

LETTER | School and Covid-19

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LETTER | The million-dollar question now is not about whether schools should be opened but rather how schools plan to manage Covid infection risk. Education Ministry's decision to open school must not be made in haste and be supported with risk mitigation measures considering the inadequate safety data on vaccination.

Are we risking getting our children infected? And infected children will then risk infecting their siblings and parents. This will have an added impact on the already saturated medical services. The following measures are proposed:

We cannot apply one rule nationwide. Customised decisions must be made based on data and sciences. Customised rules must be made, and empowerment must be based on joint parents and school management decisions.

It cannot solely be left to school administrators. Parameters that must be

considered include in rule-based decisions:

- Type of schools – Pre-schools, normal primary schools, normal secondary schools and fully boarded schools faced a different kind of risk despite having a Covid Risk Management Practice (CRMP). A fully boarded school faces the lowest risk as it is easier to design and maintain CRMP continuously.
- Vaccination - Due to limited data available on the safety of vaccination for children below 18, vaccination of children below this age group should be deferred until such information has been verified. However, we should focus on the vaccination of other adult households. In other words, schools must ensure that sufficient evidence is provided to show that all adult households are fully vaccinated before their children are allowed to return to school.
- CRMP - There is a need to develop a customised CRMP programme for every school where it must take into account the school's resources, parents support and ability in ensuring a sustainable and continuous CRMP is in place. Authorities must evaluate this, and their programme must meet certain minimum standards before they are allowed to open. CRMP must take into account the type of schools and vaccination

programs. CRMP design must be activity-based including teachers, non-teaching staff (including guards, cleaners, suppliers) and students.

- CRMP manual - All schools must have a CRMP manual that will guide preventive actions to be taken, and who is responsible for implementing them. It should also incorporate auditing and review elements to periodically find weaknesses to improve them. The manual will also guide on actions to be taken in the event of a breach. The CRMP manual will be the holy book that acts as guidance in everything the school does. The manual will incorporate important elements like vaccination and social distancing for different activities.
- CRMP tools - Key element of successfully managing a CRMP programme is having the right tools. The critical component includes having a core system that can capture all basic information periodically. This information will be used for surveillance and strategic management. The current paper-based system can no longer support the school administrators in making a quick and timely decision.

Parent participation is important in the decision on whether their children school must be open, and parents must be convinced that the school is safe for their children before they send them to school.

As a parent, I will not send my kid to school if I am not convinced that the school has put in place adequate Covid-19 risk management controls.

Keeping our children safe is our responsibility and must be based on science.

Consensus decision making among all stakeholders is a vital ingredient.

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