

**Adviesaanvraag**

Vraagsteller	Initiatief van de GEMS
Datum van adviesaanvraag	-
Onderwerp	Maatregelen en versoepelingen
Vraag	Hoe past het volledig heropenen van onderwijs in het gecommuniceerde plan van het Overlegcomité en de huidige en voorspelde epidemiologische situatie?

Adviesverstrekking t.a.v. de Ministers van Onderwijs

Datum van adviesverstrekking	23/04/2021
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In light of the discussion on reopening the schools to 100% physical presence, the GEMS would like to communicate the following considerations to the Ministers of Education:

1. As stated in the GEMS advice released earlier this week, the epidemiological situation remains very worrisome on both a national and international level.
 - a. At the national level, we see a coherently high incidence among 10-19 year olds (about 16%), and high numbers of infections among 10-29 year olds (RAG report 22/4/2021). Even though there is a decline of -8% on 23/04/21, this is due to the Easter Monday effect. The decline in cases on 24/04/21 is -4%, and on 25/04/21 it will be -2%. In the provinces of Vlaams-Brabant, Antwerp, we see an increase already, as in Brussels and in Ostbelgien. On the other hand, the incidences in Namur, Hainaut, and Luxembourg remain at very high levels. The reproduction number is a little above 1.0. For the time being, there is a hint of a favorable evolution in ICU occupancy.
 - b. At the international front, now that non-essential travel is discouraged but nevertheless allowed again, a decline in the various curves (cases, hospital occupancy, ICU occupancy) in Belgium might be counteracted by foreign introduction. Even more so, emerging variants remain of great concern. Indeed, as variants which exhibit immune escape are emerging, the need for cautious relaxations in a stable and relatively safe epidemiological situation only increases.
2. Because of this fragile epidemiological situation, we think it remains essential to define priorities. As often stated, the GEMS holds the opinion that the top priority should be to reopen schools maximally and thus organise 100% on-site education. However, with all relaxations decided and communicated by the Concertation Committee, there is currently limited epidemiological budget available to do so, which means other activities should be withheld, to make space for schools.
3. A particularly difficult combination of activities is schools and leisure activities for youth (extra-scholarly activities, sports), as this combination creates a large network of contacts in which the virus can quickly spread from one community to another.
4. Decisions on measures and relaxations can never be taken for a single sector, but need to be placed in coherent transsectoral approach to generate a meaningful perspective. Therefore the GEMS would like to urge a discussion on a broader scale, in particular encompassing the fields of education, youth, sports, and culture. By including all stakeholders, clear priorities can be decided upon and the involvement of different sectors can offer mutual support in doing so.
5. In order to maximally contain viral transmission in schools besides the basic measures, we think it is important to further invest and strengthen the following mitigating interventions:
 - a. **Testing and contact tracing.** Continued testing and subsequent isolation and quarantining as well as good management of local outbreaks is key to track and control transmission as much as possible. We support the already taken actions in this respect. Also several neighbouring countries test pupils and teachers on a regular basis to allow schools to remain open, even in an epidemiologically difficult situation.
 - b. **Ventilation.** The importance of ventilation in preventing or at the least reducing formation of aerosols cannot be overestimated as aerosol transmission constitutes a highly important transmission route of SARS-CoV-2. Performant ventilation is therefore essential to reduce aerosols to limit the spread in closed environments. Subsequently, in schools, where pupils and teachers stay indoors for prolonged periods of time, the guidelines on ventilation should be followed, i.e., opening windows and doors, organizing activities as much as possible outdoors,



- installing a CO₂-meter (as an affordable surrogate marker for ventilation) and taking proper action when the defined thresholds are exceeded..
- c. **Reduce transmission risk to vulnerable persons.** When children are not at school, due to (parttime) online learning, they are often taken care of by their grandparents, possibly creating an even larger network and illness. As we are in a transition period towards vaccination of this vulnerable group and in a high viral circulation period, additional communication to call for prudence in this age group as long as they are not yet fully vaccinated is warranted.
 - d. **Reduce risk of transmission in children and teens outside schools.** In addition, uncontrolled gatherings and extracurricular activities may increase the networks even further. A comprehensive coordinated cross sectoral plan may further reduce the risk of transmission, as particularly adolescents are at risk of isolation, loss of purpose in life, anxiety and mental health problems, increased time on social networks with all risks associated with it. When schools are closed the potential positive effect on transmission can be annihilated by uncontrolled meetings of young teenagers outside of schools.
6. In addition to the discussion regarding fully opening schools as opposed to maintaining a system with a component of hybridization, we would like to refer to former GEMS advice (dd. 10/4/2021) to stress the need for mental support for pupils and students, as it is known that mental health deteriorates during crises and that it continues even after a crisis is over (this may be particularly true for adolescents and young adults). Bridges with other sectors such as cultural sector and performed outdoors could be an opportunity to organize activities within the class bubble.