

THE ROAD BACK TO NORMAL: WHAT WE CAN LEARN FROM SCHOOLS REOPENING ABROAD

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The second year of the Covid-19 pandemic sees a world focusing on recovery. Each nation has, with a few exceptions, figured out how to best manage their ongoing outbreaks. Countries are reopening and urging their constituents to venture out and get their economies going. On our collective way out however, there is a clear delineation between rich countries who can sprint to the exit with stimulus checks and vaccines and those in the developing world who, with limited resources, can only manage a slow walk and hope to rejoin the global community before the gates are shut. There is a silver lining though, with going slow. While the US, the UK, and a few of our Southeast Asian neighbors like Singapore and Vietnam venture ahead, we in the Philippines can learn from their successes and pitfalls to augment our own reopening plans. Right now, the most important questions for us teachers are: “When can we get our students back in school and how do we ensure their health and safety?”.

First thing to consider for cities and provinces with active cases is the more considerable threat posed by the newer, faster spreading variants. If contracted, these mutations on the original virus strain can result in bigger outbreaks that would likely force the lockdown of a school or even an entire district. Also, most of the currently available vaccines are less efficacious on these new strains, putting even our immunized older staff at a heightened risk, in case they encounter it. If allowed to spread through a population, these variants are also more likely to give rise to more resistant mutations that could make most vaccines ineffectual. It is important then for all institutions,

including schools, to be informed if new variants are being transmitted locally so that they can enact the appropriate measures.

There is also the effect of our current face covering protocol has on learning. It was one thing during distant learning for the teacher's lecture to get cut due to audio or connection issues. Now, imagine trying to speak clearly while wearing a mask and shield to a room full of students who are identically outfitted with masks and shields of their own. In non-airconditioned rooms with our tropical weather, wearing face coverings can also contribute to learners' (and teachers') discomfort and distraction, especially during hot, and humid days. Looking at in-person schooling in other countries, it appears masks are still de facto, even for physical education classes, so it will be a long time before we can hold barefaced lectures, but we can thankfully say goodbye to face shields.

Of course, as stated in the beginning, school reopening measures aren't perfect and inevitably, someone will test positive for Covid-19. Whether it's a student, teacher or a staffer, the individual is bound to have had contact with other people in the campus. The focus now should be on containment while at the same time causing as little disruption to school activities as possible. All this relies on being able to test all possible contacts and isolate those who test positive. According to UK Health Security Agency (2021), UK has this capability called surge testing where if a case comes up in a school district, multiple testing centers will quickly be setup in that area so that school authorities can have a clear and up to date picture of the magnitude of the outbreak. With this information, they can decide which people to isolate and, if necessary, which areas of the school to sanitize or close off.

It is fascinating to observe the lengths to which other countries would go to reopen their schools. According to UNESCO (2021) child illiteracy has gone up by more than 20% globally due to COVID-19 restrictions on in-person learning. Extrapolate this finding to students of all levels attempting to learn equally challenging concepts, and the impetus behind these seemingly hurried school re-openings becomes clear. A return to a fully

functioning educational system is vital to our country's economy and development, and it would do us good to learn from other countries' experiences so that our own reopening can proceed as smoothly as possible.

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