

# Back to School: Reopening Schools Safely

Yugendran Rajaendran and Rachel Gong



**Views** are short opinion pieces by the author(s) to encourage the exchange of ideas on current issues. They may not necessarily represent the official views of KRI. All errors remain the authors' own.

This view was prepared by Yugendran Rajanendran and Dr Rachel Gong from the Khazanah Research Institute (KRI). The authors are grateful for the valuable comments from Nazihah Muhamad Noor and Ilyana Syafiq Mukhriz Mudaris.

A condensed version of this article was also published as a letter to the editor in the Malaymail on 14 Aug 2021 and in the News Straits Times on 16 Aug 2021.

Authors' email addresses:

[rachel.gong@krinstitute.org](mailto:rachel.gong@krinstitute.org)

[intern.yugendran@krinstitute.org](mailto:intern.yugendran@krinstitute.org)

Attribution – Please cite the work as follows: Yugendran Rajaendran and Rachel Gong. 2021. Back to School: Reopening Schools Safely. Kuala Lumpur: Khazanah Research Institute. License: Creative Commons Attribution CC BY 3.0.

Information on Khazanah Research Institute publications and digital products can be found at [www.KRIInstitute.org](http://www.KRIInstitute.org).

Photo by Naufal Zaquan from Shutterstock

## Introduction

On 17 July 2021, the Ministry of Education (MOE) announced the reopening of schools on 1 September 2021 after taking the vaccination rate in Malaysia into consideration<sup>1</sup>. This announcement was met with much concern as many students, parents and teachers worry about their increased exposure to the coronavirus<sup>2</sup>. Former education minister Dr Maszlee Malik has urged the MOE to address public concerns over the ministry's ability to handle the reopening of schools amidst the Covid-19 pandemic<sup>3</sup>. On 15 August 2021, Senior Education Minister Datuk Radzi Jidin announced the

<sup>1</sup> MOE (2021)

<sup>2</sup> Jerry Choong (2021)

<sup>3</sup> Jerry Choong (2021)

postponement of reopening of schools to 3 October 2021 based on the latest information<sup>4</sup>.

Taking only the vaccination rate into consideration may not be sufficient, given that, as of 29 August 2021, only 44.9% of the Malaysian population have been fully vaccinated and all schoolgoers aged 17 and below have yet to be vaccinated at all<sup>5</sup>. In England, there was a surge in Covid-19 cases in educational settings among staff and students when primary and secondary schools were fully reopened in September 2020 before anyone had been vaccinated<sup>6</sup>.

This article discusses the risks in reopening schools and suggests some strategies and contingency plans to avoid outbreaks of school clusters, given that the pandemic situation does not seem to be improving quickly enough. Whenever schools reopen, it is of utmost importance to prevent resurgence like in the United States where the number of cases is increasing among students as they start school<sup>7</sup>.

## Risks of reopening

We recognise that reopening schools brings increased risk to the health of schoolchildren, school staff and their families, due to prolonged contact with high numbers of people from multiple households. Risks notwithstanding, not opening schools at all could cause developmental and educational losses in children that could have exponential effects in later years.

As of 29 June 2021, 116,378 children aged 17 and below in Malaysia have tested positive for Covid-19<sup>8</sup>. The former Health Minister and the current Minister of Science, Technology and Innovation, Datuk Seri Dr Adham Baba mentioned that although children make up 15% of the total cases, they tend to exhibit no or milder symptoms and are less likely to develop serious illness<sup>9</sup>. Similarly, severe Covid-19 disease is rarer in infants, children, and young adults as compared to older adults and large epidemiological studies suggest that children make up only 1 to 2% of all Covid-19 cases<sup>10</sup>.

However, in many of these studies, only individuals who were symptomatic or required hospitalisation were tested<sup>11</sup>. There are several hypotheses why Covid-19 affects children differently from adults. One of them is that children have different immune system and clotting functions from adults<sup>12</sup>. Even if Covid-19 cases among schoolgoers increase, the cases should not be severe. Hence, medical evidence suggests that reopening schools for children is relatively safe.

---

<sup>4</sup> Justin Ong (2021)

<sup>5</sup> Jawatankuasa Khas Jaminan Akses Bekalan Vaksin COVID-19 (2021)

<sup>6</sup> Felicity Aiano et al. (2021)

<sup>7</sup> Lauren Camera (2021)

<sup>8</sup> The Straits Times (2021)

<sup>9</sup> The Straits Times (2021)

<sup>10</sup> Zimmermann and Curtis (2021)

<sup>11</sup> Zimmermann and Curtis (2021)

<sup>12</sup> Parri et al. (2020)

While the risk to the children themselves may be relatively low, the risk to adults involved in reopening schools, from student-facing staff to the families of the schoolgoers, may be high. Dr Anuar Ahmad from the Faculty of Education in Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia has questioned the need to reopen schools in September, citing the risks of reopening schools to schoolgoers and suggested that remote learning be continued until the end of this year as remote learning is practical and appropriate<sup>13</sup>.

But reopening schools is especially important for students from underprivileged and vulnerable families. Remote learning has proven to be a challenge due to inequalities seen in the lack of access to a conducive learning environment, gadgets, and internet connection. The digital divide and difficult learning environment have set underprivileged students back in their education<sup>14</sup>. Reopening schools offers a return to better educational opportunities in a more structured environment. Reopening schools also allows access to other benefits such as school feeding programmes and socialization activities. Thus, carefully thought out standards of operations and guidelines are needed to address the concerns of reopening schools safely.

### Strategies to mitigate risks

Early planning can help address the risks and challenges of reopening schools. We recognise that different strategies may be needed for different age groups, due to the differences in risks and the challenges of enforcing standard operating procedures among children. Clear and proactive communication of these strategies builds trust and confidence that all involved in reopening schools can be protected.

Communication with key stakeholders—school staff, parents, and students—is essential to ensure smooth operations and processes when reopening schools. All parties involved need to be informed on processes and plans in case of an emergency. It is important to note that strategies will likely change over time as the virus and our understanding of it evolve. School authorities should develop a communications protocol to convey important information to stakeholders.

### Vaccination priorities

Several Malaysian health experts have acknowledged the risk of students bringing home the virus and infecting vulnerable elderly members of the household<sup>15</sup>. Vaccination is currently the leading public health prevention strategy to end the Covid-19 pandemic. Promoting vaccination can help schools safely return to in-person learning as well as extracurricular activities and sports. We thus advocate for the prioritisation of school staff including teachers, cleaners, bus drivers and eligible students in the vaccination queue.

In June 2021, the National Covid-19 Immunisation Programme Coordinating Minister Khairy Jamaluddin announced that Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) and Sijil Tinggi Pelajaran Malaysia

---

<sup>13</sup> Nadia Hashim (2021)

<sup>14</sup> Jarud Romadan Khalidi and Grace Loh Wan Chi (2021)

<sup>15</sup> Keertan Ayamany (2021)

(STPM) 2021 candidates will be vaccinated with the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine starting in July, with schools being used as vaccination centres<sup>16</sup>. However, in July 2021, Dr Adham Baba reported that those sitting for their SPM examinations will not be getting their Covid-19 vaccines anytime soon as they belong to an age category vulnerable to possible side effects<sup>17</sup>. The former health minister also said healthy adolescents would receive their vaccine only after Phase Three of the National Covid-19 Immunisation Programme<sup>18</sup>. Then, on 13 August 2021, Khairy Jamaluddin announced that adolescents aged 12 to 17 will receive their vaccines soon, with priority for those with underlying medical conditions<sup>19</sup>.

These mixed messages can lead to confusion and lack of trust in government among the public. Thus, the Ministry of Health (MOH) should immediately draw up clear and firm guidelines for vaccinating schoolgoers. As mentioned earlier, student-facing workers should receive vaccine prioritisation. On the bright side, 73.5% of school staff have received at least one of the vaccine as of 27 July and Khairy Jamaluddin has announced that all staff will receive at least one vaccine dose by 1 September 2021 in time for schools to reopen<sup>20</sup>.

### Affordable testing

As of 26 July 2021, there are five Covid-19 self-test kits available from registered pharmacists, or private healthcare facilities<sup>21</sup>. The public can purchase self-test kits using the MySejahtera application from 1 August 2021<sup>22</sup>. However, according to the Medical Devices Authority (MDA), the use of Covid-19 self-test kits shall be limited for screening purposes only and all test results need further confirmation using reverse transcription polymerase chain reaction (RT-PCR) tests<sup>23</sup>. Nevertheless, the availability and affordability of test kits on the market are essential in identifying and isolating infected persons.

In order to reopen schools safely, affordable testing needs to be expanded to entire school populations, not just close contacts or those who exhibit symptoms. Self-test kits could potentially be used to regularly test students and staff as a precautionary measure. MOE and MOH should consider making self-test kits affordable and available at schools for this purpose.

### Cohort system

An innovative way to reduce the risk of transmission is through cohort systems. A cohort is a group of students and staff who learn, work, and dine together. Cohort members have little or no contact with others outside their group. Cohorts decrease transmission risk by limiting the

---

<sup>16</sup> The Edge Markets (2021)

<sup>17</sup> R.Loheswar (2021)

<sup>18</sup> The Straits Times (2021)

<sup>19</sup> Cheryl Poo (2021)

<sup>20</sup> Astro Awani (2021)

<sup>21</sup> MOH (2021b)

<sup>22</sup> Dhesegaan Bala Krishnan (2021)

<sup>23</sup> MOH (2021b)

number of contacts any one person has in a school day. Since cohorts do not mix, if someone in the cohort is suspected of having Covid-19 then only that cohort needs to be quarantined.

Schools could implement a cohort system with staggered scheduling to space out school pick-up and drop-off times or put in place other protocols to limit contact between cohorts. The cohort system does not totally eliminate the risks of transmission because students and staff will eventually come into contact with people outside their cohorts, such as their family members. However, the cohort system can reduce the chances of needing to shut the whole school down in case of infection. Alternate schedules with fixed cohorts of students and staff could decrease class size and promote physical distancing<sup>24</sup>.

In June 2021, the MOE announced the recruitment of 18,702 teachers on a one-off initiative to address the shortage of educators in the country<sup>25</sup>. Since a cohort system would require additional staff, the MOE could also consider hiring unemployed graduates as teaching assistants to reduce the student-teacher ratio, which would create jobs for graduates<sup>26</sup>.

In all cases, standard operating procedures still apply. On top of mandatory mask-wearing and good hygiene practices, classrooms should have proper ventilation, and activities, from group work to meal breaks, should be held outdoors whenever possible.

### **Contingency measures – what if someone tests positive?**

Should a student or school staff test positive for Covid-19, contact tracing is vital to prevent further transmission. Thus, schools should develop contact tracing guidelines before reopening and review and update the guidelines regularly. Contingency plans should also involve clear communications protocol, strategies for how to continue classes for affected cohorts, and metrics for quarantine and return to school. For example, clear benchmarks on when to quarantine a cohort versus closing the whole school should be set before schools reopen. These should be developed to meet the needs of the local community.

Schools need to work with local public health authorities to develop a system for tracking and sharing data about cases and outbreaks while maintaining privacy. Parents and teachers need to be forthcoming about reporting positive cases to school and public health authorities. Withholding information could put other students and the whole community at increased risk of infection. Disciplinary or legal actions may need to be taken against individuals who falsify or hide their infection status as they are putting lives in danger. Figure 1 shows a proposed flow of reporting and action once a positive case has been identified.

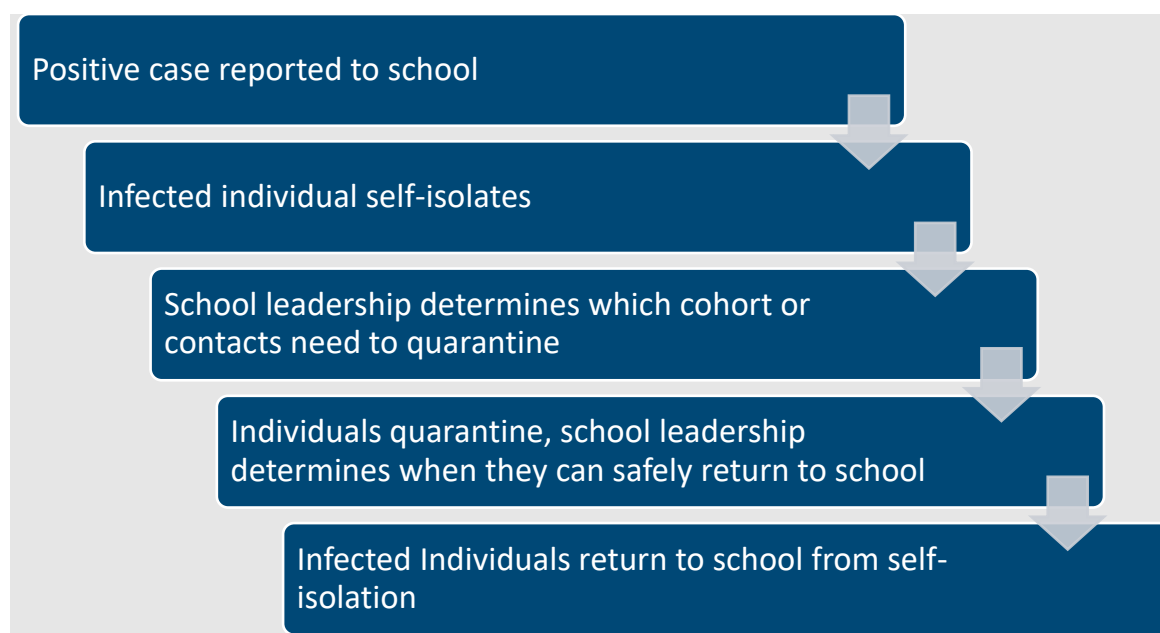
---

<sup>24</sup> Ahmad Ashraf Shaharudin (2021)

<sup>25</sup> MOE (2021)

<sup>26</sup> Hawati Abdul Hamid (2021)

**Figure 1: Contact tracing and quarantine flowchart**



Source: Authors' visualisation

### **Planning for the future: hybrid learning**

Whether due to cohort systems, detected infections, or digital transformation more generally, online learning of some form is likely here to stay. In the short term, students and teachers need to be equipped with the digital infrastructure and skills needed to adapt to hybrid learning, which combines online and in-person learning. This could include recording or streaming lessons, improving digital libraries and other reference resources, and reassessing how students are evaluated. Different types of homework and assignments may be needed with priority given to the quality rather than the quantity of classes and exams taken.

In the long term, digital pedagogy, digital content and digital resources will need to be reviewed and revised to improve education programmes and syllabi. Additional teacher training may be needed to equip teachers to manage hybrid classes. Needs assessments for students with disabilities or from underserved or underprivileged backgrounds can help to ensure that hybrid learning is inclusive.

## Conclusion

The decision to reopen schools goes hand-in-hand with risk assessment and strategies to overcome these risks. Although there is a risk that reopening schools will worsen the state of the pandemic in Malaysia, there are also good reasons to reopen schools to ensure that education is not too severely interrupted.

Thus, we need to mitigate the risks of reopening schools, which includes proactive strategies and contingency plans in case of infection. This pandemic has forced societal change in many aspects, and we should recognise that many of these changes, such as online and hybrid learning, are long-term. As society adjusts to the possibility of Covid-19 being endemic, education and the well-being of future generations need to be prioritised.



## References

- Ahmad Ashraf Shaharudin. 2020. "Reopening Schools: Giving Access to Education Equitably and Safely". Kuala Lumpur: Khazanah Research Institute. [http://www.krinstitute.org/Views-@-Reopening\\_Schools-;\\_Giving\\_Access\\_to\\_Education\\_Equitably\\_and\\_Safely\\_.aspx](http://www.krinstitute.org/Views-@-Reopening_Schools-;_Giving_Access_to_Education_Equitably_and_Safely_.aspx)
- Aiano, Felicity, et al. 2021. "COVID-19 outbreaks following full reopening of primary and secondary schools in England: Cross-sectional national surveillance, November 2020." The Lancet Regional Health-Europe
- Astro Awani. 2021. "Semua pendidik terima sekurang-kurangnya satu dos sebelum sekolah buka - KJ". Astro Awani, July 28, 2021. <https://www.astroawani.com/berita-malaysia/semua-pendidik-terima-sekurangkurangnya-satu-dos-sebelum-sekolah-buka-kj-310984>
- Ayamany, Keertan. 2021. "Health experts: School reopening increases Covid-19 infection risk among multi-generational families, but here's what can be done". Malay Mail, March 7, 2021. <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2021/03/07/health-experts-school-reopening-increases-covid-19-infection-risk-among-mul/1955549>
- Bala Krishnan, Dhesegaan. 2021. "Covid-19 self-test kits can be bought via MySejahtera". New Straits Times, July 30, 2021. <https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2021/07/713275/covid-19-self-test-kits-can-be-bought-mysejahtera>
- Camera, Laura. 2021. "Vaccines, Variants, Masks and Mandates Cloud School Reopenings". U.S. News, August 12, 2021. <https://www.usnews.com/news/education-news/articles/2021-08-12/vaccines-variants-masks-and-mandates-cloud-school-reopenings>
- Choong, Jerry. 2021. "Address parents and teachers' doubts on Sept school reopening, Maszlee urges Education Ministry". Malay Mail, July 22, 2021. <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2021/07/22/address-parents-and-teachers-doubts-on-sept-school-reopening-maszlee-urges/1991685>
- Hawati Abdul Hamid. 2021. "Tangani Risiko Buta Huruf dengan Program Intensif 3M". Kuala Lumpur: Khazanah Research Institute. [http://www.krinstitute.org/Views-@-Tangani\\_Risiko\\_Buta\\_Huruf\\_dengan\\_Program\\_Intensif\\_3M.aspx](http://www.krinstitute.org/Views-@-Tangani_Risiko_Buta_Huruf_dengan_Program_Intensif_3M.aspx)
- Jawatankuasa Khas Jaminan Akses Bekalan Vaksin COVID-19. 2021. "Laporan kumulatif vaksinasi mengikut negeri setakat 29 Ogos 2021." Jawatankuasa Khas Jaminan Akses Bekalan Vaksin COVID-19, August 29, 2021. <https://twitter.com/JKJAVMY/status/143214295022286853/photo/1>
- Jarud Romadan Khalidi and Grace Loh Wan Chi. 2021. "Building Back Better from Unprecedented Changes in Education". Kuala Lumpur: Khazanah Research Institute. [http://www.krinstitute.org/Views-@-Building\\_Back\\_Better\\_from\\_Unprecedented\\_Changes\\_in\\_Education.aspx](http://www.krinstitute.org/Views-@-Building_Back_Better_from_Unprecedented_Changes_in_Education.aspx)



- Ministry of Education (MOE). 2021a. "Pemakluman Mengenai Sesi Persekolahan". Ministry of Education (MOE). Accessed 27 July 2020. <https://www.moe.gov.my/en/muat-turun/kenyataan-media/km2021-1/4464-kenyataan-media-pemakluman-mengenai-sesi-persekolahan/file>
- Ministry of Education (MOE). 2021b. "Pengambilan Khas Pegawai Perkhidmatan Pendidikan Gred DG41 Secara One-Off Tahun 2021". Ministry of Education (MOE), 17 July 2020. <https://www.moe.gov.my/en/muat-turun/kenyataan-media/km2021-1/4438-kenyataan-media-pengambilan-khas-2021/file>
- Ministry of Health (MOH), Malaysia. 2021a. "Open data on COVID-19 in Malaysia". GitHub. <https://github.com/MoH-Malaysia/covid19-public>
- Ministry of Health (MOH), Malaysia. 2021b. "Self-test Covid-19 Test Kit for Conditional Approval (Approved)". Medical Device Authority. Accessed 26 July 2020 <https://www.mda.gov.my/announcement/631-self-test-covid-19-test-kit-for-conditional-approval-approved.html>
- Nadia Hashim. 2021. "Tiada keperluan buka sekolah awal September". Utusan Malaysia, July 17, 2021. <https://www.utusan.com.my/terkini/2021/07/tiada-keperluan-buka-sekolah-awal-september/>
- Parri, Niccolò, Matteo Lenge, and Danilo Buonsenso. 2020. "Children with Covid-19 in pediatric emergency departments in Italy". New England Journal of Medicine 383.2 187-190.
- Poo, Cheryl. 2021. "Khairy: PICK to start vaccinating 12- to 17-year-olds against Covid-19". The Edge Market, August 13, 2021. <https://www.theedgemarkets.com/article/govt-start-vaccinating-12-17yearolds-against-covid19>
- R.Loheswar. 2021. "Dr Adham: No plans to vaccinate SPM pupils yet; STPM students will get Covid-19 jabs this month". Malay Mail, July 14, 2021. <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2021/07/14/dr-adham-no-plans-to-vaccinate-spm-pupils-yet-stpm-students-will-get-covid/1989701>
- The Edge Markets. 2021. "SPM, STPM 2021 candidates will be vaccinated with Pfizer-BioNTech from July — Khairy". The Edge Markets, June 18, 2021. <https://www.theedgemarkets.com/article/spm-stpm-2021-candidates-will-be-vaccinated-pfizerbiontech-july-%E2%80%94-khairy>
- The Straits Times. 2021. "At-risk kids in Malaysia first in line for Covid-19 vaccine". The Straits Times, July 6, 2021. <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/at-risk-kids-in-malaysia-first-in-line-for-covid-19-vaccine>
- Zimmermann, Petra, and Nigel Curtis. 2021. "Why is COVID-19 less severe in children? A review of the proposed mechanisms underlying the age-related difference in severity of SARS-CoV-2 infections." British Medical Journal 106.5 429-439.