**Safe@School: A Sustainable Strategy towards Safe Mitigation and Containment of the COVID-19 Outbreak Within the Educational Sector**

**Introduction:**

The increasing number of COVID-19 cases and it’s more severe presentation has been observed among children and is worrying parents, doctors who care for them and teachers who face them in the classrooms.

For the period 25 Jan 2020 till 30 May 2021, 82,341 (14.2%) children have been reported with COVID-19 infections, most of them in 2021. 27 children have been admitted to the ICU. And there have been a total of 15 deaths.

More recently, there has been a rise in the number of COVID-19 deaths in children under 18, with 41 fatalities in 2021 compared to 6 in 2020. 15 of these were in children less than 4 years old.

COVID-19 cases have skyrocketed with 310,074 cases in 2021. This is a 25 fold increase from 12,620 cases in 2020. [1]

Unlike previously thought, more recent evidence have demonstrated that children and adults are equally susceptible and similarly likely to transmit the virus. [2,3,4]

Children are more likely to be asymptomatic compared to adults and therefore infections in children can be more difficult to detect and they are tested less often than adults. [5]

As is the situation presently, where community transmission of the coronavirus has increased, children and teenagers are becoming increasingly infected.

We cannot underestimate the role of infections in children, because they can spread the virus to their more vulnerable parents and grandparents who are at a higher risk of being hospitalized or mortalities.

School outbreaks have become more common reflecting the level of sporadic community transmission. Schools have become a driver of the COVID-19 infection in Europe, Canada and the UK. [6]

The UK government was criticized for its removal of the mandate for face coverings in secondary schools in England. [7]

Public Health England was threatened with a legal challenge by The Citizens, for “unlawfully” withholding data on the spread of the delta variant in schools. [8] In Malaysia, the MOH withheld COVID-19 data, which has contributed to the abysmal handling of the pandemic

Meanwhile the MOE must seriously take the respite during this total lockdown to address the many issues related to COVID-19, schooling and tertiary education. There should be in place a sustainable COVID-19 strategy with science-based approach to safely mitigate and contain the outbreak within the educational sector. [9]

Malaysia like the rest of the world is in the midst of a global educational crisis. The COVID-19 pandemic has put 1 billion children out of school. To about 400 million children, this means missing out on their only decent meal of the day, with no access to free school meals. Children living in abusive households have now lost their safe havens provided by their teachers and friends at school.

Prolonged school closures following the lockdowns has disrupted their learning, socializing, playing, engaging and growing. It is not too far fetched to suggest, take away his schooling and you have forever scarred his future. [10]

School closures have resulted in widening disparities across income and ethnic groups. Parents and caregivers are unable to return to normal work unless the children are back at school.

Schools are an integral component of the local communities. Reopening schools and keeping them open is today one of our greatest challenges as advocates of child education, health and welfare.

Clinical studies have shown a strong correlation between the frequency of COVID-19 outbreaks in schools and the incidence of COVID-19 in the community. If COVID-19 infection in the community is optimally suppressed, there will be minimal number of cases among the school teachers and pupils. But if there is an upsurge in the community cases, as is happening now, with sporadic, unlinked and widespread community transmission, it rapidly spills over into the schools and it becomes difficult to keep the schools open.

Therefore, it is vital to stop the transmission of the coronavirus in the community in order to prevent the spread of COVID-19 into the schools.

The school clusters comprise 5.5 per cent of the total clusters, but this is rapidly increasing. [11]

Studies show that 2/3 of coronavirus transmission in schools occur between teachers and from teachers to pupils. Teachers must therefore be exemplary, cautious, and not huddle in the staff room, which should by now have cubicles to ensure physical distancing. This should be supplemented with the early and rapid immunization of the teaching fraternity.

There are many workable solutions which can be modified to suit our local needs. There is no one-size-fits-all that would be appropriate for each and every school in the MOE. Schools may need to adjust differently to address their unique circumstances. [12]

This document is the collaborative effort of various interested parties to complement and provide positive feedback to the MOE’s “GARIS PANDUAN PENGURUSAN DAN PENGOPERASIAN SEKOLAH DALAM NORMA BAHARU 2.0’, 2 February 2021, in our joint efforts to safely re-open our schools and keep them open. [13]

The MOE’s guidelines are 123 pages long. The proposed document is more user-friendly in order to ensure better compliance.

This document attempts to scientifically rationalize and contextualize the 6 key components of the strategy for safely reopening schools, namely:

1. Healthy Policies
2. Healthy Buildings
3. Healthy Classrooms
4. Health Schedules
5. Healthy Activities
6. Health Vaccinated Teachers and Students

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