

Implementing COVID-19 protocols in Junior and Senior High Schools: The issues and the way forward

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In May 2020, the president of the republic, Nana Akuffo Addo, announced the re-opening of Junior and Senior High Schools to final year students, amid the raging COVID-19 pandemic. This generated a mixed reaction from the different stakeholders in the country.

Some argued that the reopening of the schools was a recipe for the rapid spread of the virus since Ghana had just entered the community transmission phase. Others contend that the decision was apt and absolutely necessary to keep the education machinery moving.

The central argument of the latter school of thought was rooted in the fact that the pandemic could not continue to hold off life indefinitely.

The condition for the schools re-opening, as announced by the president, was premised on the provision of adequate logistics to educational institutions. This was to ensure that the lives of students, teaching, and non-teaching staff will not be endangered. Other key measures included fumigation of schools, reduction in class size, the ban on mass gathering, and other social activities on campuses.

In keeping to its ‘watchdog’ role of promoting public accountability and good governance practices, SEND Ghana, through its participatory monitoring and evaluation networks, randomly selected and monitored Twenty-two (22) Junior and Senior High Schools in eight (8) districts. The schools monitored are shown in the table on the right.

The purpose was to ascertain the level of implementation and compliance with recommendations of COVID-19 prevention guidelines.

This report emphasizes that although implementation of COVID-19 prevention guidelines in schools is progressing steadily, many gaps exist, which require the immediate attention of the government.

First and foremost, PPEs and sanitation facilities such as nose masks, thermometer guns, Veronica buckets, liquid soaps, disposable tissue papers, and hand sanitizers were largely supplied. The schools received these items in varying quantities, with some getting more than expected.

Name of School (s)	Region	District
Lartebikorshie Presby JHS and Kaneshie SHTS	Greater Accra	Accra Metro
Stanward JHS and Nursey school and Akro SHTS	Eastern	Lower Manya Krobo,
Nahdathul Islamic JHS, Aburaso Roman Catholic JHS and Asuadei D/A JHS	Ashanti	Ahafo Ano South East
Seventh Day Adventist SHS	Western North region	Sefwi Asawinso
Yendi SHS, Dagbon State SHS, Islamic no 2 JHS, Abatey Balogu JHS, Saint Joseph JHS and Sogon number JHS	Northern	Yendi municipal and Nanumba North
Salaga SHS, TI Ahmadiyya SHS, Presby JHS	Savannah	East Gonja
Lawra SHS, Gbieri JHS, E/A JHS, Kuoli JHS, Yikpee JHS	Upper West	Lawra

“I am very satisfied with the measures put in place especially with the availability of 8 thermometer guns, which are far above what the school expected,” said a headmistress in one of the schools in Greater Accra.

Schools management ensured that Veronica buckets are placed at vantage points, enabling students and staff to frequently wash their hands.

Temperature checks were noted as a routine activity amongst students and staff in the sampled schools.

Students and staff of the Stanward JHS and nursey school and Akro Senior High Technical School (SHTS) both in **(Lower Manya)** received the maximum number of nose masks of **four (4)** each. Schools that provided the least nose masks i.e **one (1)** to students and or/staff at the time of monitoring include



Student of Lartebikorshie Presby JHS practicing handwashing | photo Credit: Jane

Kaneshie SHTS (**Accra**), Salaga SHS (**East Gonja**), Dagbon State SHS (**Yendi**), and Yendi SHS (**Yendi**). However, teachers at the Yendi SHS did not receive any nose mask, contravening the president's directives.

In most of the schools, students and staff received between **two (2)** and **three (3)** nose masks.



Students of St. Joseph JHS wearing their nose masks | Photo Credit: Fusheini

Second, the president's directive to fumigate and disinfect schools before reopening was fully implemented by the surveyed schools. Access to schools by visitors is exclusively limited to donations and for well-founded reasons only. Instances where visitors have to be given access to school premises, they are subject to strict regulation, including wearing of nose masks, washing their hands thoroughly with soap, and having their temperatures checked.

At the Salaga SHS, a security committee is formed and tasked with the responsibility of ensuring that no visitor is allowed into the school premises. Students are not also allowed to go to town under any circumstance. Parents are denied access to the school, and food vendors have also been banned around the school premises.



A member of the monitoring team washing his hands at Akro SHTS | Photo Credit: Sammuel

The third most important directive was the need for teachers to be trained/sensitized on COVID-19 safety protocols to enable them to effectively manage schools amid the pandemic. We observed that formal sensitization programs were organized for teachers, students, teaching, and non-teaching staff on the COVID-19 protocols.

The sensitization activities were carried out by MMDAs COVID-19 response teams, education directorates, and health directorates/facilities.

Some of the schools have incorporated COVID-19 education into the teaching curricula, which is helping in deepening understanding and compliance with the protocols.

The Assistant Headteacher of Salaga SHS noted that ***“the students are well educated on the safety protocols, and there is strict adherence, particularly, with the regular hand washing and social distancing.”***

Management of TI AMASS also indicated that everyone in the school is practicing all the COVID-19 safety protocols due to the impact of the sensitization.

Fourth, the practice of social distancing was noted to be encouraging, especially during class hours. The number of pupils in a classroom was reduced to the required size of



Class in session at the Lartebiokorshie Presby Junior High, Accra | *Photo credit: Jane*

maximum 30 students for JHS and 25 for SHS, and spaced out in a manner that meets the physical distancing criteria.

Ban on social events, including sporting activities, religious, and other mass gatherings is strictly enforced in schools.

Almost all the schools surveyed are mapped to health facilities with isolation centers and the availability of sick bays.

Challenges

Despite progress of implementation of COVID-19 school reopening recommendations, some significant gaps were noted in some schools.

First, the TIAMASS in Salaga lacks a befitting dining hall. The structure serving that purpose has been converted into a classroom to address the issue of reduction in class size. At present, students take their meals at an uncompleted new dining hall infrastructure, which, according to school authorities, is not pleasing.



Interior of the uncompleted dining hall where students of TIAMASS currently have their meals | *Photo Credit: Lydia*

Second, authorities of the school expressed concern about the lackadaisical attitude of some students in practicing social distancing at the dormitory level.

This problem was also reported in Yendi and Dagbon State SHSs, where students relax the physical distancing protocols after they close from class and return to the dormitories.

The third challenge confronting the TIAMASS is non-availability of isolation centre to deal with emergencies. However, the school, through its health committee, secured a contact number from the municipal hospital, which could provide health services during emergencies.

Similarly, the Kaneshie SHTS, although mapped to a health facility with the creation of a sickbay, there is no dedicated health professional. This run contrary to the president's directive of assigning each educational institution with a health facility/professional to provide real-time health services.

It was discovered also that both the Lartebikorshie Presby JHS and Kaneshie SHTS did not have adequate supply of rolls of tissues at the time of monitoring.

In schools such as Akro SHTS (**Eastern region**) Kaneshie SHTS (**Greater Accra**) Salaga SHS (**Savannah region**), the supply of water was inadequate thereby, militating against the practice of frequent hand washing and physical distancing protocols.

Akro SHTS has only one borehole and a pipe, which inevitably opens students to long queuing for water. School authorities also expressed concerns over what they referred to as “non-wearing” of face masks amongst students outside of the classroom environment.

The Salaga SHS depends on tanker services, which supply water on an irregular basis. Before the pandemic, students and staff were accessing water from Kpembe, a suburb of Salaga. However, due to the restrictions, they are not allowed to go out, and it has been a challenge for school authorities to provide water with no dedicated budget.

Currently, students are complaining about the situation, and the implication on the practice of frequent hands washing is glaring.

Conclusion

Overall, the implementation of the COVID-19 school re-opening guidelines has been quite impressive. In particular, the fumigation of schools, reduction in class sizes, training/sensitization for teachers and students on COVID-19 protocols, and the ban on public gatherings and other social activities were fully enforced. There were, however, some gaps, including discrepancies in the supply of logistics. Frequent handwashing, which is among the key antidotes in preventing COVID-19 infection was disrupted in some schools due to inadequate supply of water. Health professionals were not present in some schools to provide real-time health services in emergencies. Collectively, these contributed somewhat to undermining the effectiveness of implementation. Presently, a decision has been reached by the Ghana Education Service (GES) to re-open schools to JHS 2 and SHS 2 students effective October 5, with the existing protocols. Therefore, the government needs to be decisive in addressing the teething problems that were witnessed in implementing COVID-19 protocols in phase one of the JHS and SHS school re-opening.