

Social distancing struggles as PNG schools resume

by Joseph Pundu

5 June 2020



Grade 12 students at Port Moresby National High School (Credit: Malachi Wurr)

The Government of Papua New Guinea has relaxed some control measures that were in place in regards to COVID-19 and allowed schools in the country to resume classes after six weeks off. Teachers throughout Papua New Guinea resumed duty on 27 April, while a week later (Monday 4 May) students began to attend classes again. Having no classes for six weeks was good to prevent an outbreak of the coronavirus in PNG but it is now very challenging for teachers and students to make up for the loss of time.

Due to the previous government's introduction of a **tuition fee free (TFF) policy**, there has been a rapid increase in the number of students **enrolled** in schools in recent years. Thus, many schools in PNG have limited space in classrooms.

I have conducted interviews with students and teachers at Gordon, Jubilee, Tokorara and Gerehu secondary schools in the National Capital District (NCD). I have been told that there are more than 50 students in each classroom and there is no space to practice physical or social distancing. Three teachers from Gerehu Primary School in NCD also **mentioned** problems with social distancing, overcrowding and concern for the wellbeing of students and teachers.

The same challenges are faced by other schools throughout PNG. For example, a senior teacher at Kombolopa Secondary School in Baiyer District, Western Highlands Province, told me his school has more than sixty students per class. As a result, practicing physical and social distancing is very difficult.

Another issue is that each year in PNG, students in grades 8, 10 and 12 compete for limited places in educational institutions in the next calendar year. Usually, students have three terms of schooling in a year before sitting for the national examinations. This year students have less time to prepare. Preparation for national examinations has been compromised due to COVID-19 restrictions. If students do not perform as expected in these crucial examinations, this may prompt public

outrage.

Consider Jubilee Secondary School in NCD, which has a large population of students in grades 9 to 12. The school requires grade 10 students to attend class on Mondays and Tuesdays. Grade 12s attend classes on Thursdays with two grade 9 classes. The other two days are for grade 9s and 11s. Thus, students are receiving three to four hours of face-to-face teaching, whereas normally they would have five to seven hours per subject a week.

Other schools in PNG are in a similar position. While teachers may give worksheets and homework for students to do while they are at home, this isn't enough. Many students understand concepts better under their teacher's guidance, rather than by themselves. While teachers at city schools can provide handouts and booklets to their students, other schools in remote parts of PNG have no electricity, no photocopiers, poor road access, and limited funds. This makes it very challenging for them to produce homeschooling materials in the quantities required for the students. Vulnerable children, including girls, children with disabilities, children from poor families, and other marginalised groups, are particularly at risk.

Transportation to and from school is another hurdle. I have seen many students stranded at bus stops because the government has restricted buses to only fifteen passengers. As a result, every morning and afternoon students rush to secure limited spaces. They fight and struggle to get buses and there are no social distancing practices evident at the bus stop. Finally, many schools have boarding students, often with four students in a room. Hundreds of students normally feed in a single mess at mealtimes where it is likely very hard to practice social distancing and safe hygiene.

The onus lies with all stakeholders to play their part to successfully complete the 2020 schooling year. Let's play our role together as a team to help our schools in PNG to remain COVID-19 free.

Extra funding is needed for COVID-19 measures and equipment in PNG schools, especially soap, which is cheap. In my interviews, I found out that schools do not have enough soap. Outside the school, it is the responsibility of parents to look after their children and make sure students stay at home and comply with COVID-19 preventive guidelines set by the World Health Organization. In the longer term, COVID-19 should be a wake-up call for the PNG government to build more classrooms to accommodate the increased number of students.

This post is part of the [#COVID-19 and the Pacific](#) series.

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