



Ministry of Education & Training Government of Vanuatu



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Joint Press Release

Safe reopening of schools: Good news for children, parents, and teachers

PORT VILA, 29 April 2022: The decision to re-open schools and other technical educational institutions in Shefa and the unaffected province of MALAMPA, as well as unaffected islands on PENAMA Province and TAFEA Province to ensure children return to in-person learning, is applauded, and welcomed by teachers, parents, and children alike. School is an important time for children's learning and development and, even during the pandemic, it is possible to attend school safely. Children in the affected provinces that are currently on Alert Level 3 due to community outbreak of COVID-19 are expected to continue home-based learning for the moment.

"I am pleased to announce that as per Order 53 signed by the Minister of Health on 22 April schools on Efate and its offshore islands can now re-open with standard operating procedures in place that meet the Ministry of Health requirements", stated Minister for Education and Training, Honorable Samson Samsen. "This means that students can resume face-to-face learning supported by their teachers in the school environment with appropriate physical distancing, wearing of masks by both teachers and students, and ensuring handwashing or use of sanitisers at all time".

Across the country since the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak, there are more than 99,000 school children who have lost an estimated 232 hours each (23 million hours combined) – and counting – of in-person learning since 7 March. This may lead to children being cut off from their education and other vital benefits that schools provide. While there have been massive efforts made to provide school children with access to remote learning during the period, the shift to remote learning globally has been associated with a learning loss. The importance of the teacher has never been so clear.

The good news is that children returning to school is not dependent on the availability of vaccines for children. The latest global guidance from UNICEF and WHO includes advice on safety measures, which can be adapted to the local context, showing that it is possible to make a safe return to school here in Vanuatu. The government is ensuring



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safety measures are adopted in schools across the country to provide all students with a safe and healthy learning environment.

Acting Director of Public Health, Dr. Jenny Stephen stated, "Under the amended Public Health Act, the Ministry of Health has been at the forefront leading the COVID-19 response since the beginning of the outbreak in Vanuatu. Re-opening of schools and other educational institutions has always been a consideration in the response plan and as provinces transition into the recovery phase based on clear evidence of a decrease in transmission, steady or declining hospitalisations, combined with high vaccination rates it is important that life returns to a 'new normal' with all of the COVID-safe measures and protocols firmly in place and adhered to by teachers and students".

In addition, the latest evidence shows that schools do not drive the spread of COVID-19 in the community. COVID-19 does not pose as high a risk to children as it does to adults, and children are more at risk of COVID-19 in the community than they are in school, so long as COVID-safe measures are followed in schools. In short, children can be safe in school, and primary schools, preschools, and early childhood education centres are not high-risk settings for transmission, especially if the right safety measures are followed. So, even when COVID-19 case numbers rise, schools can be safe havens, and protecting in-person learning must be a priority.

There are also many other benefits for all children when they are in school. The majority of school children rely on their schools as a place where they not only gain important academic skills, but also critical social, emotional, and life skills when they interact with their peers, receive psychosocial and child protection support, and access health, protection, and immunisation services. For some children, school is the one place where they can feel safe and protected, have positive experiences with their teachers and classmates, and develop to their full potential.

And, just as with the opening of the borders for tourists, education is essential for the economic recovery of this country. Investing in education creates jobs, boosts economic growth, and increases social cohesion. Sending children to school also allows parents to work and support their families during these difficult times.

Together with its partners, the Ministry of Education and Training has finalised the *Safe School Reopening Guidelines*. Another focus area in progress is the development of



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resources to support safe school re-opening. Inputs from the key education partners including the Ministry of Health, World Health Organisation, UNICEF, Vanuatu Education Support Program, Save the Children, and the Government of Australia and Government of New Zealand, are acknowledged.

Schools on Efate and its offshore islands that are looking forward to re-opening their doors soon to welcome children are working to finalise their Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) that are to be submitted to the Ministry of Education & Training on 29 April. This is to ensure that all of the important measures are in place to protect children and teachers as well as their families at home. The Ministry of Education & Training is supporting school principals including through online training and consultations on protocols.

The schools in the provinces that are currently in Level 3 of the Vanuatu Outbreak Alert System, including SANMA, TORBA, PENAMA (Pentecost Island), and affected islands in TAFEA Province (Tanna, Erromango, and Aneityum), are advised to remain closed until their SOPs have been approved for school reopening. The role of teachers is critical to continue supporting and monitoring remote learning of children.

It is vital that a whole-of-society approach is taken to support children in returning to school as school gates gradually open on 3 May and preparation for a full opening on 23 May. Everyone has a role to play. Parents must ensure that their children return to school as schools re-open and, together with teachers, ensure that their children practice COVID-safe hygiene measures, including wearing masks, washing hands regularly for at least 20 seconds, and keeping at least 1.5 metres apart. It is also important that children do not go to school when they are sick. Children are nothing if not adaptable and resilient and around the world, they have demonstrated that they can and will adopt the safe behaviours that allow them to return to school.



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Notes to Editors:

For digital assets refer to link: <https://bit.ly/3KrgrQ4>

About the Vanuatu Ministry of Education & Training:

The Ministry of Education and Training (MoET) is the largest service deliverer and employer in Vanuatu. On behalf of the Government of Vanuatu (GoV), it is responsible for delivering the education aspects of the Sustainable Development Goals and international agreements such as Education for All and respect for the rights of children. This includes the Government of Vanuatu's commitment to achieving universal primary completion (UPC), improving literacy, and to developing skills for the productive sectors (rural and urban). The MoET has three strategic goals:

- **Access:** To increase equitable access to education for all people at all levels of education in Vanuatu
- **Quality:** To improve the quality of education in Vanuatu
- **Management:** To improve and strengthen the management of the education system in Vanuatu.

The MoET faces the challenges of responding to a fast-growing population, growing demands and expectations from parents and students and communities and from the formal economy as well as managing the impacts of natural disasters (tropical cyclones, volcanic eruptions, earthquakes...) and pandemic like COVID-19.

Get more information about the Ministry of Education and Training on <https://moet.gov.vu> or <https://web.facebook.com/moetvanuatu>.

About the Vanuatu Ministry of Health:

The Ministry of Health has a vision for an integrated and decentralized health system that promotes an effective, efficient, and equitable health services for the good health and general wellbeing of all people in Vanuatu. Its mission is to protect and promote the health of all people in Vanuatu. For more information on, visit <https://moh.gov.vu/>,



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and for COVID-19 related information, visit <https://covid19.gov.vu/> and follow Health Promotions Vanuatu on Facebook <https://bit.ly/3OIFQ0Q>

About UNICEF:

UNICEF works in some of the world's toughest places, to reach the world's most disadvantaged children. Across 190 countries and territories, we work for every child, everywhere, to build a better world for everyone. For more information about UNICEF Pacific and its work for children, follow [UNICEF Pacific](#) on [Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#)

About WHO:

The World Health Organization (WHO) is the United Nation's specialized agency for international public health. In the Pacific, WHO's Division of Pacific Technical Support provides tailored, timely support to 21 Pacific island countries and areas. Our main office is in Suva, Fiji, and the Division has six other offices across the region: The Federated States of Micronesia, Kiribati, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, and Vanuatu. Find out more about WHO's work in Vanuatu through our website: www.who.int/vanuatu. Follow us on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), [YouTube](#), [Instagram](#) and [LinkedIn](#)

About the Government of Australia:

Australia is a longstanding supporter of development cooperation and we have worked around the world and in our region for decades to support economic growth and reduce poverty. Through the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Australia's development program is an investment in an open, prosperous, and resilient Indo-Pacific. For more information about Australia's work in Vanuatu follow [Web](#) | [Facebook](#) | [Twitter](#) | [YouTube](#) | [Flickr](#)



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About the Government of Aotearoa New Zealand:

Aotearoa New Zealand supports sustainable development through our development, trade, environment, diplomatic, and security cooperation. Through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, the International Development Cooperation (IDC) Programme delivers Aotearoa New Zealand's official support for developing countries. The purpose of Aotearoa New Zealand's development assistance is to develop shared prosperity and stability in the Pacific and beyond, drawing on the best of Aotearoa New Zealand's knowledge and skills.



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