

The recommendations of the Ministry of Education and Research of Estonia for the start of the school year during the spread of COVID-19

19th August 2020

School year will be as normally as possible

School year can begin with in class learning and teaching. Educational institutions need to maintain and develop distance learning capabilities throughout the school year in order to be prepared for smooth transition to distance learning and teaching, if needed.

The Government aims to avoid full distance learning and teaching. If needed, transition will occur case by case in a given building, institution or area, taking local situation into consideration.

The current situation allows to begin new school year with traditional gatherings while bearing in mind that in case of a even the slightest possibility of illness one shall stay in isolation at home. One shall also follow personal hygiene and minimize the number of close contacts.

At the beginning of a new school year, it is expected that it starts with revision and assessment of students' level of knowledge. This year, the Ministry advises teachers to pay extra attention to these. Distance learning and teaching in spring has taught a lot, but also changed the perspective of learning environment, learning, teaching and skills. Time planning as well as finding a balance point between work and leisure must be the highest priority for teachers and students.

It is more time-consuming to plan in class and distance learning and teaching, but one must consider which topics need face to face meeting and which are suitable for independent learning. Students must know where and how learning materials are available on Internet and which are the criteria for successful completion of a given assignment.

Transitioning student to distance learning must be jointly decided by the students, parent and school. Students' performance, independent learning and parent support must be taken into account before allowing student to transition.

Longer than usual deadlines must be taken into account due the possibility of infrequent access to computer or Internet. One of the key areas of distance learning is the possibility for individual counselling.



Every educational institution and its manager must plan how to mitigate risks

Every educational institutions and its manager must plan how to mitigate risks while bearing in mind that in class learning and teaching must be provided to grades 1 to 6 and to students with special needs as long as possible and to those who do not find distance learning suitable.

The Pathfinder Centers (*Rajaleidja keskused*) will provide help for solutions to students with special needs.

The Ministry advises following to mitigate risks:

- The organization of distance learning, including partial distance learning
- The principles and agreements of teaching staff during partial and full distance learning
- The possibilities for rearrangements of teaching for teachers and students in potential risk
- The usage of classrooms, school premises and dispersion of people
- The access to school premises
- The organization of events, gatherings, excursions, field trips
- The procurement and usage of personal protective equipment
- The principles for communication between school and parents
- The action plans for the positive COVID-19 case

The minimization of contacts is crucial

Educational institutions are strongly advised to arrange learning and teaching in a way that allows minimal contacts and interactions between persons.

The Ministry advises to use “homebases” instead of subject classrooms, consider more extensive outdoor classes and partial distance learning (by days or by subjects). For instance, regular weekly e-learning day could be planned for older grades. The Ministry advises to arrange lunch breaks and physical education classes in a way that enables minimal contacts.

Different start of school day or breaks between classes or longer breaks (including outdoors) are some of the possibilities for minimizing contacts.

Schools operating in multiple buildings must consider how to lower the cross-usage of classrooms.

It is advised to fully transition to distance learning for older grades in case the number of cases in Estonia rises. This enables to disperse younger grades better in buildings. The Ministry advises to provide in class learning and teaching for younger grades as well as to students with special needs as long as possible.

Operation of dormitories is allowed, but the Ministry advises to minimize the possibilities for contacts and follow current regulation.



If one of the following applies, one is considered as close contact and shall contact the Health Board for further instructions. Such persons shall not attend school or any other public venue:

- Lives in the same household with COVID-19-positive person.
- Has been in contact for at least 15 minutes and closer than 2 meters with COVID-19-positive person.
- Has been in contact with body fluids of COVID-19-positive person without personal protection (ie has been sneezed or coughed on or touched used napkin with bare hands).
- Has been in the presence for at least 15 minutes and closer than 2 meters of COVID-19-positive person (ie same classroom, hall, venue etc)

The need for gatherings and events must be considered thoroughly

The mitigation of risks shall be taken into consideration when planning an event or a gathering. Attendees shall be dispersed or grouped into smaller entities. The Ministry advises to postpone international events and travel.

Accepting visitors is not prohibited, but the Ministry advises to consider its necessity.

It is allowed to rent school's or youth center's premises to third parties for events and hobby education, but rooms must be cleaned and aired afterwards.

Excursions and field trips are advised to organize by grades or groups. It must be possible to identify participants in the case of a positive COVID-19 case.

Precaution and mitigation measures are crucial, personal protection equipment is provided by the institution's manager

The institutions manager is responsible for providing personal protection equipment. Teachers and students belonging to the risk groups shall be guaranteed safe working and learning environment, for example from a distance.

Proper personal hygiene, working ventilation and cleaning of surfaces are crucial mitigation measures. One shall consider installing disinfectant stations in classrooms or walkways while taking into account handling requirements of chemicals (i.e. disinfectants are used for their purpose and correctly).

Crowded rooms contribute to the spread of viruses. Rooms shall be aired and ventilated on a regular basis.

Viruses can spread from infected surfaces, thus there's regular need for wet-cleaning of rooms and surfaces. See recommendations by the Health Board: <https://www.terviseamet.ee/et/COVID-19-trukised#JUHENDID> (in Estonian).

Children are less prone to COVID-19, according to research and the Health Board. In spring, about 4% of COVID-19-positive persons were under age 18. Of those, less than quarter were younger than 5, third aged 5 to 11 and the rest aged 12 to 18.



It has been proved that transmission from one student to another in school environment is rare similar to child to adult transmission. More information on ECDC website: <https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/COVID-19-schools-transmission-August%202020.pdf> (in Estonian).

One must stay at home when sick or in self-isolation when suspected COVID-19 case

In case of a presence of respiratory symptoms such as cough, fever, sore throat, general feeling of weakness or tiredness, one must stay at home and participation in learning shall be organized from a distance. Person who has been in contact with COVID-19-positive must stay in self-isolation for 14 days.

In case there is a confirmed positive case of COVID-19 in a grade or group, all students who have been in contact with the case must be transferred to distance learning. It is advised to transfer whole grade or group to distance learning. Ill person must give negative test, otherwise shall continue isolation.

Person is subject to 14-day restriction of freedom when he/she arrives from a foreign country with a coronavirus infection rate above 16. Educational institutions have right to transfer such student to distance learning. Current information about countries, their rates and restrictions is available on the website of Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Estonia: <https://vm.ee/en/information-countries-and-self-isolation-requirements-passengers>

Self-isolation is not required by those whose member of household is a subject to restriction of freedom due to foreign travel or who has been in contact with a person who in turn has been in contact with COVID-19 person.

Procedure when person falls ill in an educational institution

Ill person must notify the institution's management. When symptoms of illness appear, students must seek help from a teacher or school nurse who in turn notify the management and student's parents.

Person in questions shall be isolated from others in a suitable room. He or she is given a surgical face mask (bearing in mind the proper use). Ambulance must be called (dial 112) when the situation worsens considerably.

COVID-19-positive person or student's parents must notify school management as soon the diagnose is confirmed. It is crucial to stop the spread of COVID-19.

The management shall inform the members of given grade or group and their parents. The notification shall be delicate, considerate and not include any personal details.

The Health Board will contact educational institution in case of a confirmed COVID-19-positive case and determines persons in contact in cooperation with the institution and its nurse.



Persons who have been in close contact must self-isolate themselves for 14 days during which distance learning shall take place.

One must bear in mind that during self-isolation the participation in hobby activities, trainings or being in public places is prohibited.

Other students shall continue their daily lives while monitoring their health. In case of a COVID-19 symptoms, one must contact their doctor as soon as possible.

The decision of closing an educational institution is made by the Health Board and manager

The Health Board considers closing an educational institution if more than 10% of students in an educational institution are COVID-19-positive. Closure means usually distance learning.

The Health Board provides general guides when there is a local spread of COVID-19 in the school area. The guides are provided under the Communicable Diseases Prevention and Control Act. Under the same act, the management of educational institution is allowed to close the institution, in coherence with the Health Board.

The Health Board also has right to order disinfecting or cleaning procedures in buildings as well as monitor health and diagnose communicable diseases.

Orders are given by the Government of Estonia in case the restrictions have large effect of society or economy.

Extra attention must be paid on mental health

It is important to notice need for support and offer it to students and teachers.

It must be agreed on to who teachers and parents can turn to for help when they notice a student in need for help.

School managers and heads play central role in supporting teachers: co-vision, supervision, external specialists. It is important on pay attention to mental health and wellbeing of oneself.

Website Peaasi.ee provides essential information on mental health as well basic support. Youth aged 16 to 26 can register for free counselling (also possible via videoconference). Advice and help can be sought from the Pathfinder Center (+372 735 0700).

Website teeviit.ee helps to raise awareness among young people on mental health topics.

Central child support phonenumber 116 111 provides 24/7 counselling.

Teachers must pay attention to maintaining contact with students during distance learning. Special attention must be drawn on children in risk groups. It is important to notice and react when student present unusual behavior. School psychologist can guide teachers what to notice and when to ask for help.



One shall not forget that bullying can take place outside school building or in cyber space. Teachers and parents shall pay attention to interactions in Internet and remind proper netiquette, if needed.

The Ministry has increased the financial support to organizations who prevent and raise awareness on bullying in order to guarantee all students safe learning environment. The Ministry in cooperation with the Ministry of Social Affairs of Estonia has produced mental health guidebook and is producing no-bullying education guidebook.

Guidelines on how to address COVID-19 to youth: <https://www.hm.ee/et/uudised/10-soovitust-kuidas-raakida-noortega-koroonaviiruse-ohhtlikkusest> (in Estonian) and <https://www.innove.ee/blogi/innove-rajaleidja-kuidas-raakida-lastega-koroonaviirusest/> (in Estonian)

The manager is responsible for the organization of pre-primary education

The organization of pre-primary education institution is up to its manager. The head of the institution shall map out optimal solution with its local government. People with any presence of illness are not allowed into building.

The pre-primary education teacher or caretaker have right and obligation not to allow children or parents with any symptoms of illness in building.

COVID-19 affect children usually lightly, thus one has to be extra careful when monitoring their health.

Closure of pre-primary education institutions have large effect on society, thus it is necessary to provide pre-primary education even when the number of COVID-19-positive cases rise.

The manager is responsible for the organization of youth activities

The manager is responsible for the organization of youth activities, such as youth centers, hobby education schools, trainings, camps. The local organization of youth activities, usually the local government, must be informed of all updates of situation in such activities.

It is crucial to continue providing youth activities and support youth workers in order to provide support to youth in need.

Youth activities must follow similar procedure to other educational institutions, full closure shall be the last option. One must follow personal hygiene and people must be dispersed. If needed, reorganization will occur case by case in a given building, institution or area, taking local situation into consideration. In case an institution is closed, it is crucial to continue services and using solutions of smart youth work, for example.

The Education and Youth Board and strategic partners with funding by the Ministry of Education and Research are able to provide support.



High school leaving examination takes place in autumn

Although high school leavers were not required to take exams in spring, it is possible to take these in this autumn.

Passing student research or practical project is not obligatory and organization of international exams have changed due to the state of emergency.

Effect of COVID-19 and distance learning is being studied in 100 schools

Tallinn University is analyzing the effect of COVID-19 and distance learning on schools, teachers, students and parents.

Students with special needs, the availability of smart devices, changes in management and organization of teaching as well as parents' role in providing support is studied.

The Government has initiated a number of COVID-19-related researches and studies

Engaging researchers for better understanding and mitigating the outcomes of COVID-19 and the related crisis is crucial. The Government has invested additional 10 million euros in research and development activities.

The Government has granted 1.6 million euros for COVID-19 monitoring research and 0.86 million euros for systems for advance warning. 1.5 million euros have been granted for starting biolaboratory of Tartu University. Additional 2.1 million euros will be allocated for COVID-19-related studies in open application round.

A COVID-19 prevention app HOIA will be released

Starting from 20th August everyone is able to download app HOIA, which serves as an additional way to map possible contacts and mitigate the spread of virus. App will warn a person when he or she has been in close contact with COVID-19-positive person. More information can be found at www.hoia.me.

Trainings and internships are allowed in vocational education training

Trainings, internships and practical work are not suitable for independent work or distance learning. If it is possible to train, then it is advised to do so.

Training must be supervised and feedbacked while taking place in safe environment.

In case a company is not able to provide training position (in case of temporary suspension of its activities or reorganization), it is not possible to intern as well. Alternative solutions should be considered together by the company, student and school.