



THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC:

SHOCKS TO EDUCATION AND POLICY RESPONSES

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Executive summary

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, the world was living a learning crisis. Before the pandemic, 258 million children and youth of primary- and secondary-school age were out of school.¹ And low schooling quality meant many who were in school learned too little. The Learning Poverty rate in low- and middle-income countries was 53 percent—meaning that over half of all 10-year-old children couldn’t read and understand a simple age-appropriate story.² Even worse, the crisis was not equally distributed: the most disadvantaged children and youth had the worst access to schooling, highest dropout rates, and the largest learning deficits.³ All this means that the world was already far off track for meeting Sustainable Development Goal 4, which commits all nations to ensure that, among other ambitious targets, “all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education.”

The COVID-19 pandemic now threatens to make education outcomes even worse. The pandemic has already had profound impacts on education by closing schools almost everywhere in the planet, in the largest simultaneous shock to all education systems in our lifetimes. The damage will become even more severe as the health emergency translates into a deep global recession. These costs of crisis are described below.

But it is possible to counter those shocks, and to turn crisis into opportunity. The first step is to cope successfully with the school closures, by protecting health and safety and doing what they can to prevent students’ learning loss using remote learning. At the same time, countries need to start planning for school reopening. That means preventing dropout, ensuring healthy school conditions, and using new techniques to promote rapid learning recovery in key areas once students are back in school. As the school system stabilizes, countries can use the focus and innovativeness of the recovery period to “build back better.” The key: don’t replicate the failures of the pre-COVID systems, but instead build toward improved systems and accelerated learning for all students.

Unprecedented global shocks to education

The twin shocks of school closures and global recession could have long-term costs to education and development, if governments do not move quickly to counter them. The school closings shock

will lead to learning loss, increased dropouts, and higher inequality; the economic shock will exacerbate the damage, by depressing education demand and supply as it harms households; and together, they will exact long-run costs on human capital accumulation, development prospects, and welfare.

School closures: As of late April, schools have closed in 180 countries, and 85% of students worldwide are out of school.⁴ Without aggressive policy action, this will have immediate costs on both learning and health of children and youth:

- **Learning will decline and dropouts will increase, especially among the most disadvantaged.** Students will largely stop learning academic subjects, and the decline may be greater for pre-school-age children, whose families are less likely to prioritize their learning during school closures. Learning inequality will increase, because only students from wealthier and more educated families will have the support to learn at home. Finally, dropout risk will rise, as the lack of encouragement from teachers reduces the attachment to schooling for marginal students.
- **Health and safety will also suffer, without the support and structure that schools provide.** Student nutrition and physical health will be compromised, because some 368 million children worldwide rely on school feeding programs. Students’ mental health may also suffer, due to isolation during social distancing and the traumatic effects of the crisis on families. Youth out of school may engage in more risky behavior, and adolescent fertility may increase.

Economic shock: The IMF projects that the global economy will shrink 3 percent in 2020, a much bigger drop than during the global financial crisis of 2008-09.⁵ This shock will have severe consequences for both governments and households, and it will hit both the demand for and supply of education:

- **Student dropout will rise,** with many students leaving schooling forever, and the higher dropout will be concentrated in disadvantaged groups. When schools reopened after the Ebola crisis cost nearly an entire academic year in Sierra Leone, girls were 16 percentage points less likely to be in school. Higher dropout will likely be accompanied by increased child labor and child marriage for children and adolescents.

- **Learning will suffer even more**, due to economic pressures on households. Even for students who do not drop out, households will be less able to pay for educational inputs—such as books at home or private lessons—until the economy recovers. And parents may move their children from private to public schools, adding pressure and lowering quality in already over-stretched public-school systems.
- **On the supply side, the economic shock will hit schools and teachers.** Fiscal pressures will lead to a drop in education investments, reducing the resources available to teachers. And teaching quality will suffer (either online or when schools resume), as the health crisis hits some teachers directly, and as others suffer from financial pressures due to salary cuts or payment delays. The lack of student assessments during the closures means that teachers will be flying blind on learning as they try to support their students remotely. Finally, the supply of schooling may contract as a lack of revenue forces private schools out of business.

Long-term costs: Left unchecked, these impacts will exact long-term costs on both students and society. Given the likely increase in learning poverty, this crisis could prevent a whole generation from realizing their true potential. Students who are forced to drop out of school or experience significant declines in learning will face lower lifetime productivity and earnings. Inequality will rise, because these impacts will likely be greater for students from poor and marginalized households. The children who need education the most to climb out of poverty will be the ones most likely to be deprived of it by the crisis. This decline in economic prospects could lead in turn to increase in criminal activities and risky behaviors. Social unrest among youth could also rise: in many low- and middle-income countries the combination of a youth bulge and poor prospects could prove a combustible mix. These adverse impacts may reverberate for a long time, as lower human capital in the current student cohort—concentrated among the most disadvantaged—perpetuates the vicious cycle of poverty and inequality.

From crisis to opportunity: Stop the damage, then build back better

These severe consequences—and especially the long-term impacts—are not inevitable. There is no doubt that there will be significant costs to education,

and virtually everything else that societies value, in the short term. But if countries move quickly to support continued learning, they can at least partially mitigate the damage. And with the right planning and policies, they can use the crisis as an opportunity to build more inclusive, efficient, and resilient education systems.

The policies to turn this around can be grouped in three overlapping phases: Coping, Managing Continuity, and Improving and Accelerating.

Phase 1: Coping: For the first phase, as countries cope with sudden school closures, the priority is to protect student health and safety and prevent learning loss.

- In addition to protecting students and families from infection, many countries are putting in place **supplemental nutrition or cash transfer programs** to ensure that students who ordinarily depend on school feeding programs do not go hungry.
- To prevent learning loss, **emergency remote-learning programs** have been deployed across the world, from Nigeria to Norway. The best use platforms (such as TV, radio, and smartphones) that can reach every child, regardless of household income. These inclusive approaches are critical: without explicit policies to reach disadvantaged households, only wealthier and more educated families will be able to cope with the shock.
- Beyond providing remote learning, education systems should proactively prevent dropout through **communication and targeted financial support for at-risk students**. Outreach to families can also be an important channel for providing guidance and resources on how best to support children at home while schools are closed.
- Finally, countries should **draw on their universities and other post-secondary institutions** for technology support (for example, to ramp up remote learning), rapid training (such as training of nurses and laboratory technicians), and access to global knowledge.

Phase 2: Managing Continuity: As rules around social distancing are gradually relaxed, systems need to ensure that schools reopen safely, student dropout is minimized, and learning recovery starts. Reopening of schools may be a complex process, with staggered openings and possibly cycles of re-closing during flareups. Systems need to start planning for

this, learning from the experience of systems like China and Singapore that have been through the process. Beyond ensuring healthy schools, much more needs to be done:

- In many low- and middle-income countries, re-opening would need to be preceded by **reenrollment campaigns** to minimize student dropout. Groups that may be at higher risk of dropout (such as girls or students from marginalized communities) should receive targeted support and communications.
- Once students are back in school, **learning recovery** is a top priority, to prevent permanent impacts on the opportunities of children and youth. This will require a raft of measures targeted at reversing learning losses, from improved classroom assessment to more focused pedagogies and curriculum (to allow teaching at the right post-closures level) to blended use of teaching and technology. These efforts will need clear system-level guidance and materials, as well as focused, practical training for principals and teachers. It will also require substantial resources, meaning that education budgets must be protected, at a time when families will be less able to support education at home and the demands on public schools might increase.

Phase 3: Improving and Accelerating: The crisis also offers an opportunity to build back educational systems stronger and more equitable than before.

- After the pandemic, parents, teachers, mass media, the government, and others will have **changed their views and perceptions** about their role in the education process. For example, parents will have a better understanding of the need to work jointly with the schools to foster the education of their children. Equity gaps will have been made more evident, along with the urgent need to narrow them. There will be a better understanding of the digital divide—the differences in access to hardware, connectivity, and the right software, but

also the huge shortfall of teachers with the digital skills.

- This will create an opening. It is important to use it to **build back better**. Innovations in the Coping and Continuity periods will have shown what is possible when countries focus on the most effective and equitable approaches to close learning gaps for all children. It is crucial to learn from those successes and integrate them into regular processes—including through more effective use of technology in remote-learning systems; early-warning systems to prevent dropout; pedagogy and curriculum for teaching at the right level and building foundational skills; and ramped-up support for parents, teachers, and students, including socioemotional support.

The drive for better education has to start now

Every education system in the world is in emergency-response mode. This is entirely appropriate, given how suddenly this crisis arrived. The immediate priority is coping—which means first protecting health and safety and then doing everything possible to keep students engaged through remote learning and other connections with the school.

But the planning for a better future has to start now. Even as systems cope with school closures, they need to start planning how to manage continuity when schools reopen and how to improve and accelerate learning. The guiding principle should be to use every opportunity, in each phase, to do things better. By learning from innovations and emergency processes, systems can adapt and scale up the more effective solutions. In doing so, they could become more effective, more agile, and more resilient. A vision and proactive action will help not only mitigate the damage from the current crisis, but could turn recovery into real growth. Societies have a real opportunity to “build back better.” They should seize it.



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