cleaned" means for each room. Train cleaning staff on how and why to perform the new procedures, and do some disinfection during school hours.
 - **Classrooms:** Have students bring in their own water cup, school supplies, etc. And they must stop sharing food.
4. **Wear masks:** Require masks to enter the school and each classroom
5. **Maintain distance throughout the school:**

- Most importantly: Move to part-time school days or rotating days, with some students studying at home. Work with parents to arrange care for students at home
- Stagger the time of school arrival, assemblies, and meals
- Mark distances to stand in queues (such as the school entrance and lunch line).
- Classrooms must remove chairs, block off the middle seat of benches, and mark seats on the floor.
- Fresh air acts like increasing distance. Keep ventilation high by opening windows (when weather permits) and holding class outdoors (if there is space).

6. Stay home when likely to have COVID-19

- Ensure staff have paid sick leave and understand the leave policy. Plan for staff absences and for when a student or teacher gets sick.
- Track absences and community infection rates. When the infection rate is high, consider having a symptom check before entering the school: “Do you have a cough, fever, trouble breathing, or feel ill?” Also, decide how many illnesses would make your school shut down.
- Create routines to send homework home. For example, sending to a smartphone, for families that have one.

Management challenges

Each school is different. Thus, each principal must work with teachers, cleaning staff, cooks, and students. They must spot how germs can spread in the schools, and then find solutions.

This process of spotting and solving problems must be ongoing. Principals should work with a student health club, PTA, or selected or volunteer students, teachers and staff to help monitor classroom and toilet cleanliness, availability of soap and cleaning supplies, compliance with rules on distancing, etc. When problems arise, the team must find solutions.

Schools will need more money for soap, handwashing stations that work, and cleaning supplies. Schools with intermittent water will need to increase storage. Schools will also need added salary for more cleaning staff, substitute teachers and sick leave.

Thus, school systems must increase school budgets. This increase is crucial, but also difficult when government budgets are in crisis. To fill the gap, principals and other school system leaders will have to work with parent-teacher associations, donors, and local businesses.

Principals can also use low-cost [soapy bottles](#) for soap and affordable [tippy taps](#) as handwashing stations. Some schools can engage students, parents, the PTA, etc. in ensuring everyone who enters the school washes hands and in helping clean and disinfect (with proper training and equipment such as gloves).

As always, leadership is essential. School systems must transmit these priorities to principals, principals to teachers and staff, and teachers to students. And the school system must monitor schools, principals must monitor teachers and students, and teachers must monitor students. Each layer should recognize leaders and innovators below them as “Hygiene Heroes” who keep everyone safe.

Each school must reach out to families to teach these new behaviours. Schools also must create ways to update families as the situation changes.

Final thoughts

After months of lockdown, some may view these behaviours as common sense. At the same time, these behaviours are difficult to build into daily life.

Success will require elected officials, school system leaders, the principal, staff, and teachers of each school, and millions of families to support safe behaviours. Working together we can keep our schools safe for our children and our communities.

A checklist (not for editorial)

	Hands	Cover coughs	Clean surfaces and objects	Wear masks	Keep distance	Stay home
Teach students	X	X	X	X	X	X
Train teachers	X	X	X	X	X	X
reminder posters, etc.	X	X	X	X	X	X
Routine for classrooms	Wash entering classroom & before lunch		Do not share objects	X	X	Send homework home
Routines at school	Wash entering school		Disinfect surfaces & objects		X	X
Teach families	X	X	X	X	X	X
Purchase	soap, handwash stations		Disinfectant	Masks		Sick leave
Hire			time for cleaners			Substitute teachers,

10 immediate WASH in schools (WinS) actions - For School Heads to manage the response to COVID-19

WASH in Schools Network (2020)

https://www.susana.org/_resources/documents/default/3-3855-7-1591359584.pdf

1 HANDWASHING

Set up available handwashing facilities with soap at the entrance of schools (tippy taps, buckets with taps, group washing facilities) with sufficient water taps that allow physical distance so that children, teachers, staff and visitors can wash hands before entering school. **Make sure that toilets have functional handwashing facilities with soap and water.**

2 WATER AVAILABILITY

Ensure water is available for handwashing, drinking, and other uses. If the inconsistent or inadequate water supply is a concern for the school, increase the water storage capacity with the help of the community or ask children to bring a bottle of water from home, if possible.

3 SUPPLIES

Calculate the need and ensure sufficient supply for consumable resources, including soap (bar or liquid), hand sanitizer (with at least 60% alcohol concentration, only if contextually relevant) and sodium hypochlorite for cleaning/disinfecting (household bleach with the appropriate dilution), sponges, brooms and buckets, and protective equipment such as face masks and gloves for cleaners.

4 CLEANING & DISINFECTING

Ensure regular cleaning and disinfecting according to national guidelines and global recommendations. Calculate the time needed, ensure that staff for cleaning and disinfecting is available and uses gloves and face masks. Involve the Parents Teacher Association, community members and students as needed and appropriate for cleaning. Ensure handwashing stations and toilet facilities are usable and clean.

5 WASTE MANAGEMENT

Ensure bins are located in classrooms, in toilet blocks and at strategic locations on school grounds and are safely emptied daily using the waste management system.

6 PHYSICAL DISTANCING

Make sure children adhere to physical distancing as recommended by national guidelines. Possible options are: Assign children to specific shifts, stagger the beginning and end of the school days as well as during breaks, create space between desks and paint or tape lines on the floor to demonstrate physical distance at places where students line up or gather (e.g. in front of toilets or washing stations).

7 ESTABLISH A MONITORING TEAM

Assign staff member(s)—teachers and staff like cleaners, guards, gardeners or older students, community members and WASH clubs, etc.—to oversee handwashing stations and toilets (availability of

water and soap, maintenance issues, handwashing behaviour and compliance of rules for physical distancing etc.).

8 ORIENTATION/TRAINING

Organize orientation for all teachers, non-teaching staff and community members on WASH in Schools and Covid-19 and ensure that everyone understands their specific role. Ensure teachers orient the learners, by using age-appropriate hygiene promotion materials.

9 CHECKLISTS

Introduce and ensure the use of checklists (including date, the time when checked, name of responsible person) for teachers and non-teaching staff to ensure routines are implemented daily. Specifically, introduce checklists for:

- School entrance (handwashing behaviour, handwashing stations, water and soap availability)
- Classrooms (cleaning & disinfection protocol)
- Toilets and waste management

10 HYGIENE CULTURE

Establish a culture of hygiene in school and encourage hygiene behaviour change in the community. Emphasize that all teaching and non-teaching staff are part of a team working to address pandemic preparedness and response and make sure that education can move on and schools are clean and safe places. Recognize individual WASH champions in school and community