

**PROTOCOL FOR
BEST PRACTICES**

IN RESPONSE TO THE
COVID-19
PANDEMIC

PREPARING THE EDUCATION SYSTEM
TO REOPEN IN AN ENVIRONMENT
OF CHALLENGES AND UNCERTAINTIES

WE ARE GOOD ENOUGH!

Introduction

The outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic has had a debilitating impact on the world's economy. In the absence of an immediate cure for the virus, governments worldwide have been forced to adopt preventative measures to limit its spread, Jamaica being no exception. The major measures adopted include testing, treating, and contact tracing; isolation when suspected of having the virus; physical-distancing policies; the closure of schools, the shutting down of businesses, and the locking down of communities; and the wearing of personal protective gear such as masks and face shields. Schools have been forced to adopt remote learning and teaching strategies to ensure students' continued formal education. Although continuing education by remote means requires innovative and creative instructional strategies by facilitators and teachers, its effectiveness has been called into question, especially at the lower echelons of the education system.

This ineffectiveness is echoed by parents, teachers, and students, who have raised many and varied concerns about the challenges they face on a regular basis. At the same time that every effort is being made to continue the education of students, we have a responsibility to safeguard their health and safety. Both the efforts of continuing to deliver training and education to students and children at all levels of the education system while managing their health and safety must be fully integrated and addressed together. Further, both remote and face-to-face learning and teaching will be adopted for the foreseeable future. The National Council on Education (NCE), therefore, has a policy obligation to present its considered position on these matters after consultation with critical stakeholders in the education system. In response to the need for schools and other educational institutions to be fully prepared to manage the threat of the coronavirus, the protocol set out herein has been developed.

Who are at Risk at Schools and Other Educational Institutions?

1. Children who have underlying health challenges, including sickle cell disease, heart condition, and asthma.
2. Teachers, administrators, and support staff who have diabetes, heart ailment, hypertension, and blood disorder.
3. All persons who are stationed at schools and other educational institutions for extended periods, including children and students, teachers, administrators, and support staff.
4. Visitors, including parents and guardians, who come to schools and other educational institutions to do business of any type.

How to Prevent the Spread of the Coronavirus

1. Persons who show signs that they may be affected by the virus must stay at home and seek testing immediately.
2. Individuals on or off the school compound must cover both their mouth and nose immediately when feeling the urge to cough or sneeze or when coughing or sneezing.
3. Persons must wear masks at all times.
4. Sneeze or cough into a bent elbow or into tissue, and safely dispose of the used tissue afterwards.
5. Wash hands thoroughly and avoid touching the face.
6. The surfaces of desks, tables, tools, workshop machines, and other pieces of equipment should be sanitized regularly.

High Priority Actions

Washing Hands Properly

1. Wet hands with clean running water.
2. Apply enough soap to aid the scrubbing of hands.
3. Scrub all parts of the hands – the back of the hands, between fingers, and under nails – for at least 20 seconds.
4. Rinse thoroughly with running water.
5. Dry hands with a clean, dry cloth, single-use towel, or hand drier as might be available.
6. Do not touch your eyes, ears, nose, and mouth if you have not properly washed your hands.
7. Wear a mask.



Practise Physical Distancing - Keep Safe Distance

1. Stay at least six feet - about two arm's length - from other people.
2. Do not gather in groups.
3. Stay out of crowded places and avoid mass gatherings.

Seek Immediate Medical Care

Where there is:

1. Trouble breathing.
2. Pain or pressure in the chest that does not go away.
3. An unusual state of confusion.
4. Inability to wake up or stay awake.
5. Bluish lips or face.
6. Severe abdominal pain.



Most Common Signs of the Coronavirus

1. Persistent fever
2. Abdominal pain
3. Neck pain
4. Muscle pain
5. Vomiting
6. Diarrhoea
7. Rash
8. Bloodshot eyes
9. Feeling extra tired
10. Continuous coughing and sneezing
11. Loss of taste or smell
12. Chills and repeated shaking

Addressing the Needs of Our Children and Students

These are difficult and challenging times, and our children are vulnerable. There is evidence that children may be affected differently from adults. The multisystem inflammatory syndrome detected in some children is a troubling sign. Also, the reopening of schools in pre-COVID-19 settings could be a recipe for a 'super-spreader event' similar to coronavirus outbreaks in hospitals and food processing plants in the United States of America and a business process outsourcing plant, locally. While the number of children worldwide with the infection is relatively small, the increased face-to-face exposure in school could change that matrix. The COVID-19 pandemic is a threat to our normal way of living. It is expected that we will be fearful, despondent, helpless, and hopeless. The psychological impact on our children must be monitored. The children are to be encouraged to share their fears and concerns with teachers, counsellors, parents, and other persons who will listen to them. It is important to speak clearly to our children about what they must do to keep safe and healthy.

1. Constantly seek to protect yourself by doing the following:
 - a. Washing your hands thoroughly using soap and water for no less than 20 seconds, making sure that you wash between the fingers and the exposed areas of the hand.
 - b. Desisting from touching your face with your hands. If your face itches, try as best as possible to bear the discomfort as the itching is likely to go away soon.
 - c. Not sharing your cups, other utensils, and the food that you are eating with others because the mere passing of utensils and food from one person to another can cause the transfer of the virus.
2. Be a good citizen by (a) sharing information about managing the virus with family and friends, especially with the younger ones, and (b) being a good example of one who practises the principles of safe behaviour in the context of the pandemic.
3. Do not play games, make fun of, or seek to humiliate persons who may have contracted, or are suspected of having contracted the virus.
4. Inform your family members, teachers, and even your friends if you feel that you may have the virus.
5. Make sure that you remain at home until you have been tested and treated.

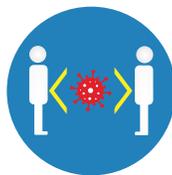
Treatment at School Levels

Early Childhood Level

1. Taking special care to ensure that children in the early childhood programme are monitored with great attention and sensitivity. Many times, they may do the very things that they had just been warned against doing.
2. Getting them to practise handwashing, sneezing, and coughing based on the stated rules is essential. It will be necessary to have them repeat these practices until they demonstrate that they have acquired the skills. Use teaching techniques that include puppetry, and other creative methodologies to increase their interest in the information being conveyed to them.
3. Implementing a tracking system to monitor the washing of hands and to reduce the sharing of utensils and food.
4. Wearing of masks should be a learned and continuous behaviour at the early childhood level.

Primary Level

1. Children at this level must be trained to take responsibility to protect themselves from the virus. It should become second nature for them to do the following:
 - a. Wear a mask.
 - b. Practise physical or social distancing.
 - c. Wash hands regularly.
 - d. Report any signs of illness.
 - e. Stay away from school if feeling ill.



2. They should be encouraged to read about the virus, and every effort should be made to infuse COVID-19 content into their various areas of instruction.
3. Teach them how to engage in safe play during break and lunch periods, as well as other play times, and monitor them regularly to ensure that the rules are observed.

Responsibilities of the School

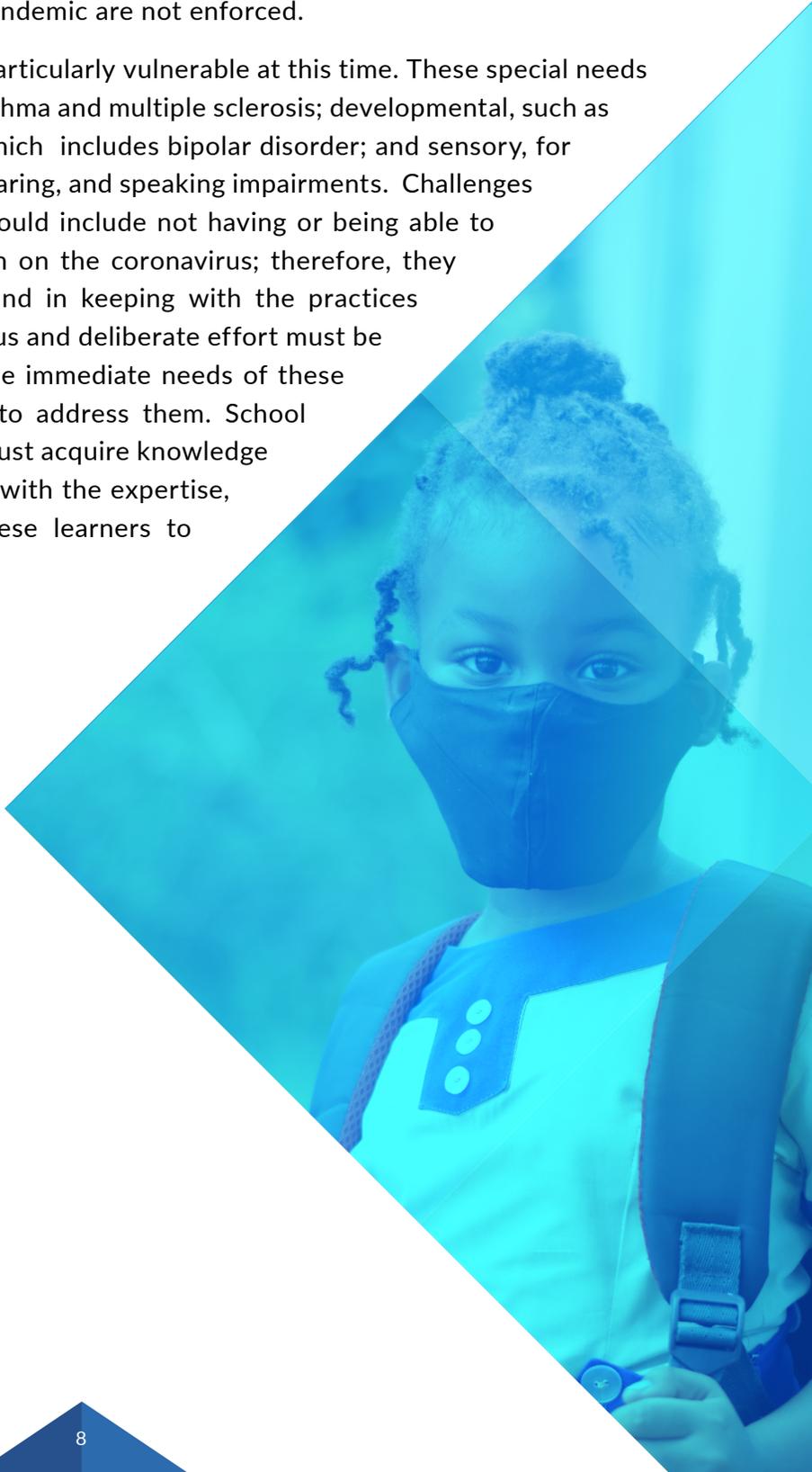
Administrators, Teachers and General Staff

Students and children spend the majority of their waking hours each day in school and travelling to and from school. The likelihood of contracting the virus while travelling is, therefore, increased. Further, they are exposed to hundreds of other children, as well as teachers, administrators, support staff, and visitors, any of whom could be COVID-19-positive. The school, therefore, has a responsibility to put in place a comprehensive set of measures that will reduce the chances of any child becoming infected. Schools should be allowed to implement those strategies that best suit their needs and circumstances. The following are strategies and guidelines that will assist schools in implementing effective measures.

General Requirements

1. Schools at all levels must establish a COVID-19 Health, Safety, and Security Committee to implement, manage and monitor the measures instituted to protect the school population from the virus.
 - a. Each class must have a class monitor, who will monitor the implementation of the safety rules and behaviours by all students and others accessing the classroom.
 - b. The committee will meet at least once every two weeks to report on its monitoring of the implementation of the measures.
 - c. Monthly reports on the virus must be sent to the regional director and central ministry.
 - d. Schools must develop a culture that emphasizes the need to act in accordance with the measures established to protect the school population from the virus.
2. Schools must make every effort to determine and further examine the social and psychological challenges that each learner is experiencing both in the home and the school at this time. This would place school leaders in a better position to identify and act on these challenges and to be better able to limit or avoid crisis situations.
3. In the case where someone is suspected of contracting the virus, the school should have a space prepared for isolating the individual. This could be a dedicated room or area with partitions to accommodate more than one person. Based on available facilities, a tent could also be considered.

4. It is important that vendors be provided with relevant orientation and training regarding COVID-19. They must be required to adhere to the protocols for protecting the school community from the coronavirus.
5. The standards set by the Government for transporting children to and from the school compound must be observed. Every effort is to be made to maintain physical distancing while waiting for and embarking and disembarking taxis and buses. Students must be told that they are required to avoid using transportation where the guidelines related to the protection from the COVID-19 pandemic are not enforced.
6. Learners with special needs are particularly vulnerable at this time. These special needs could be physiological, such as asthma and multiple sclerosis; developmental, such as Down syndrome; behavioural, which includes bipolar disorder; and sensory, for example, visual or being blind, hearing, and speaking impairments. Challenges for learners with special needs could include not having or being able to access or understand information on the coronavirus; therefore, they may not be able to act safely and in keeping with the practices outlined by the school. A conscious and deliberate effort must be made by schools to determine the immediate needs of these learners and strategies devised to address them. School leaders, teachers, and students must acquire knowledge and skills and work with persons with the expertise, to provide support to assist these learners to manage the COVID-19 threat.



Specific Requirements

1. Schools must have, on average, at least one handwashing stall for every 50 students as well as a continuous supply of soap and water.
2. Allocate specially designed and appropriately located handwashing stalls for younger children.
3. Ensure that soap and clean running water are available at handwashing stalls.
4. Encourage frequent and thorough handwashing (at least 20 seconds) on arrival at school, after touching someone, and after using the toilet.
5. Toilets averaging one for every 25 students, with an additional unit for the same number of girls, must be installed in schools.
6. Soap dispensers and hand sanitizers must be located in restrooms.
7. Ensure adequate, clean and separate toilets for girls and boys.
8. Students must attend a return-to-school orientation session as well as receive training in order to carry out the required behaviours in relation to:
 - a. handwashing;
 - b. physical distancing;
 - c. wearing a mask;
 - d. reporting any signs of illnesses.
9. All persons must be tested for elevated temperature on entering the school compound.
10. Schools must have in storage test kits and personal protective equipment (PPE) for at least 50 percent of the school population, including students, teachers, administrative and ancillary staff.
11. Hand sanitizers must be located in classrooms, halls, and near exits where possible.
12. Each school must work with the community and other stakeholders to secure test kits and PPE if the school does not have the financial resources to do so.
13. For each school, a select number of persons should obtain the necessary training to administer the test for the virus, even if there is a school nurse.
14. The masks worn by the school community must be designed so that they fit properly and comfortably.

15. The number of children in classrooms and other similar settings must be reduced to suit the guidelines established for physical distancing. Schools will, individually or in combination, implement the following measures:
 - a. Golden rules – testing, treating, and contact tracing.
 - b. Staggered attendance based on grade level and age.
 - c. Extended school day to facilitate staggered attendance.
 - d. Extended school week from five to six days.
 - e. Modified attendance to reduce large classes.
 - f. Reduced summer break.
 - g. Strategies, such as the use of public or private facilities to increase the available space, to accommodate students.
16. Schools have their unique features, such as location, size, available resources and competences of alumni. As such, the strategies employed to operate within the COVID-19 pandemic must be determined by their particular philosophy, needs, and the guidelines provided by the MoEYI and the Government. Appropriate modelling or scenario planning should be formulated to determine viability before any attempt at implementation. For example, what would be required of your school if it went on a six-day-per-week schedule or introduced staggered attendance? If the knowledge and skills are not available at the school, external help should be found for devising appropriate models or scenarios in order to function effectively in the COVID-19 environment.
17. Set performance targets for identifying students and children with the virus, completing testing promptly, and for securing treatment within the shortest possible time after confirming that the student or child has been infected.
18. Routinely clean and sanitize buildings, including classrooms, toilets, kitchens, workshops, lunchrooms, storerooms, furniture and fixtures, doors, windows, rails, light switches, cabinet handles, appliances, toys, among others.
19. Post signage at strategic locations to communicate to students, teachers, administrators, parents, and the visiting public the required behaviour at the school to protect the community from the coronavirus.
20. Ensure that garbage is disposed of daily in order to maintain standard sanitation practices at the school.

Addressing the Needs of Parents & Guardians

The role of parents and guardians is central to guiding and monitoring children during this period, characterized by uncertainty, fear, and confusion. Parents must be equipped with the facts about COVID-19 and be prepared to engage their children confidently. Children are consistently exposed to information from different sources, some of which will be misleading or inaccurate. The School must continue to be one of the most important stabilizing factors in the lives of children. Therefore, everything must be done to maintain their learning either at home or in the physical school space. Responsibilities of parents and guardians are ongoing and will include the following:

1. Constantly monitoring the health of the child to detect any sign of COVID-19 symptoms. This means that the child must be kept at home if any COVID-19-related illness is detected, and immediate steps taken to get medical attention.
2. Modelling good hygiene practices such as the following:
 - a. Washing hands frequently with soap and clean water for at least 20 seconds, as this will increase the likelihood of the child emulating the correct behaviour. If soap and water are not readily available, use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer with at least 60% alcohol. If hands are visibly dirty, soap and water are preferred.
 - b. Washing hands after using the toilet as it has been reported by scientists that there is the possibility that the virus can be present in the stool of persons who are COVID-19-positive.
 - c. Coughing and sneezing into a tissue or into the elbow and avoiding touching the face, eyes, mouth, and nose.
 - d. Always wearing a mask when at public gathering.
3. Ensuring proper storage and disposal of garbage:
 - a. Secure the garbage container from animals such as dogs, rats, cats, and insects such as roaches and flies, among others.
 - b. Ensure that garbage is collected and disposed of regularly.

4. Encouraging children to ask questions and to express their feelings freely at home and at school to their teachers, and remembering that children may have different reactions to stress. Be patient and understanding.
5. Preventing stigma by using facts and reminding children to be considerate of one another.
6. Working closely with the child's school to obtain information on what is expected of both parents and child. Parents must seek to find out from the school what additional steps they should take to support the efforts of the school to help their children adopt safe behavioural practices during this period.



Psychosocial Support in Making the Transition from Home to School

The separation of students from school over a prolonged period due to the pandemic can create adjustment challenges when schools reopen. Adjustment challenges tend to be more problematic at the early childhood and primary levels of the system. It is, therefore, necessary to make special efforts to facilitate a smooth transition. It must also be borne in mind that staff members may also experience adjustment challenges. Schools need to create a safety net for staff and students in overcoming the challenges. Efforts should be made to create a welcoming, caring, and supportive environment for not only students, but also staff, parents and guardians. This becomes even more important in situations where students and staff have been separated from loved ones due to quarantine, hospitalization, and, unfortunately, death.

What Schools Can Do

1. Make special preparations for the reopening of school. This could be a celebratory or recreational activity that creates the right mood for students and teachers. A special committee could be established to plan and coordinate such an event.
2. Develop protocols for creating a welcoming, calm, caring, compassionate, and supportive school environment.
3. Be alert to behavioural challenges or signs of stress among staff and students, and address the situation immediately.
4. Identify the cause, and, if necessary, make an early referral for counselling and psychosocial support.
5. Identify the required resources to support students, staff, parents and guardians to manage stress.
6. Make learning more enjoyable so that students will look forward to going to school.
7. Encourage teachers and support staff to take care of themselves so that they can provide the required support to the students.

Conclusion

There is evidence that crowded work environments such as the meat-packaging plants in North America and the case of a business process outsourcing firm in Jamaica are examples for transmitting the coronavirus. Our schools and other learning institutions have features similar to these entities. We, therefore, have an obligation to learn from the mistakes made at these entities and to institute the protocols that protect against the virus, which include physical distancing; handwashing; the wearing of masks; and constant testing, especially of vulnerable populations. With approximately 530,000 children and students in our education system, this is an enormous task. Nevertheless, if a deliberate and purposeful approach is taken, with input from critical sectors and stakeholders, we can return our country and schools to some level of normality without significant harm to our children and students, teachers, administrators, and support staff.

The following publications were consulted and used both as a source and a guide for developing the NCE protocol for the Jamaican education system.

1. UNICEF Publication (March 2020). Key Messages and Actions for COVID-19 Prevention and Control in Schools
2. UNICEF Publication (2020). Psychosocial Support for Children during COVID-19 A Manual for Parents and Caregivers
3. Centres for Disease Control (CDC) (2019) Parents: Multisystem Inflammatory Syndrome in Children (MIS-C) Associated with COVID-19
4. VOA News (May 23, 2020) 'Super-spreader' Events May Be Responsible for 80% of COVID Infections



COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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