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COVID-19 Education Response

Preparing the reopening of schools



PREPARING THE REOPENING OF SCHOOLS

RESOURCE PAPER

5 May 2020

CONTENTS

SECTION	PAGE
INTRODUCTION	5
1. PURPOSE OF THE PAPER	6
2. MONITORING SCHOOL REOPENING – METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH	7
3. SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPACT OF COVID-19	9
4. LEARNING FROM PAST CRISES	11
5. CURRENT STATUS OF SCHOOL REOPENING	14
6. KEY ISSUES RELATING TO SCHOOL REOPENING	20
7. POLICY DIRECTIONS	26
LIST OF BOXES, FIGURES AND TABLES	
BOX 1: Lessons learnt from past crises	11
BOX 2: Education responses to the Ebola epidemic in Liberia	13
BOX 3: Education responses to the Ebola epidemic in Sierra Leone	13
BOX 4: Countries where schools have reopened	14
BOX 5: Rapid assessment of infrastructures, human, technical and financial resources	23
FIGURE 1: Latest World Economic Outlook Growth Projections	9
FIGURE 2: Timeline of school closures in China due to SARS	12
TABLE 1: School reopening: status and measures	15

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INTRODUCTION

As part of wider measures to curb the spread of COVID-19, since February 2020, 191 countries have taken measures to implement country-wide closures of education institutions, including kindergartens, schools, vocational training colleges and universities. During this period, some 1.58 billion learners have been away from schools, representing more than 90% of the total enrolled learners worldwide – an unprecedented situation in the history of education.¹ School closures have also affected about 63 million primary and secondary teachers, who are trying to ensure teaching and learning online, where ICT infrastructure and reliable internet connection exist, or through other modalities, such as the radio, television and other means.

About three months after the country-wide school closure wave started,² Ministries of Education (MOEs) are considering school reopening, with the primary concern of ensuring the safety and protection of the entire school population, as well as their physical, mental and psychosocial health, well-being and social relationships.

A small number of countries are reopening schools progressively, but the majority of the countries are still in the phase of discussing and preparing back-to-school strategies. Planning for school reopening must start as soon as possible as several measures need to be taken to assess the readiness of the education system to ensure continuity of learning and meeting the learning objectives of the school year, based on the provisions of the right to education.³

MOEs also need to anticipate and prepare for additional challenges resulting from the direct and indirect consequences of COVID-19 and prolonged social isolation, on both the education system and on the school community. These include learning loss, increased risk of dropout, the exacerbation of existing and new inequalities, and the loss of education personnel.

UNESCO has been monitoring education responses to COVID-19 globally, collecting and analyzing information and facilitating policy dialogue and experience-sharing. Key policy issues include the **timing**, the **conditions** and **processes** for school reopening. The effectiveness of these policy decisions and reopening strategies will depend on the level of preparedness of the education system in terms of infrastructure (health and sanitary measures); teaching staff (ability to provide both psychosocial and academic support); pedagogical preparedness (offering remedial action and alternative modalities to meet learning objectives); learners, families and communities (ability and willingness to return to school and readiness to continue learning).

Despite the great challenges presented by this crisis, the situation also offers the opportunity to rethink the overall purpose, role, content and delivery of education in the long term and prepare education systems to deal with current and future crises through comprehensive and inter-sectoral approaches, by tapping into collective experience and practices from around the world.

MOEs should be aiming at reopening safer, healthier and more relevant schools for all learners.

¹ <https://en.unesco.org/themes/education-emergencies/coronavirus-school-closures>

² On 19 February 2020, UNESCO global monitoring of school closures reported the first country-wide closure (Mongolia), where 0.1% of total enrolled learners were affected.

³ <https://en.unesco.org/themes/right-to-education>

1. PURPOSE OF THE PAPER

In response to the unprecedented crisis caused by COVID-19, this paper is an attempt to synthesize and present information on the status of school closures and reopening globally, in an effort to inform decision-makers and support education planning efforts for school reopening. Leveraging lessons from past and current crises, it also presents concrete country examples and experience in handling similar situations and health crises. The paper analyzes available information and concludes with a set of policy directions.

This paper acknowledges certain limitations, mainly resulting from the unprecedented nature and the globally shared uncertainty of the situation, as well as the short time available for collecting, processing and publishing information. Data and evidence were rapidly collected, primarily based on information retrieved online, which may exclude other resources and data that are not available online. Language was another barrier as a lot of information and evidence exists in local languages, not always accessible to UNESCO. A small time-lag may be observed between the time the data is issued and published and the necessary time to develop the current document, during which an evolution of the country decision or status with relation to school reopening might have occurred.

UNESCO will continue to monitor the reopening of schools and report its findings on the dedicated webpage.⁴

⁴ <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse>

2. MONITORING SCHOOL REOPENING – METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

As the UN agency mandated to coordinate and lead the global education agenda, UNESCO has been monitoring education responses to COVID-19 globally, collecting and analyzing information, tracking the evolution, scale and impact of and policy responses to school closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and uses this information to facilitating policy dialogue and experience-sharing. Information has been collected from various resources, including official and other online sources, including the work of the UNESCO Agile Working Group, an online survey administered by UNESCO in March 2020 for MOEs. It also draws on the *Framework for Reopening Schools*, issued jointly by UNESCO, UNICEF the World Bank and WFP, the UNESCO Issue Note 7.1 on school reopening and a response brief on the same topic by the UNESCO International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP). It is also informed by the discussions and presentations given in the various UNESCO Webinars on the theme of COVID-19 Education Responses, particularly the sixth webinar and the third ministerial webinar, dedicated to this topic.

The Agile Working Group

Following a decision made by senior management in early March 2020, UNESCO was mobilized to support the monitoring of COVID-19 education disruption and response, establishing an Agile Working Group to monitor the closure of education institutions globally.⁵

The Agile Working Group tracks the status of school and university closures, generating data on the timing and duration of these closures, the number of school days lost, the number of students affected, by level of education and sex, and the number of teachers affected. In addition to offering a real-time overview of the situation, in the long-term, the data on school closures will inform the analysis and understanding of the education, social and economic consequences of the COVID-19 crisis. Since the end of March 2020, when countries started reopening schools, the Group is also monitoring school reopening using the same tracking system. Updates are reported online.⁶

Online survey

An online survey, administered by UNESCO in March 2020 on education responses to COVID-19, showed that the majority of MOEs are eager to reopen schools as soon as possible but are waiting for advice from health experts before any decision is taken.⁷

Out of the 61 MOEs worldwide that responded, more than half anticipated reopening of schools at the time of data collection as soon as the situation allows it. Prolonged school closures are causing major concerns to policy-makers, including over learning loss, increased risk of drop out, as well as new and exacerbated inequalities, especially among the most vulnerable groups. However, the rapidly evolving situation of the COVID-19 pandemic prevents most of countries from setting a concrete date for the reopening. For example, in Samoa not all students and families have access to distance learning platforms and the Ministry is eager to reopen schools as soon as the status of the pandemic allows them to do so. Denmark, where the epidemic is better controlled and with the green light by health experts, has already reopened daycare and primary schools, as younger children are less likely to benefit from distance learning. In many other countries, including the Republic of Korea, the health and safety of students, teachers, and other staff is the top priority and schools will continue to remain

⁵ This is based on the TOR of the Agile Working Group.

⁶ <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse>

⁷ As part of the UNESCO education response to COVID-19, an online survey was carried out between 23-31 March 2020.

Link: <https://en.unesco.org/news/unesco-survey-highlights-measures-taken-countries-limit-impact-covid-19-school-closures>

physically closed while online learning is ensured. Countries which initially had fixed dates for school reopening, such as Japan, had to postpone their decision in view of the evolution of the pandemic in the country.

Framework for Reopening Schools

Issued jointly by UNESCO, UNICEF, the World Bank and WFP, the Framework aims to inform decision-making on school reopening, support national preparations and guide the implementation process. It is a flexible tool that can be adapted to different contexts and updated as the situation changes.⁸

UNESCO Issue Note

The UNESCO COVID-19 Education Response Education Sector Issue Note 7.1 on school reopening presents key policy concerns and strategies to address them, including lessons learnt from past crises and current practices.⁹

IIEP response brief

The *Plan for School Reopening* response brief is part of a series of five, intended to support countries with advice on ensuring access to quality education in the time of COVID-19.¹⁰

UNESCO Webinars

A series of UNESCO COVID-19 Education Response Webinars and Ministerial Webinars have been organized since March 2020. The sixth Webinar,¹¹ held on 24 April 2020, and the third Ministerial Webinar, held on 29 April 2020, were dedicated to school reopening. The webinars offered country representatives the opportunity to discuss and share experiences among countries from all regions of the world, identifying effective strategies to respond to common challenges.

⁸ <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000373348.locale=en>

⁹ <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000373275>

¹⁰ <http://www.iiep.unesco.org/en/plan-school-reopening>

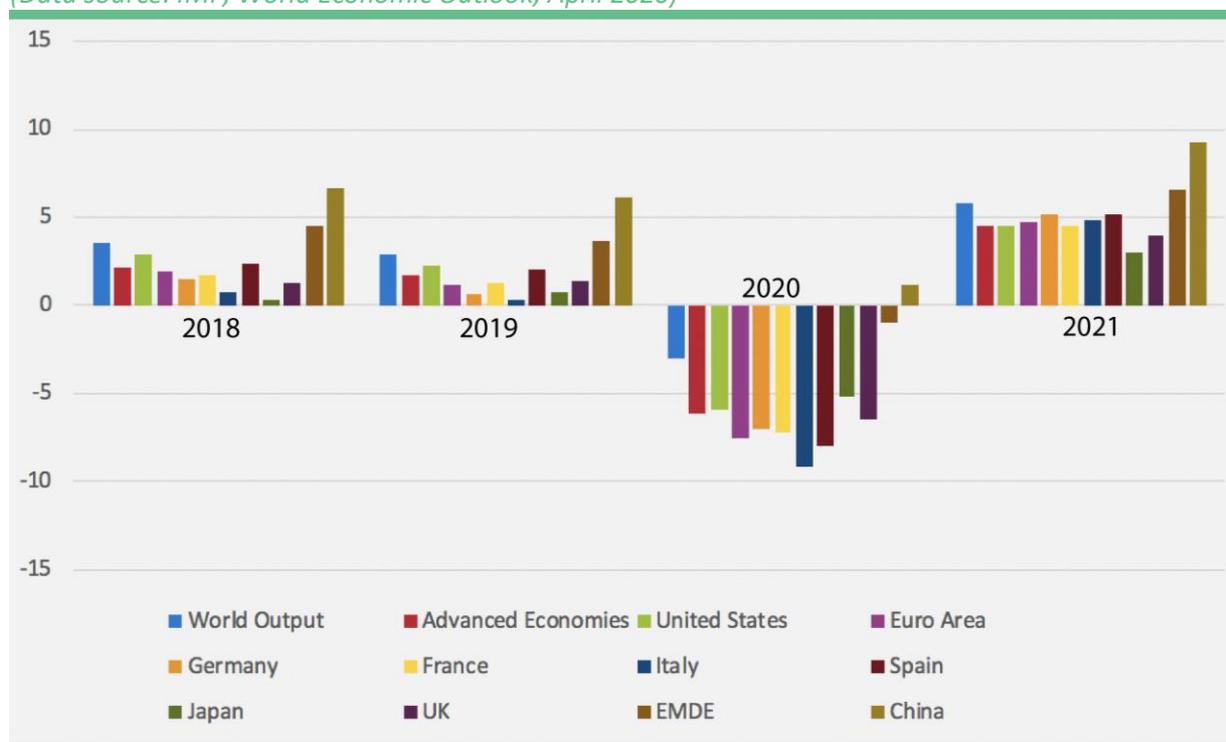
¹¹ <https://en.unesco.org/events/back-school-preparing-and-managing-reopening-schools-covid-19-education-webinar-6>

3. SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPACT OF COVID-19

Planning for school reopening needs to be considered against the economic challenges brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. According to IIEP,¹² education financing will be affected in multiple ways with long-lasting effects on education expenditures in most countries. These include loss of education resources while schools remain closed; the additional costs that will be necessary, for example, to implement hygiene standards or provide distance education; channelling of existing or future resources elsewhere (for example towards health); and, eventually, reduction of overall resources available to education, as a result of the expected global financial downturn.

In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) has readjusted economic growth projections for 2020.¹³ The adjusted projections suggest that due to the confinement measures, most world economies will experience reductions of up to -9.1 per cent of their Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Latest World Economic Outlook Growth Projections
(Data source: IMF, World Economic Outlook, April 2020)



(real GDP, annual percent change)

The UNESCO Issue Note 7.2 on *Anticipated Impact of COVID-19 on Public Expenditures on Education and Implication for UNESCO's Work*¹⁴ examines how the global recession is expected to negatively impact public expenditure on education, as global and government revenues will be reduced.

A UNESCO study¹⁵ on the impact of the 2008 global financial crisis on education experience showed that in many countries, education remains a priority even after a crisis. In most of the 51 countries surveyed,

¹² <http://www.iiep.unesco.org/en/what-price-will-education-pay-covid-19-13366>

¹³ <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/Issues/2020/04/14/weo-april-2020>

¹⁴ <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000373276>

¹⁵ <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000183667?posInSet=8&queryId=9b03590a-1a15-44cc-8681-c96d5ed2f767>

expenditure on education as well as the flow of Official Development Assistance (ODA) were maintained. However, the Global Education Report team¹⁶ signals that while governments maintained their financial commitment to education, expressed as a GDP percentage, the absolute value of GDP was lower due to the crisis, leaving fewer resources for education.

The financial impact of the pandemic will be felt very differently across countries, but low-income countries are the most vulnerable. The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) estimates that developing countries will face up to 3 trillion USD financing gap over the next two years. Low-income countries will be doubly impacted if there is a reduction of official development assistance from high-income countries, if they realign their fiscal priorities against the crisis.

Reductions on education finance have negative consequences for the quality of education and create new or exacerbate existing inequalities. The demand for education will also be affected, especially for the most vulnerable families that do not have access to social protection policies and who will be even more unable to meet the actual and opportunity costs of education. Increased inequalities in education will only feed wider social inequalities and aggravate the global learning crisis, hampering progress towards the Sustainable Development Goal on education and the wider sustainable development agenda.¹⁷

¹⁶ <https://gemreportunesco.wordpress.com/2020/03/24/what-are-the-financial-implications-of-the-coronavirus-for-education/#more-12762>

¹⁷ <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/?menu=1300>

4. LEARNING FROM PAST CRISES

What did we learn from past health crises?

Past health crises, such as the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) epidemic in 2003 and the Ebola Virus Disease (EVD) epidemic in 2014 and 2018, provided policy-makers with experience which is extremely relevant in the current context. Although these epidemics were different in terms of scale and spread, there are useful lessons that can be drawn from recovery responses of the education system which can inform current practices. Past approaches that were proven effective include the use of alternative education delivery modalities (e.g. online platforms, the radio, television and others); initiating preparations for school reopening as soon as possible, so as to ensure that appropriate strategies are defined and schools are ready to operate once confinement measures are over; ensuring communication and close coordination among key partners; and, promoting awareness raising and social mobilization to reassure the school population and general public and build trust.

Box 1: Lessons learnt from past crises

Past recovery responses highlighted the need to:

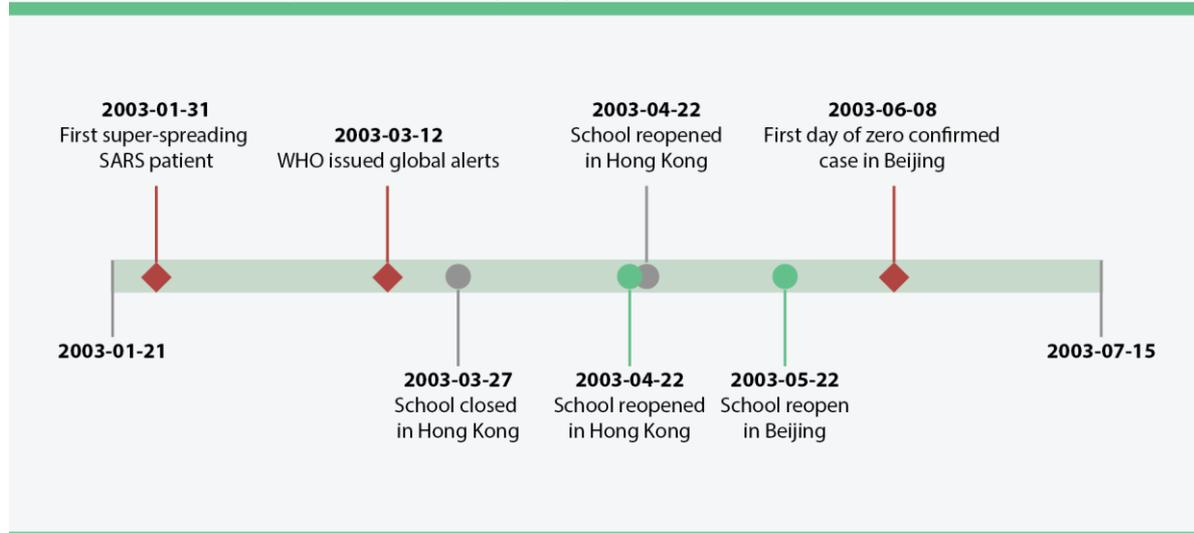
- Start preparing for school reopening as soon as possible, to ensure that appropriate strategies are defined and schools are ready to operate as soon as confinement measures are over.
- Ensure effective communication channels, within the school community, between the government and other education authorities and schools. Communication is key to building trust and consensus among stakeholders and partners.
- Prioritize community engagement and awareness-raising in back-to-school strategies to ensure higher return rates. In post-Ebola Sierra Leone, communication around improved school hygiene practices were effective in encouraging parents to send their children back to school upon reopening.
- Adjusting learning priorities. In African countries hit by the Ebola crisis, adjusting learning priorities was a key strategy to ensure curriculum is covered in a shorter academic year.
- Capitalize on the momentum of using ICT to assist learning and keep up with technology after the crisis. However, caution must be exercised, in order to avoid or mitigate social disparities and inequities, resulting due to lack of equipment and/or access to the internet.
- Take into consideration the wider socio-economic impact of the pandemic on families and the community, and its effect on education. For example, school dropout or transfers increase during crises as families lose income, are forced to leave the affected areas or resort to negative coping mechanisms such as child labour; inequalities are exacerbated due to lack of social services, health, nutrition and protection; female vulnerability is exacerbated, gender-based violence (GBV), including sexual and domestic violence rises, together with incidences of early marriage and pregnancy.
- Incorporate health prevention and crisis management in education sector planning to ensure school preparedness to deal with future health or other crises and mitigate their impact.
- Strengthen the leadership and meaningful participation of women and girls in all decision-making processes to address the COVID-19 outbreak. During the Ebola crisis, women were less likely than men to have power in decision making around the outbreak, and their needs were largely unmet.

The SARS epidemic

As the SARS coronavirus spread in early 2003, mainly in China and Hong Kong, SAR, China, the Chinese Government formulated a comprehensive strategy to guard against infection. School closure was practiced as part of public efforts to contain the epidemic. School closures were implemented in Hong Kong, SAR, China for about three weeks (27 March - 22 April 2003). China officially announced localized school closures in Beijing for one month (23 April 22- May 2003), affecting about 1.7 million students.

Figure 2: Timeline of school closures in China due to SARS

(Data sources: Bureau of Education, Hong Kong, SAR, China, WHO, New York Times)¹⁸



In order to minimize the adverse effects of school closures and ensure continuity of learning, TV channels in Beijing, inner Mongolia, Hebei, Guangxi and other regions were used to broadcast and teach new courses for primary and secondary schools, which was called "classroom in the sky". A special website was created and free online platforms were developed to enable online learning and offered teaching guidance, psychological counselling and responses to common questions. The Hong Kong Education and Manpower Bureau issued health guidelines, titled "Handbook on Prevention of SARS in Schools".¹⁹ These guidelines clearly defined the respective roles and responsibilities of parents, students, staff and schools. Measures taken in schools included mandatory temperature monitoring, hygiene practices, epidemic prevention measures, as well as social distancing.

The Ebola epidemic

During the Ebola crisis in Liberia and Sierra Leone in 2014, a series of concrete measures and operations were undertaken which ensured better coordination among partners, resource mobilization and more effective use of these resources, supporting children from vulnerable backgrounds and adjusting school priorities to enable the completion of the school year. Such interventions were successful in ensuring the safety and health of all students and significantly reducing dropout. Boxes 2 and 3 present examples of such measures taken in each country.

¹⁸ <https://www.nytimes.com/2003/04/23/world/the-sars-epidemic-beijing-chinese-capital-closes-schools-for-at-least-two-weeks.html>

https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/207501/9290612134_eng.pdf

¹⁹ <https://www.edb.gov.hk/en/sch-admin/admin/about-sch/diseases-prevention/handbook-on-prevention-of-sars.html>

Box 2: Education responses to the Ebola epidemic in Liberia

- Creating special Task-Teams to plan and manage the crisis.
- Planning for recovery of instructional time.
- Developing a compressed curriculum and academic schedule for the remaining of the school year.
- Collecting data on existing realities for planning purposes and creating website for data storage.
- Aligning with MoE Sector and Operational Plans.
- Conducting emergency drills for teachers, planners, and administrators.
- Developing training modules and offering training in their implementation.
- Establishing Education in Emergencies (EiE) standards to strengthen the education sector to respond to future crisis and develop coping mechanisms.
- Developing the Education Cluster Strategic Recovery Plan with intensive consultation with Partners.
- Addressing cross-cutting issues.
- Ensuring community engagement and holding meetings with parents' and teachers' associations.
- Delivering UNICEF school kits to schools.
- Training on health protocols, including WASH.
- Preparing teaching and learning materials for both teachers and students.

Box 3: Education responses to the Ebola epidemic in Sierra Leone

- Setting up a special Task Force to respond to the crisis, with the participation of the Ministry of Education, development partners, and NGOs, which was supported by three working groups, each responsible for a specific task (distance learning, social mobilization, teacher training).
- Mobilizing resources with the help of partners.
- Delivering lessons via radio and television during the closure period.
- Carrying out rapid assessments to ascertain the status of school buildings, furniture, WASH facilities, etc.
- Disinfecting schools prior to reopening.
- Training teachers on psychosocial support and school safety (at least two teachers in each school).
- Raising awareness among the community on school reopening through strong social mobilization.
- Issuing health guidelines and protocols to ensure the safety and security of students and teachers.
- Weaving school fees for all pupils to release financial burden of parents and caregivers.
- Providing school meals for all primary school pupils.
- Providing teaching and learning materials.
- Providing hygiene kits, encouraging hand washing and monitoring students' temperature.
- Readjusting the academic year upon the reopening of schools.
- Using accelerated learning programmes and revising the school calendar to allow children to catch up with the time lost, especially where distance learning options were not implemented.
- Taking decisions concerning priority issues, such as high-stake examinations.
- Planning for improved hygiene and sanitation practices as well as water, hygiene and sanitation infrastructure.

5. CURRENT STATUS OF SCHOOL REOPENING

This section presents global, ongoing policy measures and practices relating to the reopening of schools and in terms of practical and operational sanitary and hygiene measures.

Schools are reopening in 13 countries globally, eight in Asia-Pacific (China, Cook Islands, Japan, Marshall Islands, Republic of Korea, Tonga, Vanuatu, Vietnam) four in Europe (Denmark, Faroe Islands, Greenland, Norway) and one in Africa (Madagascar) (Box 4). Despite the geographical differences these countries based their decisions to reopen their schools on the following common factors:

1. The status and evolution of the pandemic in these countries is lower than in other contexts.
2. The safety and overall health of the students and the entire school population is the overall priority. Education authorities are working jointly with health authorities to issue health guidelines and protect the health and safety of the school population.
3. School reopening is usually progressive, or country-wide in small islands. Where school opening is implemented in a progressive manner this is done based on: age (prioritizing younger children, who are less likely to benefit from distance learning (e.g. Denmark); learning priority, for example for graduating students who need certification on depending on high-stake exams for transitioning to higher levels of education (e.g. China); or, by locality, starting in low-risk areas (e.g. Vietnam).

Box 4: Countries where schools have reopened

(Data source: UNESCO Agile Working Group - last updated 5 May 2020)²⁰

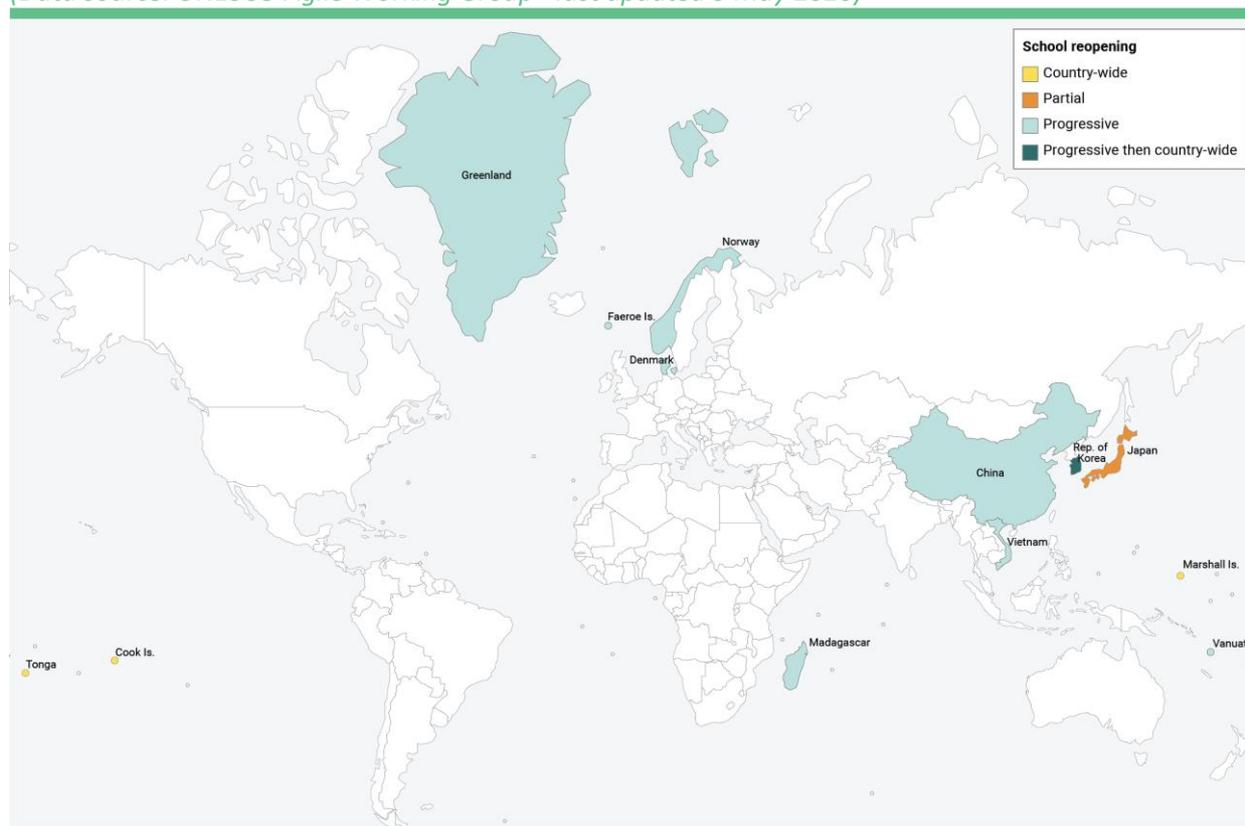


Table 1 presents country policy decisions for school reopening together with the accompanying measures and practices in place to protect public health. This is based on information retrieved online from official and other sources. Given the evolving nature of COVID-19 pandemic, the level of detail of

²⁰ Made with Natural Earth. The boundaries shown on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance.

data evidence and information vary across countries, often determined based on when and how school reopening has started. The first country globally to initiate the reopening of its schools was China (March 2020) and the latest included in the current document is Madagascar (22 April 2020). Given that policy measures and practices for school reopening are relatively new, it has not been possible to collect evidence related to learning gaps so far.

Table 1: School reopening: status and measures

(Data source: UNESCO Agile Working Group - last updated 5 May 2020)

COUNTRY	DATE	STATUS	MEASURES
ASIA-PACIFIC			
1. China	March - April	Progressive Primary schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • specific guidelines determine measures and work arrangements for health monitoring, hygiene, prevention, school operations, curriculum arrangements, student assessments, and extra-curricular activities • students returning to their school region from hard-hit areas are required to stay at home and monitor their own physical health conditions, ensuring no one has symptoms for at least 14 days before going to school • school-hours to be organized during off-peak • social distancing • schools reopen in stages, giving priority to graduating students in secondary schools and vocational schools • kindergartens and special education institutions are dealt with in a more flexible manner • school reopening in Mainland China is progressive, the dates vary across different provinces: • As of 25 April 2020 about half of the provinces are reported to have reopened primary schools. • 8.3% of the provinces will reopen schools for primary students progressively, starting in May 2020 • 61% of the provinces decided to reopen secondary schools between March and April 2020 • 92% of provinces have reopened schools for Grade 9 and Grade 12 in order to prepare for the national college entrance examinations (postponed for one month) <p>Criteria for reopening</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the epidemic needs to be fully under control at least at county level (criteria vary locally) • zero new confirmed cases for 14 consecutive days is a pre-requisite for reopening • parents feel safe sending their children to school. • measures and resources for the epidemic prevention and control are in place • all schools must meet the basic COVID-19 prevention and control requirements to guarantee public safety, following the notice issued by the Ministry of Education

	<p><i>Sources:</i> Class Resumption Guidelines for Non-Tertiary Education Schools after the Novel Coronavirus Pneumonia Epidemic in Macao MOE of China: COVID-19 control and prevention guidance for schools MOE of China and UNICEF team up to help students return to school safely</p>		
2. Japan	6 April	Localized	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> operational and policy measures based on public health measures (regular handwashing, masks, etc) strict social distancing promote balanced nutrition and physical exercise to strengthen the immune systems attention to mental health – liaising with school counsellors when necessary
	<p><i>Source:</i> School reopening guideline for COVID-19 infection in Japan</p>		
3. Marshall Islands	6 April	Country-wide	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> frequent handwashing use of hand sanitizers, hygiene etiquette and practice teachers provide daily messages on COVID-19 infected staff and students must stay at home
	<p><i>Source:</i> Republic of the Marshall Islands, Public School System FB Page</p>		
4. Republic of Korea	9 April	'Online school year'	<p>The school year in the Republic of Korea has begun even though schools remain closed due to strict social distancing measures. The Ministry opted for the 'online school year', reinforcing the online platform capacity and content. The attendance rate is similar to the school attendance rate.</p> <p>Consultations and preparations for physical school reopening are ongoing. This "Korean distance learning model" will be used to pursue innovation and development of education in the future.</p>
	May	Country-wide physical reopening	
	<p><i>Source:</i> Ministry of Education, Press Release</p>		
5. Tonga	14 April	Country-wide	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> regular handwashing social distancing <p>The safety of students and staff is a priority. The Government continues to monitor the situation and will close schools again if necessary.</p>
	<p><i>Source:</i> Tonga Gov Portal</p>		
6. Vanuatu	14-20 April	Progressive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> handwashing social distancing hygiene practices <p>The safety of students and staff is a priority. In Port Vila different grades come in different days; there are</p>

			half-day classes; teachers and students arrive at school at a different time.
Sources: MoE FB Announcement COM Decision TC Harold Final Facebook: Ministry of Education & Training, Vanuatu			
7. Cook Islands	20 April	Country-wide	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> regular handwashing hygiene practices extra cleaning of surfaces teaching & learning aides will be strengthened social distancing <p>The health, well-being and safety of every student, teacher and staff member are paramount.</p>
Source: Cook Islands Ministry of Education FB			
8. Vietnam	20 April	Progressive 9 and 12 grades (Ca Mau province – low risk)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> safety guidelines provided social distancing hygiene practices <p>Reopening foreseen only in the southernmost province of which is categorized as a "low-risk" locality by the National Steering Committee on COVID-19 Prevention and Control.</p>
	early May	Ho Chi Minh City and others	
Source: School reopen information in Vietnam			
EUROPE			
9. Greenland	14 April	Progressive primary schools (Coastal schools) and all the educational institutions of the country under special instructions except in Nuuk (Capital)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> social distancing utilizing all the premises of the school institutions, maximizing the utilization of the school day hygiene practices avoiding handshakes hygiene requirements of the school canteens <p>The safety of students and staff is a priority. School reopening is conditional to students not crossing district boundaries to attend school, and as long as there is no change in risk assessment by National Medical Officers.</p>
	later date	Gradual reopening of remaining schools and daycare centres	
Source: School reopen information from Sermitsiaq			

10. Denmark	15 April	Progressive: Daycare Public schools, Grade 0 to 5 After school programmes Special schools and institutions – all grades Last year of high school A group of vocational education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • handwashing • hygiene practices • cleaning • social distancing • only small groups allowed • discussions are ongoing regarding examinations <p>Guidelines for school reopening were issued by MoE with clear criteria for hygiene and sanitary measures. The guidelines are meant for the teachers, no strict expectations from children</p>
	<i>Source:</i> Controlled reopening of the Danish society		
11. Norway	20 April	Progressive Pre-schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • safety guidelines issued for primary and upper secondary education schools • guidance for infection control in pre-schools • high-risk staff and pupils or with high-risk family members are not expected to attend school • exams for the 10th grade and all written exams for high school students are cancelled <p>Reopening is progressive. It is the school owner's responsibility to ensure that students receive education. Schools must still provide the other pupils with an educational offer at home and facilitate education as far as possible. This applies to pupils for Grades 5-7 in upper secondary schools. School owners also make an offer at school to vulnerable children and adolescents and children with parents with critical social functions.</p>
	27 April	Primary schools (Grades 1-4)	
<i>Source:</i> Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training			
12. Faroe Islands	20 April	Progressive Pre-schools Primary schools (Grades 1-3) Some classes of final grade of high school After-school	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • grades 4 to 10 will continue to have classes from home pupils in grades 9 and 10 will not have final exams in the summer • classes for other high school years than final, will continue to take place remotely • final exams for the graduating high school year are under consideration and will be adapted to circumstances

		recreation centres	Attendance will be optional, not compulsory. Parents who wish and have the possibility, can keep their children at home. Classes for other high school years will continue to take place remotely
Source: The government of the Faroe islands: Easing restrictions			
AFRICA			
13. Madagascar	22 April	Progressive Grades 3 and 7 of lower-secondary and upper-secondary education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> wearing a mask is mandatory for all students, distribution of masks is planned social distancing <p>Challenges A large number of private schools have decided to postpone reopening in order to adapt classrooms to social distancing measures (if they can)</p>
Source: President of Madagascar official twitter account			

6. KEY ISSUES RELATING TO SCHOOL REOPENING

The decision to close schools was relatively quick and easy to implement, often done overnight. However, the decision to reopen schools after the confinement measures is more complex and more complicated to implement, given the pandemic is still present with an unpredictable evolution. The decision is highly sensitive and needs to be made based on advice from health experts and in consultation with all concerned actors.

MOEs are in charge of planning for school reopening. This should be done in consultation with Ministries of Health, Social Affairs and other key public and private institutions. The primary concern is the safety and protection of the entire school populations, including their physical, mental and psychosocial health, well-being and social relationships.

While recognizing that the situation varies across different geographical, sociocultural, economic or other contexts, back-to-school strategies need to focus on three overarching issues: assessing the readiness of the education system for school reopening; ensuring continuity of learning; and, building system resilience to anticipate and deal with future crises.

1. **Assess system readiness:** status of infrastructure, availability of resources and school population, including capacity to resume functions.
2. **Ensure continuity of learning:** resuming learning, continuing as smoothly as possible after the interruption and addressing emerging challenges.
3. **Build system resilience:** reinforcing the preparedness of the education system to anticipate, respond to and mitigate the effects of current and future crises.

The effectiveness of the policy decisions and reopening strategies will depend on the level of preparedness of the education system across several factors:

- Infrastructure preparedness, including health and sanitary measures.
- Preparedness of teaching staff, including ability to offer psychosocial and academic support.
- Pedagogical preparedness, including pedagogical processes to assess progress during school closure, identifying learning loss and organizing remedial courses.
- Student, family and society preparedness, including awareness and willingness to return to school and ability to continue learning.

School reopening will not simply be about picking up from where things were left. While ensuring continuity of learning, meeting learning objectives, providing remedial courses and organizing examinations, MOEs will also need to anticipate additional challenges, resulting from the direct and indirect consequences of COVID-19 and social isolation on the education system as well as on the school population and the entire community. These may include learning loss, new or exacerbated inequalities, increased risk of dropout and loss of education personnel.

The negative impact of school closures will disproportionately affect those who already experience barriers in accessing education, especially those from vulnerable groups, while the learning gap between them and other students is at risk of widening. Equally concerning are longer-term implications for the enjoyment of the right to education for all. When planning for and implementing school reopening measures, therefore, emphasis should be placed on upholding the provisions of the

right to education and compulsory education for these students, closely monitoring school returns, and defining appropriate recovery of learning loss, exploring every possible modality.

To ensure schools are ready to receive students and staff once confinement measure are over and to ensure continuity of learning, planning must start as soon as possible. Planning must take into account the national and sub-national contexts, priorities, needs and challenges within the immediate, medium and long-term perspective. Constant monitoring, assessment and re-assessment of the situation will be critical to ensure there are no health trade-offs and to avoid setbacks.

The *Framework for Reopening Schools*,²¹ issued by UNESCO, UNICEF, WFP and the World Bank, provides guidance to help national and local authorities to make their decisions on why, when and how to reopen education institutions, supporting national preparation, guiding the implementation process, and contributing to overall public health and education planning processes.

Key questions around school reopening concern the **timing, conditions and processes**.

Timing

The most crucial question around school reopening is that of timing. Opening schools too early might put the health of the population and general public in danger; keeping schools closed longer than necessary increases the risk of learning loss and dropout and aggravates inequalities, especially for students from vulnerable groups.

The timing of school reopening will depend on the status and evolution of the pandemic and will be determined in each country based on political decisions, with advice from designated health experts, epidemiologist and established monitoring mechanisms. The unpredictability of the length of the closure period poses specific challenges and requires flexible scenario planning.

Contingency plans for school reopening also need to be based on contextual factors. For example, in some countries the closure period coincides with the end of the school year, in others with the beginning, or with school holidays and the examination period. MOEs need to prioritize reopening strategies based on the status of their school calendar, their education objectives and priorities.

School closures do not affect all children in the same way. Students from vulnerable backgrounds are most at risk, as many of them rely on school not only for learning but also for nutrition, health services and social protection. These may include refugees, migrants, those living in poverty and in remote geographical areas or urban slums, students with disabilities, those exposed to child labour, violence and other adverse conditions. The exacerbated vulnerability of females needs to be acknowledged together with a higher risk of gender-based violence, child marriage and early pregnancy.

The impact is also bigger for students sitting high-stake exams, such as graduating students or those transitioning to higher levels of education, which requires certification. The learning loss will also be bigger for students with unequal access to alternative learning modalities, such as online learning, either due to connectivity issues or lack of equipment. Younger students are also less likely to benefit from distance learning, while other crucial aspects of their development, such as play and socializing, cannot be fully addressed in confinement, if at all.

While carefully weighing the risks and benefits in every context, the overarching priority must be the protection of public health and the overall well-being of the school population.

²¹ <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000373348?posInSet=1&queryId=5d6e856b-006e-4283-bdad-4dcba51f0212>

Conditions

The conditions for school reopening must preserve the overall safety and health of students, teachers and other personnel. The effectiveness of the policy decisions and reopening strategies will depend on the level of preparedness of the education system across several factors:

- **Infrastructure preparedness:** Schools must be cleaned and disinfected, especially in case they were used for other purposes during the closure period (e.g. as health centres). Health and sanitary measures must be in place, including sanitary facilities (e.g. soap and water, washing facilities), guidelines and protocols to inform hygienic practices for students and staff (e.g. number of students per class, group gathering, social distancing, transfer to and from school, etc.). The pandemic may also affect the availability of teachers and the number of students allowed in each classroom. Planning techniques in school mapping can assist in exploring various options for reorganizing the school day, such as use of the school premises, double-shifting, and other options.
- **Preparedness of teaching and other staff.** Teachers must be able to return to their duties and be able to offer both psychosocial and academic support. This might require additional training, for example where health specialists are not available. Training should also include approaches to deal with post-traumatic stress caused by COVID-19, and the resulting social isolation and confinement
- **Pedagogical preparedness.** How to assess progress during the closure period and identify learning loss, organizing remedial courses, prepare for examinations, especially high-stake examinations, readjust curriculum and learning objectives, implement accelerated learning programmes.
- **Student, family and society preparedness,** including awareness and willingness to return to school and ability to continue learning. As in past health crises, students, their families and their communities might be directly or indirectly affected by COVID-19. Illness, for them or their families, life loss but also wider socio-economic changes, such as loss of income, lack of nutrition and social protection, exposure to violence and other adverse conditions might even push students from vulnerable groups out of education. Particular attention must be paid to girls who might experience a higher risk of gender-based violence, early marriage and pregnancy.

These factors are context-specific and may vary across but also within countries. Data and information collection might be necessary to determine whether and which of these conditions are in place to determine the course of action. (e.g. number of teachers affected, students at risk of drop-out, which schools to reopen and where, which students should return to schools first, etc.).

Processes

Once the timing for school reopening has been set and the necessary health and other conditions are ensured, the process of reopening schools need to be determined, including strategies and actions at national, district and school levels.

Below are practical issues related to school reopening that MOES need to consider and address, primarily in the immediate, short and medium-term, but also in the long-term. The list is not exhaustive and can be considered and complemented by other appropriate actions based on local contexts.

IMMEDIATE-TERM ACTION: ASSESSING AND ENSURING THE READINESS OF THE EDUCATION SYSTEM

➤ Preparing for school reopening:

- **Communicate and consult:** Communication and consultation with key stakeholders, including teachers, parents, students and other concerned stakeholders is critical to raising awareness, reaching consensus and building trust.
- **Coordinate:** Determine who will manage the crisis and post-crisis situation, and how, looking at staff, modalities, and processes. This includes deciding when schools reopen, how much in advance, under which conditions and measures, and how to inform students, parents and caregivers, teachers and other personnel. Work through existing crisis management teams and functions, to ensure a smooth transition from remote learning to classroom learning. Manage governance issues, especially in the context of partner engagement, for example with the private sector, and philanthropic institutions, ensure community participation and improve accountability.
- **Plan:** Carry out a situation analysis to determine the effects of the pandemic on education. This may include for example the health and safety of the school population, loss of instructional time, learning outcomes, missed examinations, inequalities and dropout. This should be done from a gender lens, using sex-disaggregated data and reviewing policies that may create barriers to school return, including those that prevent pregnant girls or adolescent mothers attending schools, and ensuring gender expertise in response teams and task forces. Prepare contingency plans at national, district and school levels, including priority setting and strategy development, monitoring, and financing. Key actions for rapid assessment are presented in Box below.

Box 5: Rapid assessment of infrastructures, human, technical, and financial resources

- Education personnel: availability, health status, motivation, etc. Foresee redeployment in case of loss or mobility as teachers may leave the affected areas, especially if they do not have fixed contracts.
 - Status of school infrastructure including school availability, potential need for rehabilitation works and resources, including disinfection. This would be particularly necessary in cases where schools were used for other purposes during the closure period.
 - Status of school health environment: availability of sanitation facilities, separate for girls and boys; and health equipment such as clean water, soap, sanitizers, hand washing facilities, thermometers, etc
 - Availability and coordination of resources and modalities to offer psycho-social support. For example, qualified doctors and other specialists such as psychologists, school counsellors, and social workers. In the absence of specialists, focal points need to be identified, noting that in this case pre-training will be necessary. Other options might include collaborating with relevant local universities/institutions.
 - Sourcing and distribution of food supplies for school feeding programmes.
 - Overall financial impact and status of school financing.
-
- **Determine strategies and actions:** Determine interventions at national, district and school levels, to ensure continuity of learning, mitigate impact and address immediate gaps, in consultation with concerned education stakeholders and other relevant sectors. These may include:
 - Ensuring a smooth transition from distance learning platforms to classroom delivery.
 - Adjusting curriculum and delivery modalities to be able to meet the key learning objectives for the school year, and to promote the use of more practical approaches to learning such as project-based learning.
 - Rearranging the school calendar based on curricular priorities for each level.
 - Implementing targeted accelerated learning/remedial/catchup programmes or shorten teaching periods.

- Adapting the examination/evaluation calendar and content based on a back-to-school learning assessment. This may necessitate the recruitment of volunteer teachers.
 - Ensuring professional support is provided to teachers who need to adapt their teaching approaches in a flexible way. For instance, delivering a compressed curriculum.
 - Training teachers and students on alternative teaching and learning approaches, before, during and after the crisis, in consultation with teacher-training institutions.
 - Identifying strategies and interventions to address learning gaps, especially among vulnerable groups, and to mitigate inequalities that might have been created or exacerbated during confinement. This may include supplementary teaching, tutoring, and extra-curricular non-formal learning activities.
 - Determining what to assess. For example, in Costa Rica evaluation will be formative, not related to grades, since ideal and equal learning opportunities could not be ensured for all students during school closure.
- **Prioritize:** Depending on the context, this may include focus on high-stake examinations, such as those determining entrance to higher education institutions or graduation certificates. In other contexts, priority is given to vulnerable groups at higher risk of drop-out.

MEDIUM-TERM ACTIONS: RESUMING SCHOOL FUNCTIONS AND ENSURING CONTINUITY OF LEARNING

➤ Ensuring students, teachers, administrative and other staff are ready to resume teaching and learning

Health support

- Ensure the security and safety of students at, on the way to and from school to minimize the risk of new infections.
- Assess the impact of school closure and confinement on the health and well-being of the entire education community, including students, teachers and other personnel. This might require strengthening the monitoring capacity of MOEs. For example, expand EMIS by developing a tracking/reporting system or introducing Standard Operation Procedures (SOPs) for monitoring the health status of staff and students, actions to be taken in case of new infections, in collaboration with health professionals and the wider community.
- Promote health education, implement school health protocols, diffuse age and language-appropriate messages around hand washing, hygiene, prevention at school and in the classroom.
- Care for the mental health and socio-emotional well-being of the school population. For example, offer psychosocial support to students and education personnel to deal with post-traumatic stress, coordinate the work of pre-identified psychologists, counsellors, social workers or focal points or designate and train teachers to do so.
- Assess and address female vulnerability, gender-based violence, including sexual and domestic violence, and the increased risk of early marriage and pregnancy.
- Communicate with the wider community, consult with and support parents and caretakers to support children.
- Deal with prejudice and stigma, which in certain cultures persist even after recovery.

Academic support

- Ensure teacher motivation and coordination, and deal with the risk of attrition or life loss.
- Provide teacher professional development, in collaboration with teacher training institutions (e.g. providing distant learning, options for curriculum adaptation, peer learning, etc).
- Monitor student returns using sex-disaggregated data, and ensure compliance with the provisions of compulsory education, identifying and targeting vulnerable groups and those at risk of drop out.
- Ensure student motivation, and address disengagement and risk of dropout. Identify those at risk of exclusion and not returning to school and consider a Back-to-School Campaign. If and where necessary, consider programmes to address stigma and direct community mobilization, waiving school fees, broadening the scope of school feeding programmes, and providing targeted support to vulnerable groups.
- Assess the impact on learning and identify disparities, focusing on vulnerable students.
- Assess the impact on curriculum delivery and consider adjustment options.
- Identify inequalities, considering disparities among students, schools, households or regions.
- Recognize and address female vulnerability, taking into consideration the increased risk of gender-based violence, early marriage and pregnancy, usually observed during crises.
- Implement appropriate remedial action and accelerated learning strategies, ensuring quality, equality and inclusion.
- Consider qualifications assurance and certification, focusing on priority and time-sensitive groups, such as those transitioning to higher levels of education requiring entrance exams, those transitioning to the world of work, and those requiring exam-based certification.
- Monitor the situation, documenting lessons learned at all levels, from school to national levels, to inform further action. This may concern teaching and learning processes, governance and management of schools, strengthening education community, and promoting experience sharing.
- Develop risk-reduction plans at national, district and school levels, which focus on the range of risks school communities are confronted with.
- Set implementation, coordination and monitoring arrangements during and after crises as well as communication mechanisms.

LONG-TERM ACTIONS: EDUCATION SYSTEM RESILIENCE

➤ Strengthening education systems

- Document lessons from the crisis period to inform future decision-making and practice on crisis preparedness and incorporate those in education planning and costing, using a gender lens.
- Ensure adequate resources are allocated to meeting school hygiene standards.
- Rethink the overall purpose, content and delivery of education and consider possible reforms.
- Rethink the role of schools. Beyond building knowledge, skills and attitudes schools also have a social function and can be key in promoting health and well-being.
- Consider developing or revising policies and guidelines (e.g. on distance learning).
- Reconsider education delivery modalities. For example, distance education, both on and off-line, could become part of mainstream delivery, where the necessary infrastructure is available, with training for teachers and students. Due consideration must be given to disparities resulting from lack of access to equipment and services and how to address them.
- Enable peer learning. For example, create or strengthen platforms for experience sharing, national, regional and international, including communities of practice for teachers.
- Review and ensure Education in Emergencies (EiE) standards are included in national education policies and plans, with specific and clear implementation strategies.

7. POLICY DIRECTIONS

Many things are still unknown about the nature and behaviour of the new COVID-19 and this applies worldwide, irrespective of the development status of countries. Very often, learning by doing might be the only option. During these moments of uncertainty, consulting, taking small steps, assessing and reassessing decisions seems to be the safest approach. Collaboration is an invaluable asset - if not the only way to go, and peer learning, knowledge- and experience-sharing platforms have become more important than ever.

UNESCO has been monitoring education responses to COVID-19 globally, collecting and analyzing information and facilitating policy dialogue and experience-sharing. Based on the information available and drawing on experience and lessons learnt from past and current practices, UNESCO aims to raise awareness about the most critical aspects around school reopening and offer policy directions.

Key policy decisions to be made revolve around the **timing**, the **conditions** and **processes** for school reopening. The effectiveness of these policy decisions and reopening strategies will depend on the level of preparedness of the education system across several factors:

- Infrastructure preparedness, including health and sanitary measures.
- Preparedness of teaching staff, including preparedness to offer both academic and psychosocial support.
- Pedagogical preparedness, including processes to assess learning loss and organizing remedial action.
- Family and society preparedness, including awareness of students and parents/caregivers and their readiness to return to school.

Before and upon school reopening decision-makers will have a large set of issues to address, including prioritizing target groups (e.g. based on socio-economic background, education level, etc.), determining the school calendar, organizing the teaching and learning processes while maintaining social distancing, managing absenteeism and dropouts, responding to special needs groups, implementing sanitary measures, and others. Below is a set of policy recommendations that can facilitate decision-making and support the planning for and implementation of school reopening.

Recommendation 1: Consulting and communicating closely with health experts

The timing of school reopening is highly sensitive and often requires a political decision. This should be made based on the status and evaluation of the pandemic, across and within countries. The world is facing an unprecedented and global health crisis. There is no pre-existing knowledge on the nature and behaviour of the epidemic. Evidence is becoming available as ongoing studies are concluded. Decisions concerning public activity and behaviour, including that of reopening of schools, must be made based on advice from designated health experts, epidemiologists and established monitoring mechanisms in each country, to ensure that public health is not in danger (see for example the Republic of Korea).

Recommendation 2: Setting up an effective communication and consultation mechanism

It is critical to plan a well-functioning communication and consultation mechanism among central and local authorities, schools and families as well as across various stakeholders. The importance of consultation, communication and coordination with concerned stakeholders, within and outside the school community, including parents, students and teachers, is paramount, as a means to build consensus and trust, coordinate among various actors and reassure the school population about school safety (see for example Denmark).

Recommendation 3: Preparing multiple and flexible scenarios for gradual reopening

Each country may make different plans for school reopening based on the actual situation, their needs and priorities. No linear approach is encouraged and gradual reopening seems to be the safest approach, as it can provide countries the opportunity to assess and control the situation before general reopening. Certain countries may opt for partial reopening (see for example Madagascar), differential reopening (different grades on different days) progressive reopening (see for example Mexico) or to remain closed until further notice (see for example Italy). Given the unpredictable nature of the pandemic, reclosure should be an option when the risk for a new potential outbreak is back. Countries which initially had fixed dates for school reopening had to postpone their decision in view of the evolving situation (see for example Japan). Some countries prioritize grades for younger children, as they are less likely to benefit from distance learning (see for example Denmark). Others prioritize graduating students and those in transition to higher levels of education to enable them to take high stake exams (see for example China).

Recommendation 4: Ensuring ongoing monitoring

Clear guidelines for school hygiene practices and health protocols to determine action in case of infection must be in place. It is important to monitor the situation closely in collaboration with local authorities. Consulting and collaborating with local authorities is important, as often they are best placed to carry out constant monitoring, assessment and reassessment of the situation together with other local stakeholders and actors. When uncertainty prevails, coping strategies and mechanisms are often innovated by the local entities (see for example Norway).

Recommendation 5: Anticipating and planning for exacerbated and emerging challenges

MOEs will need to ensure continuity of learning, meeting learning objectives, providing remedial actions and organizing examinations. But school reopening will not be simply about picking up from where things were left. As in past crises, education systems will also need to be prepared to deal with the potential health effects on the entire school community, both physical and mental, resulting from the direct and indirect consequences of COVID-19 and social isolation. MOEs will also need to anticipate additional challenges, including learning loss, an increased risk of dropout, new or exacerbated inequalities, and loss of education personnel (see for example Sierra Leone).

Recommendation 6: Giving particular attention to the most vulnerable populations

Students from vulnerable backgrounds require particular attention as they are usually hit the hardest by crises and are more likely to experience learning loss or drop out of school altogether. Depending on country context, these include refugees, migrants, minorities, those living in poverty and in remote geographical areas or urban slums, children with disabilities, those who lack nutrition and protection, those exposed to child labour, violence and other adverse conditions. The exacerbated vulnerability of females needs to be acknowledged, including the increased risk of gender-based violence, child marriage and early pregnancy, which was observed in past crises (see for example Sierra Leone).

Recommendation 7: Considering overall improvements to the education system

Despite the great challenges presented by this crisis, the situation also offers the opportunity to rethink the overall purpose, role, content and delivery of education in the long term, and better prepare education systems to deal with current and future crises through comprehensive and inter-sectoral approaches, tapping into collective experience and practices from around the world (see for example the Republic of Korea).

Underpinning principles:

- The safety, health and overall well-being of the entire school population is the primary priority
- Consultation, communication and cooperation ensures trust in the process and the effectiveness of interventions
- Constant and ongoing monitoring mechanisms must be in place to avoid health trade-offs and setbacks.

Practical Tips:

- ✓ Acknowledge the unprecedented magnitude and global nature of the crisis.
- ✓ Prioritize collaboration and working in partnerships, within and across countries and consult with key education and other concerned stakeholders.
- ✓ Promote multi-sectoral collaboration, for example among sectors such as education and health, as well as the social sector, private sector, and community.
- ✓ Promote and facilitate peer-learning, sharing of experience, information, challenges, lessons learned, but also solutions and ideas. Strengthen communities of practice for teachers. If there are group discussions, as well as other actions in the short term to promote the solidarity and understanding between the educational community members, this should be cultivated in the mid-term and long term.
- ✓ Monitor the evolving nature of the situation constantly. This may be done using crowd-based monitoring, cloud-based data and information sharing.
- ✓ Learn from past experience but also accept that sometimes learning by doing might be the only option.

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UNESCO's COVID-19 Education Response



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