



**Ministerial Statement**  
To The House of Assembly  
By  
**The Hon. Diallo V. Rabain JP, MP**  
Minister of Education

**Ministerial Statement**  
Update on School COVID Phases – Living Safely with COVID in Schools

**Friday, March 25<sup>th</sup>, 2022**

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**MR SPEAKER,**

In early 2020, the full impact of COVID on our country could not have been foretold. The global pandemic brought on by the COVID-19 virus forced us to shelter in place while learning and schooling as we knew it would not be the same. In short order, our island home went from moving along with everyday life to one where the effects of a global pandemic disrupted our lives in ways never previously imagined.

**MR SPEAKER,**

From an education perspective, with schools closed, we were forced virtually overnight into remote learning. While remote learning by itself will never be an adequate substitute for the richness of face-to-face learning, it was all we and other education systems worldwide had. The ugly face of inequalities, which often lie within our shores hidden, became glaringly apparent. Some of us had the luxury of internet-capable devices and access to the internet, critical components of remote learning, and others did not. And whether working with printed material that had to be collected from schools or delivered by mail or utilising the technological solutions put in place, all parents and families grappled with the newness of managing and supporting their child's learning. And they did so while also juggling their employment and the uncertainty of navigating a global pandemic. It would be true to say the educational setbacks were felt much harder for some than others.

**MR SPEAKER,**

This Government was determined to get our children and young people back in the classrooms as quickly and safely as possible. It was not only the morally correct thing to do to close any growing or potential learning gaps but also because the island needed to begin to recover and move forward from the effects of the pandemic. As a result of the pandemic, tens of millions of dollars have had to be found to support Bermudians who could not work. So, yes, getting our children back to school for September 2020 was a high priority.

**MR SPEAKER,**

At the start of the new school year in 2020, Bermuda achieved what countries 100 times our size could not. We opened our school buildings for in-class learning. This was not without its challenges, as we were still learning about the best ways to fight COVID, and like the rest of the world, we were learning about the best mitigation strategies to keep our young people safe while engaged with in-person learning. I am proud to say is that this Government has never wavered on its commitment to protecting the safety and health of our learners and our educators.

**MR SPEAKER,**

Throughout 2020 and 2021, we have learned a lot about this virus and the best ways to prevent contracting it. A variety of strategies to help avoid unnecessary exposure have served us well with vaccinations and home Antigen Tests, more recently supplementing mask-wearing, social distancing, and hand sanitising. While a vocal minority will differ in their thoughts, these tried and true methods of avoiding unnecessary exposure are effective. They have been proven to work to limit us from infection. Our colleagues from the Ministry of Health have often reminded us of the swiss-cheese model. While no single intervention or mitigation strategy is perfect at preventing exposure to COVID, as they all have holes, but having multiple layers of interventions in place increases our chances of success. This is equally applicable in school settings.

**MR SPEAKER,**

We now find ourselves in 2022, and as we move towards "Living Safely with COVID" as a nation, we must balance our desire, some may even say impatience, to relax all COVID restrictions. However, within Education, we must never forget our ultimate goal; keeping our students safely in school for in-class learning. It is appropriate to remind ourselves of the global evidence around this. It has been established that a young person is more likely to meet the learning and well-being outcomes they desire and need to succeed in the world if they have the opportunity to engage in high-quality instruction in social learning settings. That is, they are engaged with in-school learning. Our policies must and will always start with this in mind as we seek a balance between this and living safely with COVID.

**MR SPEAKER,**

I get it; honestly, I do. I get the emails, social media posts, private FaceBook Group campaigns, the pressure put on the honourable members by their constituents, the daily newspaper's gratuitous allowance of the letters to the editor, and the occasional reporter lead "stories." Still, as Minister of Education, I remain committed to the ultimate goal that all of us should strive for, which is to keep our students in the classroom. Something, unfortunately, doesn't seem to be the first thing mentioned in the spaces as mentioned earlier.

**MR SPEAKER,**

Some insist that all COVID mitigation strategies in schools be removed completely and immediately. This would fly in the face of what we know will help us achieve our ultimate desire, to keep students in the classroom. I remind colleagues and the listening public that a positive COVID test result will result in a period of quarantine. A student or teacher that tests positive must quarantine, regardless of their age, whether they are from a public or private school, from the Back of Town or Fairylands, black or white, live in multigenerational households or not or any combination of these. I do, however, acknowledge that we must find ways to move into a space that gives our schools a feeling of a greater sense of normalcy.

**MR SPEAKER,**

Movement in this direction will not come without risks, and those risks must be balanced. If too many teachers are out simultaneously, schools will be forced to close. If the spread of COVID amongst children increases, we will begin to see additional learning losses. We do not want to go backward with students in and out of the classroom due to increased positive cases. This is unacceptable and should be unacceptable to my colleagues in this house and the listening public

**MR SPEAKER**

I think it is important to remind honourable colleagues and the listening public that the majority of positive cases of students are a result of their activities outside of school. We desire to detect covid positive persons before entering a school via screening programs. We also want to protect staff and students from being exposed to COVID in school by the use of mitigation policies and isolate any person found to be positive. I am thankful for the study forwarded to me last night from the American Academy of Pediatrics titled "School Masking Policies and Secondary SARS-CoV-2 Transmission". The March 2022 study's findings were that secondary infections in school districts with optional mask-wearing policies are 3.6 times higher than in districts with mask-wearing policies.

**MR SPEAKER,**

Far too often, I received messages from a vocal minority that wished to compare COVID restriction relaxation in bars, restaurants, football games, parties, events, etc. We also hear the threats from a particular segment of our community of the financial impact the island will feel if they decide to move away or send their children to boarding school if we do not drop all COVID restrictions in school immediately. Unfortunately, even members in this House and the other place are repeating these messages. Just yesterday, Senator Ben Smith, when referring to the COVID guidelines in schools, said it in the other place "...people going to restaurants where they can remove their masks and sit, eat and drink...." and "...there is an economic impact as more people are making decisions to find another method of education and sending their children away earlier..."

**MR SPEAKER,**

I remind colleagues and the listening public that going to a restaurant to eat or attending a party or function and going maskless is optional. You are putting yourself at risk of exposure, but you accept that risk. Turn up positive, quarantine for 5 to 7 days, work from home remotely, for those who are fortunate to have jobs that can allow them to work remotely. As I have gone to great pains to get us to recognise, we want our children in school and going to school is not an option. I urge those who continue to compare a school to a restaurant, a bar, a club, or a concert to please stop doing that. It is simply an apple to oranges comparison.

**MR SPEAKER**

Our children are too precious to deliberately expose them to COVID-19 because we can now eat at a restaurant without a mask on. When speaking of economic impact, at about the economic impact on families that can't afford to be home on quarantine with a child exposed unnecessarily? For once, I would like people to stop, think and understand we are here to govern for everyone, not just to speak certain people's desires and needs.

**MR SPEAKER,**

This morning, schools were advised of the relaxation of some Covid-related restrictions. These modifications will permit the optional removal of masks within classrooms and school grounds, the mixing bubbles, parents and visitors onto school grounds, sports days, etc. Effectively, returning to the kinds of formative experiences we want all young people to have while at school. These relaxations, however, come with a great and shared responsibility, a responsibility that all staff, parents, learners and the community must accept to prevent exposure that can result in catching COVID. It is everyone's responsibility to positively demonstrate and continue the behaviours that we know reduce the spread of COVID.

**MR SPEAKER,**

These revised guidelines consider school populations' usage of the at-home screening programs or the saliva screening program. We must have effective measures in place to allow the detection of any COVID-positive staff or

student as soon as possible. Schools families that have high adherence to the screening policies will enjoy fewer restrictions than those that do not. While current mask-wearing for those who have very high participation rates will be changed to optional in most circumstances, it is still recommended that to increase your ability to avoid exposure; people make personal choices to wear them as often as possible. There needs to be a shift from government-mandated safety measures to personal responsibility for yourself and those around you.

**MR SPEAKER,**

I want to thank the members of the Education Emergency Measures Committee (EEMC). They have provided feedback to help evolve the 2021-2022 Covid-19 Phases for School Protocols document released this morning. Some proposals find themselves in the document and others do not. However, I want to clarify to colleagues and the listening public that this revised guideline document is the sole responsibility of the Ministry of Education and can and will be changed as necessary to protect our children and keep them in the school buildings. As a result, I fully understand and accept, even if others do not or refuse to, that the relaxation of mask-wearing will most likely lead to more COVID positives in our school system, which can lead to more students missing critical in-class learning.

**MR SPEAKER,**

Regardless of the changes in the restrictions, we must continue to do everything we can to slow the spread of the virus as, despite the thoughts of some, we are still in a pandemic. That means wearing a mask, physically distancing and practising hand sanitising. I will continue to urge that we take all the precautions possible to prevent exposure. This Government is committed to finding ways to balance keeping our children in school for in-class learning while Learning to Live Safely with COVID.

Thank you, **MR SPEAKER.**