PHILIPPINE PEDIATRIC SOCIETY
PEDIATRIC INFECTIOUS DISEASE SOCIETY OF THE PHILIPPINES

PPS-PIDSP Joint Position Statement
on Optional Masking in Indoor School Settings
2 November 2022
Version 1.4

COVID-19 Prevention Strategies Remain Important for Safe In-Person Learning in Schools

The Philippine Pediatric Society (PPS) and the Pediatric Infectious Disease Society of the Philippines (PIDSP) recommend continued infection prevention strategies, including wearing of facemasks, in indoor school facilities to prevent SARS-CoV-2 transmission.

Both the PPS and PIDSP recognize the positive impact of in-person learning on the physical, mental, and educational well-being of children amidst this pandemic. Schools provide safe and supportive learning environments for students, optimizing their social and emotional development, as well as providing access to critical and much needed services. Notwithstanding, i**n light of circulating SARS-CoV-2 variants of concern (VOCs), including Omicron and its subvariants, layered prevention strategies in the form of universal masking, optimized ventilation, physical distancing to prevent crowding, as well as hygiene and other measures to reduce transmission risks, will continue to be essential to prevent transmission in school settings.**[1-3]

Covid-19 vaccination is currently recommended for children ages 5 years old and above, with boosters recommended for those 12 years of age and above. Despite being highly recommended, vaccination is not mandatory, leaving a considerable number of unvaccinated children who are susceptible to the disease. Thus, given the continued risk of transmission in school settings, a high level of infection prevention and preparedness in these settings must continue.

Preventive measures such as appropriate use of face masks, ventilation and physical distancing have been suggested in some studies to have significantly reduced secondary transmission. **Correct and consistent mask use by all students, teachers, staff, and visitors is particularly important when physical distance cannot be maintained**.[3] The wearing of masks has been one of the most competent preventive measures to reduce the spread of virus-laden respiratory droplets from asymptomatic or pre-symptomatic infected wearers, who may seem to be well and are unaware of their infectiousness to others. Masks can also provide protection against other various respiratory viruses besides SARS-CoV-2, including Influenza, Respiratory Syncitial Virus (RSV), and Rhinovirus.[4]

COVID-19 remains a risk for children, especially those who are unvaccinated. Though fewer cases of COVID-19 have been reported in children compared to adults, and disease may often be mild, rare but serious complications do occur even in children with initially mild infections. This includes Multisystem Inflammatory Syndrome in Children (MIS-C) which causes severe disease and coronary artery aneurysms. A well-fitting mask reduces the chance of contracting COVID-19 and its possible consequences, and likewise helps prevent spreading the infection to others.

In addition, layered prevention strategies are also important in controlling the spread of infectious diseases including COVID-19. This is especially true in areas with moderate to high community transmission, low vaccination rates and for people who are not fully vaccinated.[2] These strategies include: staying up to date on vaccinations (including those recommended for other diseases), staying home when sick, hand hygiene and respiratory etiquette, regular facility cleaning and disinfection, management of cases and exposure, and special considerations for higher-risk activities (e.g. contact sports).

Recommendations:

The PPS and PIDSP reiterate that while there are profound benefits of in-person learning, the threat of COVD-19 among vaccinated and unvaccinated children persists, and so **wearing of facemasks in indoor school facilities must be continued to decrease the risk of SARS-CoV-2 transmission.**

Caution dictates the need for universal indoor masking (unless with contraindications) by all students, staff, teachers, and visitors to schools, regardless of vaccination status. Additional recommendations include optimizing ventilation, maintaining at least 3 feet of physical distance between students within classrooms to reduce transmission risk[6], handwashing and respiratory etiquette, staying home when sick and getting tested, cleaning and disinfection, and management of cases and higher-risk activities. We call on the whole community to keep schools safe and protect students, teachers, staff, visitors, and other members of their households, and as such fully support in-person learning.

References:

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