



CIPRIANI COLLEGE OF LABOUR AND CO-OPERATIVE STUDIES

Mask Up!!

According to the Ministry of Education 52 % ECCE, 64 % Primary and 67 % Secondary school students attended school on the first day that school children returned to physical school. It was the return to physical classes after two years on the virtual platform. A total of 121 609 children attended in 820 schools. The figures are worrisome and should there be a cause for concern that so many were absent from physical school? What is the reason for this?

Social media was abuzz with children happy to once again return to school after missing the interaction with their peers whilst others were adamant at the risk of COVID -19 in sending their children to school. The data from the Ministry of Health attributes 82 % of COVID-19 related deaths to unvaccinated persons and they have provided various vaccine options for persons 12 years or older. Therefore, vaccines are available to the secondary school children to protect them against the virus together with our new motto ‘wash hands, wear mask and watch your distance.’ What then is the reason for the absence of 33 % of secondary school children from our nation’s schools. Aren’t they old enough to understand the information and adhere to the new motto? Or are there other social reasons for not attending schools? It will be interesting to find out the reasons for such so that these children are not left behind in their academia but rather assisted in every way possible.

What about the absent 48 % ECCE and 36 % Primary school children? Parents have shared concerns about children aged 2 -11 for a 7-hour school day wearing masks and its effect on breathing, social development and mental health. More so it has been compounded by the unavailability of vaccines for this group of children. However, it is necessary to look at the scientific information for the concerns shared by parents so that the fears can be allayed and decisions are made on the valid information available.

In the case of its effect on breathing, the question posed is whether they will be able to get enough oxygen during their 7 hours in school with a mask on as children breathe more rapidly than adults. According to pediatric pulmonologist Theresa Gilbert the size of the carbon dioxide

and oxygen molecules are far smaller than the holes in a weave cloth and surgical mask and as a result, have no trouble flowing in and around the mask. However, children with severe asthma are required to take mask breaks during the school time in a hallway or in an open area. For this reason, there is no major concern for the wearing of the mask.

It is difficult to read the emotions of adults who are wearing masks and same is applied to children. However, there is limited evidence to suggest that the social development of children is affected by the wearing of masks. In fact, Walter Gilliam, a child psychiatry and psychology professor states that children pick up on cues like how people walk through spaces, the tone of their voices and hand gestures that they make. The development of a child suggests that they will adjust quickly, similar to adjusting to someone who wears sunglasses. The social development aspect is therefore not hindered as a result of the mask wearing for the duration of the school day.

The effect on mental health is another concern that has been debunked by experts. So much so that studies indicate the opposite where most of the issues related to mental health came early on in the pandemic where children doing remote learning experienced anxiety and depression because they were not in school with their peers. As a result of this many countries investigated strategies to keep childcare programs and school opened. A quick glance on social media platforms would indicate the longing that children had for school and interaction with their peers. Social interaction aids in the development of the child and the physical classroom nor wearing of mask hampers the child's mental health.

Where do we go from here? It is imperative that the absent children return to school and the administration assists in this regard. The implementation of risk mitigation strategies to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in schools is imperative and administrators must make this a priority. These strategies range from monitoring symptoms stringently to mask wearing and ventilation. Another is an understanding of the disabilities and medical issues that particular students may have and create avenues to ensure that they are safe whilst at school. These strategies will ensure the continuation of the physical school with the presence of more students and an environment where breathing, social development and mental health of students are not affected.

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