

Report for EdTech Hub

An international review of plans for school reopening

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Section 1: Summary

Scope of study

- This report is based on a survey of recently-published guidance documents and media commentary related to the management of the reopening of schools after closure in response to the Covid-19 pandemic.
- We consider current approaches to reopening schools, using relevant country examples to illustrate trends in policy.
- We use examples from high-income, middle-income and low-income contexts.
- At the time of writing, most of the school systems that have reopened are in high-income or middle-income countries. Schools in most low-income and many middle-income countries remain closed. The evidence base related to the experience of reopening is, therefore, heavily skewed towards high-income and middle-income countries.
- We identify issues relating to the use of technology in the reopened schools.

Key findings

Approaches to school reopening have been heavily influenced by the political context of each country

- Decisions about reopening schools are highly political and attract high levels of public attention. In democratic states the decision-making has been typically contentious and contested. In most countries (and provinces where the system is federal) reopening decisions are ultimately made at the level of the prime minister/president rather than by ministers of education and health. In the Philippines, the recommendations of the ministry of education for reopening in August 2020 were publicly overruled by the president who has postponed reopening indefinitely. In countries facing similar circumstances national governments have, in some cases, reached very different conclusions. In Laos schools reopened in May 2020; in neighbouring Cambodia schools will only open, at the earliest, in November 2020. Decisions about which students go back first are also subject to political judgement about the relative importance of educational continuity for different student groups.

Very few low-income countries have reopened their schools because of the state of the epidemic and the difficulty of reopening

- The first phase of the reopening of schools was almost entirely concentrated in high-income and middle-income countries. This reflects both the pattern of spread of the virus and the difficulties faced by low-income countries as they seek to meet the health and hygiene requirements needed for safe reopening. The pandemic first hit Asian and European countries and these regions have provided a majority of the early cases of school reopening. The governments of several low-income countries are currently considering school reopening

but are cautious about acting precipitately because it is extremely difficult to guarantee hygiene and social distancing in a resource-poor environment.

Most governments supervising school reopening have focused on the immediate challenge of implementing new hygiene protocols at school level and not the opportunity to ‘build back better’

- Where schools have reopened or are currently reopening, governments have typically taken very seriously the mitigation of the risk that schools might become places where the virus is transmitted. Policy and practice have largely corresponded with the advice of international bodies such as UNESCO and the World Bank on these matters. School capacity for reopening with new health and safety rules has been carefully assessed in many countries. In some but not all countries key stakeholders have been fully consulted. New standard operating procedures for hygiene and social distancing have been clearly articulated in most places. The World Bank has called on education policymakers to ‘build back better’. Our enquiry suggest that much less attention has been given to this agenda of transformation and the need to build long-term resilience.

Concerns about the urgent need to address health and safety has led many policymakers to neglect the challenge of providing equitable blended learning opportunities in reopened schools

- The intensity of the preoccupation with the health and hygiene challenge has made it difficult for policymakers to devote much attention to issues of access and equity in the reopened schools. Most school systems have reopened or will reopen with reduced access to face-to-face teaching, with time in school rationed through some form of shift or rota system. Policymakers assume that students will have access to ‘blended’ learning opportunities. Reduced classroom time will be compensated by increased learning at home. There are many risks associated with these assumptions regarding blended learning. There has been little focus at national and provincial level on the role of technology in the new world of blended learning. In most countries there remains a ‘digital divide’ that will make it more difficult for disadvantaged students to participate in any online learning provision. Similarly, disadvantaged students will find it more difficult to engage at home when ‘low tech’ TV or radio broadcasting is used to supplement classroom time. Worldwide teachers will need training and support if they are to be effective in the management of the mixed modalities of blended learning.

Policy on school reopening rarely addresses the question of the quality and impact of provision in reopened schools

- Ensuring the effectiveness of blended learning in reopened schools will depend upon the existence and use of information from the frontline about school quality, student engagement and academic progress. Country level responses to reopening rarely emphasise the importance of data related to individual students and groups of students. Data should be gathered on student enrolment, attendance, engagement and achievement. Disaggregated data is particularly important for identifying and tracking the engagement of vulnerable groups of students. One aspect that has received relatively little attention from the planning and coordination of school reopening efforts is the accountability of schools and teachers. There is a need to check that students are receiving good blended learning opportunities.

The scale of difficulty of reopening schools in low-income countries is such that it will require new solutions and not simply the modification of approaches currently being implemented in some high-income countries

- It is difficult to understate the challenge of school reopening in resource-poor contexts where schools are often overcrowded. In low-income countries the blended learning model is doubly problematic: social distancing and frequent washing in school is very difficult and engagement with technologically-enabled home learning is not currently possible in many households. The measures being introduced in high-income countries to ensure the health and wellbeing of students and staff during school reopening will be extremely difficult to manage. Millions of students in low-income countries lack access to online learning and educational broadcasting. Different approaches are needed that are not simply a version of the blended model that is emerging in high-income contexts.

Section 2: Evidence and policy

Extended school closures: a worldwide problem that has exacerbated existing inequalities

To ensure the health and wellbeing of children and staff during the Covid-19 pandemic, most countries around the world decided to close schools in the early months of 2020. On 9 June 2020, 63.3% of all students worldwide or 1.11 billion learners remained out of school, with 129 countries operating nationwide school closures. Although this is a staggeringly high figure, it represents a significant reduction from early April, when a total of 91.3% of students around the world were affected, with 195 country-wide closures.¹

Based on past school closures and the emerging evidence from the current crisis, a number of risks associated with keeping children out of schools have been identified:

- 1. The mental and physical health of students is at risk.**
 - a. According to the World Food Program, 369 million children are without school meals due to the Covid-19 pandemic.² Past research on summer breaks in the UK has found that children who experience hunger during the break can fall substantially behind their more affluent peers.³
 - b. Social isolation, anxiety, and potential loss of family members during the pandemic are likely to negatively affect students' mental health for the foreseeable future.⁴
 - c. Past school closures have also led to increases in gender-based violence, while simultaneously leaving victims unable to report the abuse and seek help.⁵
- 2. School dropouts are likely to increase.⁶**
 - a. Past crises and subsequent financial downturns have led to an increase in child labour both during and after the crisis period.⁷

¹ UNESCO (2020d). COVID-19 Educational Disruption and Response. [Online]. Available at: <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse>

² World Food Programme (2020). Global Monitoring of School Meals During COVID-19 School Closures. [Online]. Available at: https://cdn.wfp.org/2020/school-feeding-map/?_ga=2.96101275.664989139.1587115625-1835378179.1587115625

³ Forsey, A. (2017). Hungry holidays: A report on hunger amongst children during school holidays. All-Party Parliamentary Group on Hunger. <https://feedingbritain.files.wordpress.com/2015/02/hungry-holidays.pdf>

⁴ Gianna, S., Jenkins, R., Saavedra, J., (2020).

⁵ UNDP & Irish Aid (2015). Assessing Sexual and Gender Based Violence during the Ebola Crisis in Sierra Leone. [Online]. Available

at: https://www.sl.undp.org/content/sierraleone/en/home/library/crisis_prevention_and_recovery/assessing-sexual-and-gender-based-violence-during-the-ebola-cris.html; Akmal, M., Hares, S., O'Donnell, M. (2020). Gendered Impacts of COVID-19 School Closures: Insights from Frontline Organizations. Centre for Global Development. Policy Papers. 27th May 2020. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.cgdev.org/publication/gendered-impacts-covid-19-school-closures-insights-frontline-organizations>

⁶ UNESCO (2020c). School reopening issue note. Issue note n° 7.1–April 2020. [Online]. Available at: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000373275>

⁷ World Bank (2020a). The COVID-19 Pandemic: Shocks to Education and Policy Responses. World Bank, Washington, DC. [Online]. Available at: <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/33696>

- b. After Ebola, cases of early marriage⁸ and teenage pregnancies rose significantly, the latter by 65%.⁹ In Sierra Leone, girls were 16% less likely to be returning to school than their male counterparts.¹⁰
 3. **There is likely to be a significant loss of learning as a result of school closure:**¹¹
 - a. The extent to which education systems have been able to put alternative education arrangements in place- using 'high tech' or 'low tech' modalities- has varied by country, and there are also differences in the extent to which students can engage with such education programmes linked to disadvantage. Loss of learning will be particularly substantial for those students unable to engage with effective alternative learning modalities, such as online learning or radio/TV broadcasting.¹²
 - b. School closure threatens to deepen the pre-existing learning crisis.¹³
 - c. Past research has identified a statistically significant loss in literacy during periods of absence from school, such as the summer break.¹⁴
 4. **There is a risk of teacher attrition and a decrease in future funding for education:**
 - a. Increased financial pressures during the pandemic may force teachers to switch jobs and leave the profession.¹⁵
 - b. Governments might now reallocate resources from the education sector, or there may be an overall decrease in public spending due to financial difficulties brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic.¹⁶
 - c. There may be a reduction in international aid in general, or a transfer of funding from education to health interventions.¹⁷ A similar change in priorities took place during and after the Ebola crisis.¹⁸

Overall, it is clear that those students who are already disadvantaged, marginalised and vulnerable have suffered most from school closures, and that it is almost certain that existing inequalities have been exacerbated.¹⁹ There is also a risk that these same disadvantaged students may be disproportionately impacted by the arrangements that are put in place for the reopening of schools.

⁸ UNESCO (2020a). Preparing the reopening of schools. RESOURCE PAPER. 5th May 2020. [Online]. Available at: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000373401>

⁹ UNDP & Irish Aid (2015).

¹⁰ World Bank (2020c). Response to COVID-19: Preparing for School Re-Opening. The Case of China East Asia and Pacific. Education Briefing Note. 24th April 2020. [Online]. Available at: <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/743891587996521873/pdf/Response-to-COVID-19-Preparing-for-School-Re-Opening-The-Case-of-China.pdf>

¹¹ Gianna, S., Jenkins, R., Saavedra, J., (2020). Reopening schools: When, where and how?. UNESCO. Blog Post. 13th May 2020. [Online]. Available at: <https://en.unesco.org/news/reopening-schools-when-where-and-how>

¹² World Bank (2020a).

¹³ Gianna, S., Jenkins, R., Saavedra, J., (2020)

¹⁴ Slade, T., Piper, B., Kaunda, Z., King, S., & Ibrahim, H. (2017). Is 'summer' reading loss universal? Using ongoing literacy assessment in Malawi to estimate the loss from grade-transition breaks. *Research in Comparative and International Education*, 12(4), 461-485.

¹⁵ World Bank (2020c).

¹⁶ UNESCO, UNICEF, World Bank, World Food Programme (2020). Framework for reopening schools. April 2020. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.unicef.org/media/68366/file/Framework-for-reopening-schools-2020.pdf>

¹⁷ Carvalho, S., Rossiter, J., Angrist, N., Hares, S., & Silverman, R. (2020). Planning for School Reopening and Recovery After COVID-19. Centre for Global Development. Policy Papers. 29th May 2020. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.cgdev.org/sites/default/files/planning-school-reopening-and-recovery-after-covid-19.pdf>

¹⁸ Hallgarten, J. (2020). Evidence on efforts to mitigate the negative educational impact of past disease outbreaks. K4D. Helpdesk Report 793. Reading, UK: Education Development Trust. [Online]. Available at:

https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/bitstream/handle/20.500.12413/15202/793_mitigating_education_effects_of_disease_outbreaks.pdf?sequence=6&isAllowed=y

¹⁹ UNESCO (2020a). Preparing the reopening of schools. RESOURCE PAPER. 5th May 2020. [Online]. Available at: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000373401>; UNESCO (2020c). School reopening issue note. Issue note n° 7.1–April 2020. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000373275>; UNESCO, UNICEF, World Bank, World

Major international organisations have made the case for a phased, multi-faceted approach to reopening

Several global agencies have produced, at extremely short notice, thoughtful advice on the management of the reopening process. Our starting point in conducting this enquiry was the advice provided in three key documents which give high-level guidance to policymakers on the management of school reopening.

IIEP-UNESCO has issued a policy briefing: *Prepare for school reopening*.²⁰ This identified three phases in the process of reopening. Initially, policymakers need to **plan for the reopening of schools**. In this planning phase, attention should be given to ensuring sufficient financing for reopening and the readiness of both the infrastructure and the key human resources. During the second phase, the emphasis should be on the need to **communicate, consult and coordinate**, so that there is shared understanding of and buy-in to the approach. The third phase should focus on action **to review and assess the learning needs of students**.

UNESCO has published a *Framework for reopening schools*, in partnership with UNICEF, the World Bank and the World Food Programme.²¹ The Framework identified six dimensions of effective reopening and mapped each dimension across three phases of reopening:

- Prior to reopening
- Part of the reopening process
- With schools reopened.

The six dimensions or components underpinning successful reopening are identified as: effective policy, sufficient finance, safe operations, learning quality, including the most marginalised, and ensuring wellbeing and protection.

The World Bank has produced a detailed guide to reopening policy in a document entitled, *The COVID-19 Pandemic: Shocks to education and policy responses*.²² Like the guidance from IIEP and the UNESCO consortium (which included the Bank), this advisory document emphasised the need to start by ensuring safe reopening and the remediation of learning loss. The Bank went further and highlighted the extent to which school reopening provided an opportunity to go beyond the restoration of the 'status quo' and develop education systems that are better than those that existed before the pandemic. This unprecedented opportunity to transform school education was expressed by the slogan: **build back better**.

Food Programme (2020). Framework for reopening schools. April 2020. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.unicef.org/media/68366/file/Framework-for-reopening-schools-2020.pdf>; Crawford, L., Hares, S., Sandefur, J., Silverman, R. (2020). When Should Schools Reopen? Centre for Global Development. Blog Post. 23rd April 2020. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.cgdev.org/blog/when-should-schools-reopen>

²⁰ IIEP (2020a)

²¹ UNESCO, UNICEF, World Bank, World Food Programme (2020).

²² World Bank (2020a).

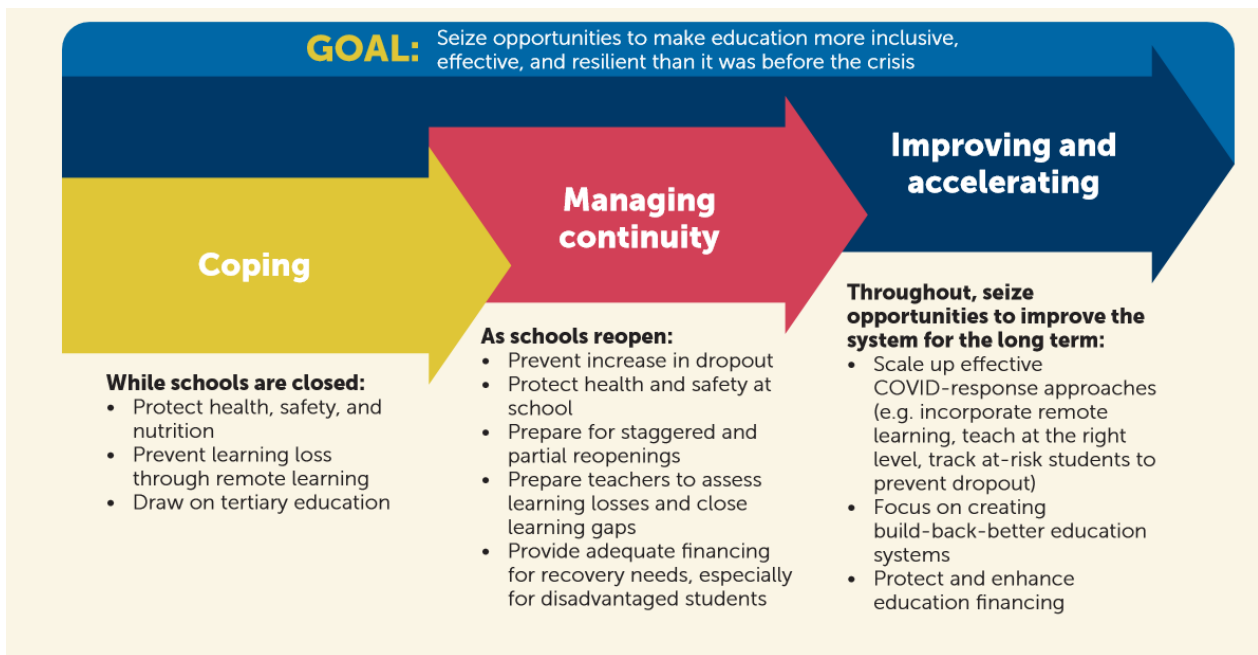


Figure 1: The World Bank view of the phases of reopening²³

Each of the highlighted advisory documents has a somewhat different character, but together, they make the case for a phased, multi-faceted and systematic approach to reopening. We combined the analysis from these sources and highlighted four potentially important stages or components of reopening.

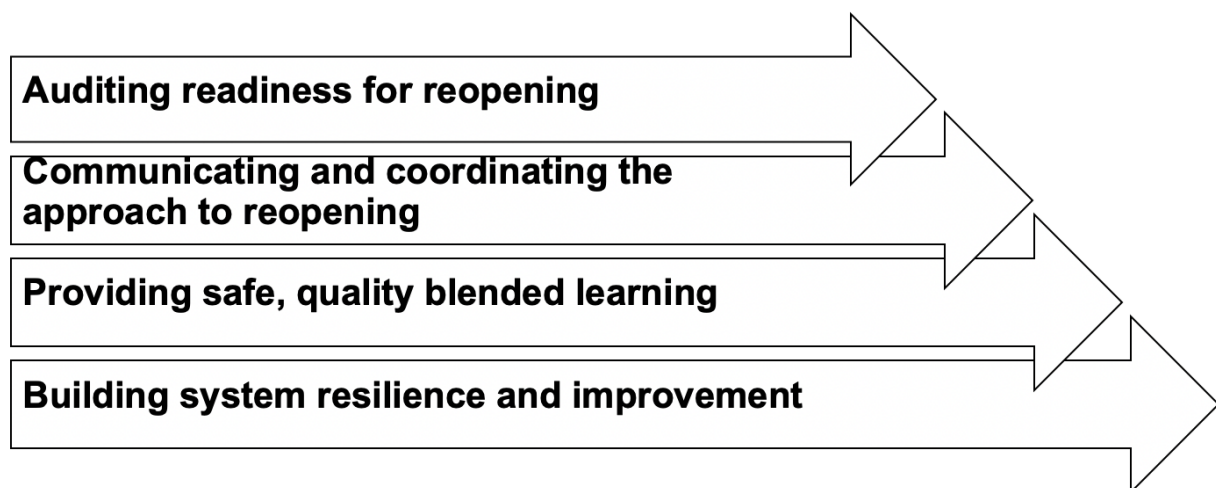


Figure 2: Stages or components of effective reopening

²³ Ibid

While the detail of the schools reopening process may differ from place to place, effective policy is everywhere likely to require:

1. Assessment of an education system's capacity to enable context-specific planning for school reopening
2. Consultation, coordination and communication of the approach to reopening with key stakeholders
3. Ensuring safe provision of face-to-face learning, 'blended' with home learning, and using technology as appropriate to access distance learning
4. Building the resilience of the education system and enabling the redesign and improvement of teaching and learning.

We used these stages/components as a framework against which to consider policy towards school reopening in practice at national (and, in federal states, provincial) level. Our sample was dominated by high-income countries, with some middle-income countries, but very few low-income countries. This was because, with some exceptions, the first school systems to reopen have been in high- and middle-income countries.

In placing a particular stress on blended learning at school level, integrating school learning and home learning through the use of appropriate technology, we went a little beyond the advice in the three documents. The brief, high-level IIEP document did not discuss the possible need for 'blended' solutions to future provision. The UNESCO framework made an important but extremely brief reference to the need for policymakers to consider investing 'in remote learning ... to supplement instructional hours with a blended model where schools may be operating on partial or otherwise adapted schedules'. The World Bank guidance also made a brief but important reference to blended learning, stating:

Once schools have reopened, systems can shift from emergency remote-learning systems to more sustained models that blend remote learning and other uses of technology with teacher-led instruction.²⁴

This issue seemed to us to be of extreme importance because, in almost all countries, social distancing regulations will make the provision of 'traditional' full-time (five-days-per-week), face-to-face schooling extremely difficult in the forthcoming academic year. Effective responses to this issue are likely to require a well-designed blended learning offer, which provides students with the equivalent of a full week of school through a mix of face-to-face interaction and distance learning.

Our analysis suggests that policymakers have, in general, taken the need for planning informed by careful initial assessment seriously. Governments have recognised the need for stakeholder engagement through effective consultation and communication. In managing a phased and staged approach to reopening, policymakers have decided to limit initial face-to-face learning and supplement this with home learning. The policy emphasis has been on the paramount need for safe operations, rather than encouraging schools to reflect on how to 'blend' in-school learning with technologically enabled learning at home. There is as yet relatively little evidence of policy intended to 'build back better' and ensure improved system resilience.

²⁴ Ibid

The reopening strategy in middle-income and high-income countries

Several countries in Asia, Europe, and some other regions have now reopened their schools following the initial outbreak of Covid-19. China, for example, began a phased reopening in March 2020.²⁵ The first reopening in Europe took place when primary schools in Denmark welcomed students back on 15 April. Since the Danish reopening, many other European education systems have reopened their schools. Schools in New Zealand reopened on 18 May.

In one country, Sweden, there was no closure of primary or lower secondary schools. In many countries, a partial reopening of schools began once the spread of the pandemic had slowed down. Most provinces in China delayed reopening until 28 days had passed without new infections.²⁶ Although many countries reopened schools when the virus was considered to be under control, there has been no simple correlation worldwide between the timing of reopening and infection levels.

Plans to reopen schools are typically informed by advice from public health experts, based on the pandemic level in each country, but the decision-making is also political.²⁷ Reopening is a policy decision that requires a judgement based on an evaluation of the costs and benefits of continued school closure. As discussed above, there are clearly costs associated with closure relating to possible losses in student learning. Policymakers are often also acutely sensitive to the economic damage caused by 'lockdown', including school closure. While advocates for the rights of disadvantaged students and those representing business interests have often (for different reasons) pushed for rapid reopening, parent groups and trade unions have typically called for maximum caution, based on their view of the need to minimise infection.

Preparing the immediate response: assessing education system capacity to enable context-specific planning for school reopening

Contextual factors

Almost all systems have reopened in a phased way and a crucial aspect of reopening approaches has, therefore, been the criteria used to decide who returns first. Such decisions have been determined by national contexts and priorities. The governments in Denmark and Norway allowed their youngest students to return to school first. It was argued that their absence from school was particularly detrimental to children's development and parents with younger children would be less able to work from home while assisting with schooling.²⁸ Germany and France, among others, started the phased return to schools with students in the last years of high school, who were preparing to sit final exams. Vietnam started reopening schools in those districts that had the lowest numbers of

²⁵ Wiley, M. (2020). COVID-19: Countries around the world are reopening their schools. This is what it looks like. World Economic Forum. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/05/coronavirus-countries-schools-education-covid19-reopen-classroom/>

²⁶ World Bank (2020c).

²⁷ IIEP (2020a). *Preparing for school reopening*. IIEP-UNESCO COVID-19 response brief. [Online]. Available at: http://www.iiep.unesco.org/en/plan-school-reopening?utm_content=bufferc6f16&utm_medium=social&utm_source=twitter.com&utm_campaign=buffer

²⁸ UNESCO (2020b). COVID-19 Education Response Webinar. Back to School: Preparing and Planning for the reopening of schools. Synthesis report. 24th April 2020. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000373318>

Covid-19 cases and were therefore deemed safest. Other districts in Vietnam, where case numbers were higher, kept their schools closed for longer.²⁹

Systems capacity assessment

In several countries, a rigorous assessment of system capacity at local level was considered an indispensable precondition for the development of effective school reopening plans. Detailed, up-to-date information about the infrastructure (physical and digital), as well as about the availability of personnel and of resources has, in many countries, guided reopening efforts.³⁰ Such capacity assessment relates to issues such as the number of students, the layout of school buildings, the demography of the teacher workforce, and the availability of sanitary facilities. It was as a result of a national audit of individual school-level readiness that South Africa decided to postpone the return of students to schools by a week. The South African authorities concluded that protective equipment, such as masks, were not available at a sufficient scale and that schools were not ready to open safely.³¹

The extent to which local authorities were empowered to make reopening decisions based on local knowledge has also varied by country. In Japan³² and Denmark,³³ the central government left decisions on when and how the reopening process would begin to the discretion of prefectures, which made individual assessments of their schools' ability to reopen under new rules, resulting in some prefectures opening schools earlier than others.

There has also been variability in the extent to which detailed and explicit attention has been paid to the needs of vulnerable and disadvantaged students when planning for school reopening. In some countries, special measures have been taken for children with special educational needs during the reopening process. In Austria, for example, special arrangements were made for the school transport of children with disabilities, as they would not be able to travel to school safely using public transport.³⁴ In France, children with special educational needs have been permitted to continue supported remote education, even if their schools have reopened.³⁵ Meeting the needs of the vulnerable also requires ensuring that crucial, non-educational services (such as school meals or health support) continue to be available while a phased reopening takes place.

²⁹ Tuoi Tre News (2020). Back-to-school date delayed to May in most parts of Vietnam. Tuoi Tre News. 18th April 2020. [Online]. Available at: <https://tuoitrenews.vn/news/education/20200418/backtoschool-date-delayed-to-may-in-most-parts-of-vietnam/54100.html>

³⁰ UNESCO (2020b).

³¹ Ngqakamba, S. (2020). South Africa: Education Dept Now Says Pupils Will Only Go Back On 8 June, Western Cape Disagrees. All Africa. 31st May 2020. [Online]. Available at: <https://allafrica.com/stories/202006010028.html>

³² The Japan Times (2020b). Schools reopen in some parts of Japan after pandemic shutdown. The Japan Times. 7th May 2020. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2020/05/07/national/schools-reopen-coronavirus/#.XsflGC3MygR>

³³ Wiley, M. (2020). COVID-19: Countries around the world are reopening their schools. This is what it looks like. World Economic Forum. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/05/coronavirus-countries-schools-education-covid19-reopen-classroom/>

³⁴ ORF (2020b). Schulstart: Sonderschule als Sonderfall. ORF. 14th May 2020. [Online]. Available at: <https://noe.orf.at/stories/3048502/>

³⁵ Ministère de l'éducation nationale et de la jeunesse de France (2020a). Coronavirus — COVID-19: informations et recommandations pour les établissements scolaires, les personnels et les familles. Ministry website. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.education.gouv.fr/coronavirus-covid-19-informations-et-recommandations-pour-les-etablissements-scolaires-les-274253>

Implementing the short-term response: coordinating and communicating the reopening approach

Coordination

Policymakers have generally recognised the need for stakeholder engagement during the reopening process. The extent to which this has been successful has varied from place to place. In Norway and Denmark, for example, reopening plans were developed in consultation with student unions, teachers' unions and parent associations.³⁶ In New Zealand, the Ministry of Education involved teachers' unions and the national principals' federation in the development of the reopening plan.³⁷ By contrast, teaching unions have been vocal in their criticisms of government plans in some other countries. In Germany, for example, teachers' unions lamented that schools were given insufficient information and guidance on how they should operationalise reopening and that plans were made without sufficient consultation.³⁸

In some jurisdictions, role clarity for different actors has been a policy priority. With this in mind, some governments have given clear, detailed instructions about the roles and responsibilities of everyone involved in the reopening process. The Provincial Department of Education in Yunnan, China, for example, requested all schools to establish task forces to reinforce public health protocols and other logistics associated with school reopening. School leaders led these task forces with roles and responsibilities specified at school, grade, and class levels. The school-level task forces are required to maintain close communication with local government authorities (such as the education, health and transportation authorities) to ensure the flow of information and the smooth return to schools.³⁹ In Norway, the government provided training and guidelines for school administrators and school leaders so that they could guide their teams in the phased reopening and to comply with the new rules.⁴⁰ The government of South Africa specified that:

District officials are required to establish and maintain safe and healthy working, teaching and learning environments. The School Management Team and the Principal put the measures in place for hygiene control and social distancing and keep parents informed of the plans to be implemented. Circuit Managers are responsible for coordinating and monitoring the orientation programmes at schools.⁴¹

The School Management Team, teachers and non-teaching staff arrived at school a week before the learners in order to make necessary preparations for the learners' arrival.⁴²

³⁶ Coughlan, S. (2020). How reopened schools in Denmark keep children safely apart. BBC News. 12th May 2020. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/amp/education-52550470>; UNESCO 2020a

³⁷ Web-Little, A. (2020). Teachers voice concerns around school reopenings under alert level three. The Spinoff. [Online]. Available at: <https://thespinoff.co.nz/society/19-04-2020/teachers-voice-concerns-around-school-reopenings-under-alert-level-three/>

³⁸ Tagesschau (2020). Ende der großen Pause. Öffnung weiterer Schulen. Tagesschau. 4th May 2020. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.tagesschau.de/inland/schulen-coronavirus-101.html>

³⁹ World Bank (2020c).

⁴⁰ Government of Norway (2020). Norway to lift COVID-19 restrictions gradually and cautiously. Press release. 8th April 2020. [Online]. Available at: https://planipolis.iiep.unesco.org/sites/planipolis/files/ressources/norway_to_lift_covid-19_restrictions_gradually_and_cautiously_-_regjeringen.no_.pdf

⁴¹ Department of Basic Education. Government of South Africa (2020) Coronavirus Orientation Guidelines For Schools. For Teachers, Non-Teaching Staff And Learners. On The Covid-19 Outbreak In South Africa. [Online]. Available at: https://planipolis.iiep.unesco.org/sites/planipolis/files/ressources/south_africa_coronavirus-orientation-guidelines.pdf

⁴² Ngqakamba, S. (2020). South Africa: Education Dept Now Says Pupils Will Only Go Back On 8 June, Western Cape Disagrees. All Africa. 31st May 2020. [Online]. Available at: <https://allafrica.com/stories/202006010028.html>

Communication

Clear communication of measures taken to protect students and staff can be helpful in establishing trust and in facilitating the return to schools. Some governments have also assisted local authorities and schools by providing standardised communication. In New Zealand, for example, the government has provided a letter template for schools to send out to parents, which details the school reopening approach.⁴³ To clarify the reopening approach, the government of New Zealand has also actively corrected misinformation spread on social media.⁴⁴

Just as clear communication can aid the reopening efforts, the absence of effective communication can be detrimental. In Israel, several municipalities boycotted the school reopening as they complained about a lack of information and insufficient guidance on the practicalities of reopening from central government.⁴⁵ In British Columbia, Canada, a campaign was started by a concerned parent about the risk their child would be exposed to when returning to school. A petition gathered several thousand signatures from parents and teachers within days and pushed the state ministry of education to issue a public clarification of the health and safety measures put in place in schools.⁴⁶ In the German state of Hesse, the parents of a fourth grader successfully sued at the state's constitutional court against the reopening and achieved the cancellation of fourth graders' return to schools. The court ruled that the return of students in the fourth and final grade of primary school was unfair treatment, in comparison to other primary school students who were not scheduled to return. Without any high-stakes examinations (such as those that students must sit at the end of secondary school), this return to school was deemed an unnecessary and unfair risk.⁴⁷

Executing the medium-term response: a mixed economy of limited face-to-face learning, new hygiene measures and home learning

Opening under new rules

The early stages of reopening in most countries have been characterised by reduced face-to-face learning, strict hygiene rules and an expectation of increased home working, compared to the pre-crisis regime. One measure that has been particularly widespread is the introduction of shifts or rota systems that ration access to classroom time. In the Japanese prefecture of Toyama, for example, primary school students were only allowed to attend school once or twice in the first week of reopening. This was implemented so that the young students could adjust to the new rules at school while keeping their distance. Students in secondary schools were divided into morning and afternoon shifts to reduce class sizes.⁴⁸ Similarly, students in New South Wales, Australia, returned to schools

⁴³ Independent Schools of New Zealand (2020). Coronavirus: What schools need to know. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.isnz.org.nz/news/coronavirus-what-schools-need-to-know/#lev2>

⁴⁴ Ministry of Education. Government of New Zealand (2020d). COVID-19 update. 21st May 2020. [Online]. Available at: <https://mailchi.mp/education/covid-19-update-21-may>

⁴⁵ Staff, T. (2020). Many elementary schools reopen as Israel gingerly steps toward 'normalcy'. The Times of Israel. 22nd May 2020. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.timesofisrael.com/some-schools-set-to-reopen-as-israel-gingerly-steps-toward-normalcy/>

⁴⁶ Johal, R. (2020). Ministry of Education responds to petition against reopening BC schools. CH News Vancouver. 19th May 2020. [Online]. Available at: <https://dailyhive.com/vancouver/ministry-of-education-responds-petition>

⁴⁷ Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (2020). Viertklässlering klagt abermals gegen Rückkehr in Schule. Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung. 14th May 2020. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/rhein-main/region-und-hessen/berufung-auf-corona-pandemie-klage-gegen-rueckkehr-in-schule-16769329.html>

⁴⁸ The Japan Times (2020c).

for one or two days per week.⁴⁹ The Austrian government, after requests for clarifications from parents' associations, specified that arrangements should be made to take the needs of families with several children into account.⁵⁰

Many governments have defined precise standard operating procedures at school level as a means of reducing the risk that reopened schools will be places where the virus can be transmitted. As countries around the world have begun to reopen their schools in phases, the following measures have been implemented (see Table 1).⁵¹

Measures	Countries
Spacing tables 2m apart	Denmark, Israel, Norway, Germany, Switzerland
Taking temperatures at the door	Japan, Taiwan, China, Vietnam, Thailand ⁵²
Having parents take their children's temperatures	France ⁵³
Holding classes outdoors	Denmark, Norway
Requiring children to wash or disinfect their hands regularly	Denmark, Taiwan, Israel, Japan, Austria, Germany, France, China, South Africa
Regularly disinfecting facilities and equipment	China, Norway, Israel, France, South Africa, Thailand
Ventilating rooms and cleaning with special procedures	Japan, France
Reduction of class sizes (potentially combined with shifts/rotas)	Norway, Denmark, Germany, Austria, Israel, France, Quebec ⁵⁴
Shorter school hours or fewer days (potentially combined with shifts/rotas)	Japan ⁵⁵ , Vietnam ⁵⁶ , Australia ⁵⁷
Schools have staggered drop-off times	Denmark, Germany

⁴⁹ ABC News (2020). Schools are reopening, so here's a guide to the situation in each state and territory. ABC News. 4th May 2020. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-05-04/australian-schools-reopening-after-coronavirus-closures/12211526>

⁵⁰ ORF (2020a). Große Rückkehr mit vielen Fragezeichen. Pflichtschulen öffnen wieder. ORF. 14th May 2020. [Online]. Available at: <https://orf.at/stories/3165674/>

⁵¹ Unless otherwise indicated, examples were taken from the following sources: Wiley, M. (2020).; Cavanagh, E. (2020).; Rouby, T. (2020).; GEM (2020).; Crawford, L., Hares, S., Sandefur, J., Silverman, R. (2020).

⁵² CTN News (2020). Schools in Thailand Can Reopen if Covid-19 Guidelines Followed. Chiangrai Times. 30th May 2020. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.chiangraitimes.com/thailand-national-news/schools-in-thailand-can-reopen-if-covid-19-guidelines-followed/>

⁵³ Ministère de l'éducation nationale et de la jeunesse de France (2020b). Circulaire du 13-5-2020: Réouverture progressive des écoles et des établissements d'enseignement (Bulletin officiel n° 20 du 14-5-2020). Press release. [Online]. Available at: <https://planipolis.iiep.unesco.org/en/2020/circulaire-du-13-5-2020-reouverture-progressive-des-ecoles-et-des-etablissements-denseignement>

⁵⁴ McQuigge, M. (2020). Schools face daunting, unique reopening challenges during pandemic. CTV News. 14th May 2020. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.ctvnews.ca/canada/schools-face-daunting-unique-reopening-challenges-during-pandemic-1.4938911>

⁵⁵ The Japan Times (2020c). Japan's schools begin to reopen with staggered attendance. The Japan Times. 18th May 2020. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2020/05/18/national/japan-schools-reopen-state-of-emergency/#.XsflFi3MygR>

⁵⁶ Vu, K. (2020). Vietnam reopens schools after easing coronavirus curbs. Reuters. 11th May 2020. [Online]. Available at: <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-health-coronavirus-vietnam-schools/vietnam-reopens-schools-after-easing-coronavirus-curbs-idUKKBN22N0QW>

⁵⁷ Thomson Reuters Foundation (2020). COVID-19: These countries show us what education looks like after lockdown. World Economic Forum. 14th May 2020. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/05/schools-education-lockdowns-coronavirus-covid19/>

No parents allowed on school grounds	Netherlands, ⁵⁸ Denmark, Switzerland
At-risk staff are asked to stay home	Israel, Denmark, Austria, ⁵⁹ Australia ⁶⁰ , South Africa ⁶¹
Teachers and/or children are required to wear masks	Japan, Germany, Denmark, Taiwan, Austria, Netherlands, South Africa, Thailand,
Students are not allowed to interact with students from other classes	Denmark ⁶²
Designate rooms and establish procedures in case of someone developing symptoms at school	China ⁶³

Table 1: Overview of health and safety measures implemented as part of school reopening processes around the world

Assessment of learning loss and remedial education

Once students have returned to school, two interrelated concerns become pressing. Firstly, there is a need for assessment of the learning that took place during school closures and, secondly, planning of remedial action will be required to mitigate any learning loss.⁶⁴ In Quebec, the first Canadian province that opted to reopen all schools, teachers have been required to make assessments about student learning and to make decisions regarding their advancement to the next grade level. Teachers are encouraged to base their assessment on students' online work.⁶⁵ Mexico has announced that, after an initial week of acclimatisation, an assessment of each students' learning gap should be undertaken, followed by the design of appropriate remedial education. The assessment is to be based on students' work during the period of remote learning.⁶⁶

In some countries, it has been considered necessary for the academic calendar to be adjusted. China, for example, has postponed the 'Gaukao' exams, the high-stakes exams at the end of secondary school, by a month. This change was made to allow students to catch up on the work that they missed during period of school closures.⁶⁷ Italy, meanwhile, has announced that while schools will remain closed for the rest of the academic year, an early start to the school year 2020/21 will be

⁵⁸ Van de Wouw, P. (2020). Plastic shields in place, Dutch schools to reopen amid coronavirus. Reuters. 8th May 2020. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-netherlands-school/plastic-shields-in-place-dutch-schools-to-reopen-amid-coronavirus-idUSKBN22K242>

⁵⁹ Bundesministerium für Bildung, Wissenschaft und Forschung (2020). FAQs Aktivierung des Schulsystems/Unterricht nach Öffnung der Schulen. Ministry website. [Online]. Available at: https://www.bmbwf.gv.at/Themen/schule/beratung/corona/corona_fua.html#a2

⁶⁰ GEM (2020).

⁶¹ Department of Basic Education. Government of South Africa (2020) Coronavirus Orientation Guidelines For Schools. For Teachers, Non-Teaching Staff And Learners. On The Covid-19 Outbreak In South Africa. [Online]. Available at: https://planipolis.iiep.unesco.org/sites/planipolis/files/ressources/south_africa_coronavirus-orientation-guidelines.pdf

⁶² Crawford, L., Hares, S., Sandefur, J., Silverman, R. (2020). When Should Schools Reopen? Centre for Global Development. Blog Post. 23rd April 2020. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.cgdev.org/blog/when-should-schools-reopen>

⁶³ World Bank (2020c)., p. 2

⁶⁴ Gianna, S., Jenkins, R., Saavedra, J., (2020).

⁶⁵ Government of Quebec (2020). Preschools and elementary and secondary schools during the COVID-19 pandemic. Ministry website. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.quebec.ca/en/education/preschool-elementary-and-secondary-schools/etablissements-scolaires-prescolaires-primaires-et-secondaires-dans-le-contexte-de-la-covid-19/>

⁶⁶ UNESCO (2020b).

⁶⁷ World Bank (2020c).

available for students who are falling behind in individual subjects.⁶⁸ In order to recover lost class time for students in South Africa, schools – in consultation with District offices – can increase the daily teaching time by between 30 minutes and two hours, depending on the students' age.⁶⁹

The World Bank guidance emphasised the key role that technology can play in the assessment of learning loss and for measures to reverse such losses, but so far, there is little evidence in practice in the context of school reopening.⁷⁰ The role of education technology is not limited to the assessment of learning loss and the delivery of remedial education. It also includes the continued teaching of those students who have not, or have not yet, returned to school. Countries like South Korea, which rapidly rolled out online learning, and Thailand, which has also heavily invested in education technology during Covid-19, delayed the reopening of their schools because, among other issues, they argued that the loss of learning was mitigated by technology-enabled remote learning.⁷¹ In Norway⁷² and New Zealand⁷³, sick or at-risk children, or those living with family members who are part of a vulnerable group, will continue to receive remote education. In Quebec, parents can decide if they want to send their children to school or keep them at home. Provisions are then made for children to receive distance education until the end of the school year.⁷⁴ In France⁷⁵ and some Australian states,⁷⁶ parents can similarly choose to continue distance education.

What's missing? Guidance on blended learning and the case for greater emphasis on data, accountability and teacher training

In planning for reopening, the overwhelming initial emphasis has been on ensuring the safety of students and staff and minimising the risk that schools become places where infection is spread. While this is entirely understandable, there is a need to combine the focus on hygiene and safety with policy intended to ensure the quality of provision and the engagement of all learners, regardless of background.

Policy and guidance at a national level has tended not to address the difficulties of achieving learning through a combination of a shortened school week and technologically enabled learning at home. The question as to how the 'digital divide' will be addressed has received varying levels of attention

⁶⁸ UNESCO (2020a). Preparing the reopening of schools. RESOURCE PAPER. 5th May 2020. [Online]. Available at: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000373401>

⁶⁹ Department of Basic Education. Government of South Africa (2020) Coronavirus Orientation Guidelines For Schools. For Teachers, Non-Teaching Staff And Learners. On The Covid-19 Outbreak In South Africa. [Online]. Available at: https://planipolis.iiep.unesco.org/sites/planipolis/files/ressources/south_africa_coronavirus-orientation-guidelines.pdf

⁷⁰ World Bank (2020a).

⁷¹ Mala, D. (2020). July 1 new term start confirmed. Bangkok Post. 1st May 2020. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/1910720/july-1-new-term-start-confirmed>

⁷² Government of Norway (2020).

⁷³ Ministry of Education. Government of New Zealand (2020). COVID-19 Information and advice for students, whānau, and the education sector. Ministry website. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.education.govt.nz/covid-19/>

⁷⁴ Government of Quebec (2020). Preschools and elementary and secondary schools during the COVID-19 pandemic. Ministry website. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.quebec.ca/en/education/preschool-elementary-and-secondary-schools/etablissements-scolaires-prescolaires-primaires-et-secondaires-dans-le-contexte-de-la-covid-19/>

⁷⁵ Ministère de l'éducation nationale et de la jeunesse de France (2020). Coronavirus — COVID-19: informations et recommandations pour les établissements scolaires, les personnels et les familles. Ministry website. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.education.gouv.fr/coronavirus-covid-19-informations-et-recommandations-pour-les-etablissements-scolaires-les-274253>

⁷⁶ ABC News (2020). Schools are reopening, so here's a guide to the situation in each state and territory. ABC News. 4th May 2020. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-05-04/australian-schools-reopening-after-coronavirus-closures/12211526>

and there are no simple answers. Some of the approaches used in practice have already proved problematic. In Cyprus, for example, high school students returned to class in May 2020 on a half-time basis, attending school on a rota for five days each fortnight. When at home, they were simply expected to join in the classes via online video streaming. Press reports indicated that many students were finding this very difficult.⁷⁷ Guidance documents issued at national or provincial level tend to place great weight on health measures, but say little about the ‘how’ of blended learning and expectations regarding the use of technology. For instance, guidance from the state of California invites schools to consider provision through blended learning, but provides little detail as to how this can be done.⁷⁸ The California guidance is exemplary in its attention to the detail required for an orderly reopening, but the emphasis is on safety rather than effective blended pedagogy. The primacy of health concerns is reflected in the fact there are only two references to digital ‘devices’ in the detailed guidance document, one highlighting the risk of transmitting infection through the sharing of devices in class.

Country-level responses to reopening rarely emphasise the importance of data. The advice of international organisations rightly stresses the importance of collecting up-to-date information during the reopening phase to enable monitoring and, if necessary, the adaptation of the reopening approach.⁷⁹ Data should be gathered on student attendance, retention, engagement and achievement.⁸⁰ The use of disaggregated data is particularly important in identifying and tracking the engagement of at-risk students.⁸¹

Another aspect that has received relatively little attention from the planning and coordination of school reopening efforts is the need for accountability mechanisms for schools and teachers. The urgency of the situation and the time pressure under which reopening plans are being drawn up has, it seems, forced accountability concerns into the background. Clear communication of roles and responsibilities and checks on compliance and quality can be used to ensure that reopening occurs in a safe, coordinated and efficient manner that benefits all children.

The ‘new normal’ will require teachers to provide blended learning, integrating face-to-face instruction with different forms of distance education. Immediate country-level responses say little about how this should be done. Previously identified challenges relating to online learning persist and have the potential to undermine the work of schools in the reopening phase, and new blended learning offers are likely to exacerbate inequalities if issues around the digital divide are not addressed. For instance, hardware and connectivity are not always available to disadvantaged students. The 2018 PISA report included the results of a survey of school principals, which showed that even among the comparatively affluent OECD countries, 30 to 60% of students in disadvantaged communities attend schools that are lacking in technology.⁸² The move to online learning and the digital divide has meant that disadvantaged students have been less able to participate in remote education than some of

⁷⁷ Cyprus Mail (2020) Coronavirus: Students return but complaints that online learning for those at home failed <https://cyprus-mail.com/2020/05/11/coronavirus-students-return-but-complaints-that-online-learning-for-those-at-home-failed/>

⁷⁸ State of California (2020) Stronger Together: A Guidebook for the Safe Reopening of California’s Public Schools. State website [Online]. Available at: <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/he/hn/coronavirus.asp>

⁷⁹ Carvalho et al. (2020).

⁸⁰ Shah et al. (2020).

⁸¹ Shanker, A., Marian, D., Swimmer, C. (2015).

⁸² OECD (2019). PISA 2018 Background questionnaires. in *PISA 2018 Assessment and Analytical Framework*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/67e1518f-en>; OECD (2020a). Education disrupted – education rebuilt: Some insights from PISA on the availability and use of digital tools for learning <https://oecdeditoday.com/coronavirus-education-digital-tools-for-learning/>

their peers.⁸³ There is a very serious risk that this situation will continue into the phase of school reopening.

Technological inequalities have also posed additional challenges for children with special educational needs.⁸⁴ Technology-assisted learning has much potential for students with disabilities.⁸⁵ Technologies such as text-to-speech, speech-to-text, or special keyboards all become critical when the learner's only avenue to learning is through the computer. However, little to no evidence has been found of countries using the potential of technology to improve the quality of education for students with disabilities during Covid-19-related school closures or in the reopening phase.

Thinking long-term: the role of education technology in increasing systems resilience and building back better

System resilience

A recent OECD report states that 'disruption is the new normal, at least for the next 18 months'.⁸⁶ Plans for reopening should therefore envisage multiple scenarios including the possibility of repeated school closures. Some countries have already addressed the risks of repeated periods of remote learning, albeit usually on a small scale. Japan's plan for reopening includes having home learning measures in place, so that students who have been able to come back to school but subsequently return into quarantine can continue learning.⁸⁷ China has put reporting and response mechanisms in place in case of two or more students or staff within one school developing symptoms.⁸⁸ The need for provision for renewed school closure has been demonstrated in Israel and France. In both countries, there have been localised outbreaks of infection requiring local school closure.⁸⁹

⁸³ McAleavy, A., Joynes, C., Gibbs, E., & Kate Sims. What steps are being taken to reach the most disadvantaged students during the period of Covid-19 school closure?. EdTech Hub. May 2020. [Online]. Available at:

<https://edtechhub.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/disadvantaged-students.pdf>

⁸⁴ Schaeffer, K. (2020). As schools shift to online learning amid pandemic, here's what we know about disabled students in the U.S. Pew Research Centre. 23rd April 2020. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/04/23/as-schools-shift-to-online-learning-amid-pandemic-heres-what-we-know-about-disabled-students-in-the-u-s/>

⁸⁵ Castelo, M. (2020). Using Assistive Technology to Empower Students with Disabilities. EdTechMagazine. 31st March 2020. [Online]. Available at: <https://edtechmagazine.com/k12/article/2020/03/using-assistive-technology-empower-students-disabilities-perfcon>

⁸⁶ OECD (2020a). Corona virus special edition: Back to school. Trends Shaping Education Spotlight 21. 15th April 2020. [Online]. Available at: http://www.oecd.org/education/cei/Spotlight-21-Coronavirus-special-edition-Back-to-school.pdf_p.2

⁸⁷ Sim, W. (2020). Japan issues guidelines to curb virus for schools set to reopen next month. Straits Times. 25th March 2020. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/east-asia/japan-issues-guidelines-to-curb-virus-for-schools-set-to-reopen-next-month>

⁸⁸ World Bank (2020c)

⁸⁹ Haaretz (2020) Nearly 100 Schools Closed Since Reopening as Coronavirus Cases in Israel Rise 5 June 2020.

[Online]. Available at: <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/coronavirus-israel-news-updates-breaking-1.8888326>; Europe 1 (2020) Coronavirus : combien d'écoles ont recensé des suspicions de cas depuis la reprise ? 17 May 2020. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.europe1.fr/societe/combien-decoles-ont-recense-des-cas-de-coronavirus-depuis-la-reprise-3968897>

Beyond planning for repeated outbreaks of Covid-19, international organisations have been urging countries to invest in building up the resilience of their education systems.⁹⁰ They also point to the fact that in countries in which past crises have led to school closures, system leaders were able to learn from their experiences. Hong Kong has, for example, revisited some of the messaging and built on the guidelines from the 2003 SARS outbreak.⁹¹ In its current crisis management Sierra Leone, has been able to draw on the structure and experience of special task forces put in place to respond to Ebola in 2015.⁹² In both contexts, the prior use of remote education modalities meant that students and teachers were more familiar with them during Covid-19. A review of the lessons learned from the current crisis would therefore be valuable in increasing the resilience of education systems around the world.

Further recommendations to build resilience include the strengthening of technological and professional capacity for distance learning, for example, through partnerships with communications providers, or by training teachers in remote education. The Canadian province of Quebec has announced that students who do not have access to technological tools will be provided with tablets and internet access. This initiative is undertaken in partnership with Telus and Apple. The tablets will also have full access to the state's online education platform.⁹³ A similar project has been implemented in South Korea. As mentioned above, the effective use of education technology goes beyond the mere provision of hardware and connectivity. A more resilient education system would also require teachers to be able to integrate technology into their teaching, be it face-to-face or remotely.

Building back better

The World Bank has called for countries to use the Covid-19 crisis as an opportunity to “build back better” and to design more equitable education systems that move beyond the failures of the past.⁹⁴ New Zealand has, partially, heeded this advice in their 2020 national budget, which was announced on 14th May 2020. It states that:

*...the Covid-19 pandemic has brought significant challenges to how we deliver education for children and young people. It has highlighted the need for a core service that is built on strong foundations, resilient to disruption, and able to adapt and respond to changing circumstances.*⁹⁵

While the New Zealand government acknowledges that the current budget will focus primarily on the immediate response to and recovery from Covid-19, it highlights that building resilience is a long-term goal. In a push for a more equitable education system, it has, for example, pledged \$200 million “to support Māori learners and whānau to reconnect and succeed in education post Covid-19”.⁹⁶

⁹⁰ E.g. World Bank (2020c); Colao, A., Piscitelli, P., Pulimeno, M., Colazzo, S., Miani, A., Giannini, S. (2020). Rethinking the role of the school after COVID-19. Lancet Public Health. 25th May 2020.

DOI:[https://doi.org/10.1016/S2468-2667\(20\)30124-9](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2468-2667(20)30124-9)

⁹¹ UNESCO (2020a).

⁹² UNESCO (2020a).

⁹³ Government of Quebec (2020). Preschools and elementary and secondary schools during the COVID-19 pandemic. Ministry website. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.quebec.ca/en/education/preschool-elementary-and-secondary-schools/etablissements-scolaires-prescolaires-primaires-et-secondaires-dans-le-contexte-de-la-covid-19/>

⁹⁴ World Bank (2020a).

⁹⁵ Ministry of Education. Government of New Zealand (2020b). Budget 2020. Ministry website. 14th May 2020. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.education.govt.nz/our-work/publications/budget-2020/>

⁹⁶ Ministry of Education. Government of New Zealand (2020c). Budget 2020 announced. Ministry website. 14th May 2020 [Online]. Available at: <https://www.education.govt.nz/news/budget-2020-announced/>

However, the New Zealand response is untypical. To date, the approach in most countries has been preoccupied with crisis management and has not begun to explore the opportunities for system transformation.

Identifying risks that can limit the effectiveness of school reopening

We have attempted to show diagrammatically (see Figure 3) the expected cause and effect relationships underpinning policy for reopening in several (mostly high-income and middle-income) countries where plans for reopening have been implemented or are at an advanced stage. This analysis is based on our view of the tacit logic that underpins the plans. Overall, the logic seems to us to be convincing but subject to certain assumptions that constitute risk factors and create potential points of failure.

On the diagram, the assumptions for effective reopening are detailed below the phase during which they are most relevant. The support of staff and parents is, for example, particularly important during the early parts of reopening. We have seen, in countries like Israel and Germany, that a lack of such support can delay the return to schools. Teachers' ability to carry out learning loss assessments and to deliver education based on blended learning becomes most relevant once students have returned to schools.

In most countries, the initial phase of reopening involves a shorter school week, with face-to-face instruction combined with home learning. Using shifts or rota systems (where students are allocated face-to-face days), students attend school part-time and study at home part-time. This is a potential point of failure if students lack the equipment and connectivity for home learning and teachers lack the skills needed for what is (for most) an unprecedented way of working. In many cases, students will lack the supportive home environment conducive to home learning. The students least likely to thrive in the world of blended learning are, therefore, those who come disadvantaged backgrounds.

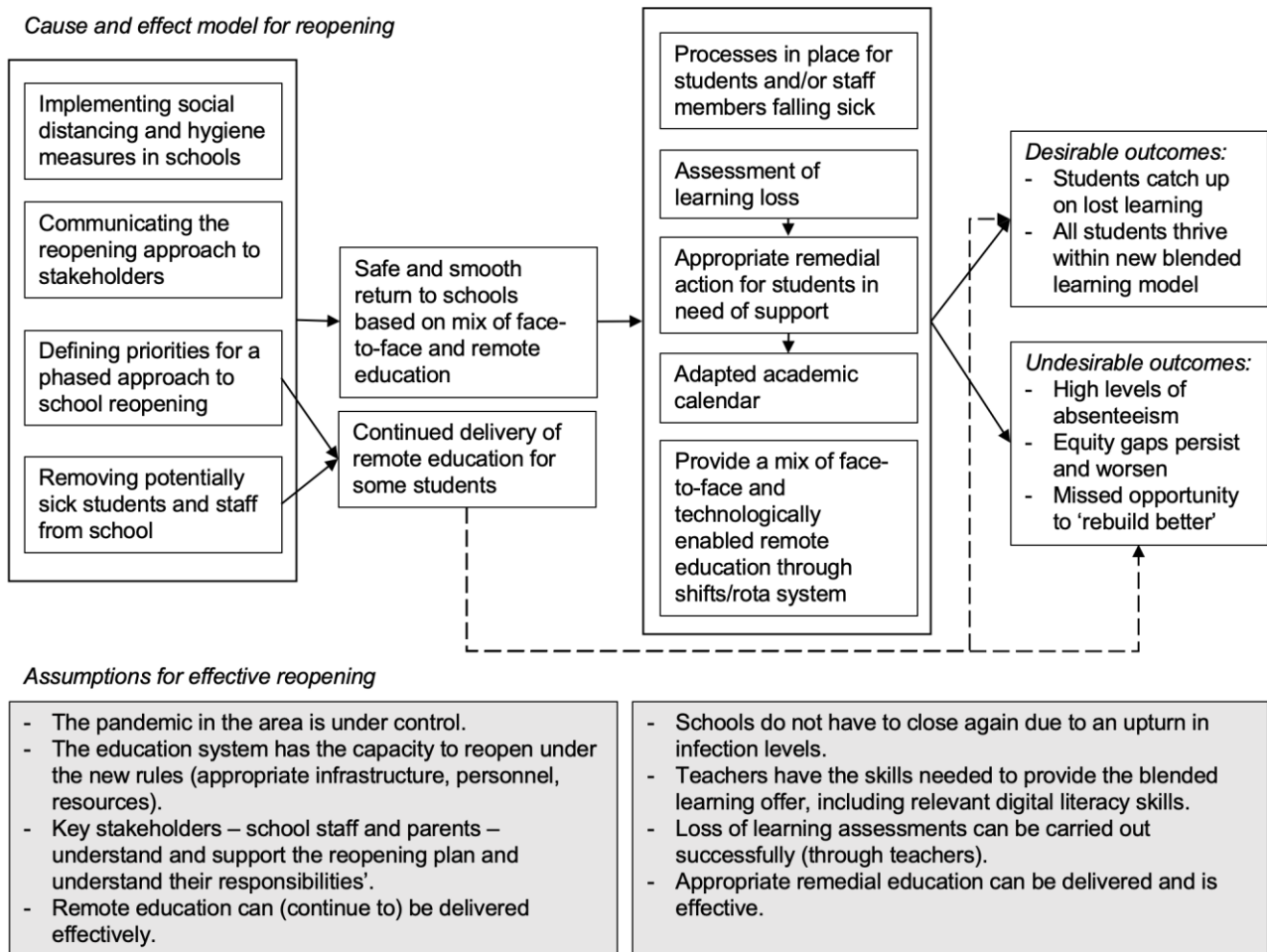


Figure 3: Expectations and risks regarding cause and effect

The cause and effect model illustrated in Figure 3 is an attempt to capture the essence of the planning theory for reopening underpinning a sample of country-level responses. As discussed, the achievement of the desired outcomes depends upon a series of conditional assumptions that may not always apply. Policymakers need, therefore, to ensure proactively that these conditions apply, otherwise they are unlikely to see the desired outcomes..

In our view, ensuring the validity of these assumptions is necessary but not sufficient to guarantee the success of schools reopening and to avoid the possible undesirable outcomes. To be effective, plans also need to be implemented in a way that is data-driven and adaptive. As stated above, in country-level responses, we could find only limited evidence of emphasis on the importance of gathering disaggregated data relating to the participation level of absenteeism of students from different backgrounds. Without fine grained data about the engagement of students from different backgrounds or in different geographical localities, it will be impossible for policymakers to measure the success of reopening policies. Moreover, without data of this sort, policymakers will not be able to adapt aspects of implementation in response to emerging evidence.

In addition to granular data, successful implementation will benefit from robust accountability mechanisms. However, as we have noted, accountability receives little attention in most country-level

responses and in guidance from international bodies. Checks are necessary to ensure that schools comply with health and safety requirements, and the quality of educational provision should also be monitored in a proportionate manner. While teachers resent heavy-handed monitoring, which can be counter-productive, policymakers have a duty to check that students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, are taught well. The need is to ensure that teachers, operating in the demanding new world of 'blended learning', receive a judicious mix of both support and accountability.

The challenge of reopening schools in a low-income (and lower-middle-income) context

The great majority of schools that have reopened are in high-income or middle-income countries. Few schools have reopened in low-income and lower-middle-income countries, but there are exceptions. To date, schools have reopened in Benin, Madagascar and Laos.⁹⁷ In the great majority of cases, however, governments are still in the planning phase. This is true both of most low-income countries and several populous lower-middle-income countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

At the time of writing, there is a debate in many countries about the plans for reopening. Some of the decision-making and messaging has been confusing and erratic. The reopening decision is high-profile and politicians and civil servants at ministry level can be overruled by higher authorities. In the Philippines, for example, a plan had been announced for school reopening to begin in late August. The public announcements of the education ministry were countermanded by the president who stated that there will be no reopening until a vaccine for Covid-19 is discovered.⁹⁸ In Senegal, the planned reopening of some schools on 2 June was cancelled by presidential action the night before, causing considerable confusion at local levels.⁹⁹ Teachers in Madagascar, meanwhile, learned about the reopening of their schools largely through the president's twitter account.¹⁰⁰ The short notice and lack of information led critics to conclude that the reopening should have been more gradual, better organised and more clearly communicated.¹⁰¹

Policymakers facing broadly similar circumstances have often reached very different conclusions. Laos and Cambodia, for instance, are neighbouring countries, and in both cases, the level of Covid-19 infection, according to public statistics, has been very low. Officially, there have been no deaths in either country. While schools have reopened in Laos, there is no plan for any reopening of schools in Cambodia before November 2020 at the earliest.¹⁰²

⁹⁷ <https://www.cgdev.org/blog/back-school-tracking-covid-cases-schools-reopen>
http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-06/02/c_139107698.htm

⁹⁸ Straits Times (2020) Coronavirus: No vaccine, no school reopening in Philippines, Duterte says. 27 May 2020. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/no-vaccine-no-school-reopening-duterte-says>

⁹⁹ All Africa (2020). Sénégal: Coronavirus - La réouverture partielle des écoles finalement reportée sine die. 2 June 2020. [Online]. Available at: <https://fr.allafrica.com/stories/202006020838.html>

¹⁰⁰ Rajoelina, A. (2020). Twitter Post. 20th April 2020. [Online]. Available at: https://twitter.com/SE_Rajoelina

¹⁰¹ Mandimisoa, R. (2020). Déconfinement : réticence face au retour dans les écoles. Madagascar Tribune. 25th April 2020. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.madagascar-tribune.com/Reticence-face-au-retour-dans-les-ecoles.html>; Honore, R. L. (2020). Retour aux écoles. Les élèves comme cobayes ? Agence Malagasy de Presse. 20th April 2020. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.agencemalagasydepresse.com/politique/retour-aux-ecoles-les-eleves-comme-cobayes/>

¹⁰² Xinhuanet (2020). Lao students returning to schools. 19 May 2020. [Online]. Available at: http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-05/19/c_139069240.htm; Phnom Penh Post (2020). School reopening to be

While the reopening process is highly challenging to policymakers in resource-poor countries, there have been examples of purposeful policymaking. Some governments have made strenuous efforts to base their plans on consultation. In Kenya, the government instated a task force to coordinate the reopening plan with stakeholders. The task force received and reviewed 3,000 submissions from individuals and institutions, who contributed their thoughts and concerns about the reopening process.¹⁰³ The education sector response in Sierra Leone was developed in consultation with key international partners: the World Bank, the European Union, UNICEF, DFID and Irish Aid.¹⁰⁴ In some countries, there has been a recognition of the urgent need to ensure enrolment from disadvantaged groups after school reopening. As part of their reopening plans, the government of Zambia is planning a school feeding programme that targets the economically worst-hit area, to reduce dropouts.¹⁰⁵ Pakistan is planning to conduct back-to-school campaigns, which should “include procedures for finding students who do not return to school and actions to take that will enable their return”.¹⁰⁶ The government of Chad is one of the few countries that has published an education response including three possible scenarios and associated budgets for the development of the pandemic. These scenarios range from a quick return to schools to protracted school closures.¹⁰⁷

The planning response of the government of Sierra Leone is impressive. The proposals for communication are grounded in the specifics of the national context. The government stated their intention to make their communications outreach campaigns child-friendly, accessible to people with low literacy, those with disabilities, those in rural remote areas and those without access to technology.¹⁰⁸ The approach is consistent with international best practice. Well-coordinated, consistent communication through various channels can improve the spread of information. Information on government websites, television, or radio messages can be combined with mass SMS or advertisement in print.¹⁰⁹

Proactive communication is one way of reducing the risk that some vulnerable groups will fail to return to school. From past experiences of back-to-school campaigns, we know that messages on local and social media announcing the return to schools can be particularly useful in ensuring that

postponed until November. 13 May 2020. [Online]. Available online: <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/school-reopening-be-postponed-until-november>

¹⁰³ Wanzala, O. (2020). Uhuru gives hint on reopening of schools. Daily Nation. 27th May 2020. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.nation.co.ke/news/education/Uhuru-reopening-of-schools-covid-19-2643604-5561916-lfepc8/index.html>

¹⁰⁴ Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education. Government of Sierra Leone (2020). COVID-19 Emergency Response Plan. May 2020. [Online]. Available at: <https://planipolis.iiep.unesco.org/sites/planipolis/files/ressources/sierra-leone-covid19-education-response-plan-pdf.pdf>

¹⁰⁵ Ministry of General Education. Republic of Zambia. (2020). Education Contingency Plan for Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19). [Online]. Available at: <https://planipolis.iiep.unesco.org/sites/planipolis/files/ressources/moge-novel-coronavirus-covid-19-response-and-recovery-plan-2020-final.pdf>

¹⁰⁶ Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training. Government of Pakistan (2020). Pakistan National Education Response and Resilience Plan (K-12) for COVID-19. 4th May 2020. [Online]. Available at: <https://planipolis.iiep.unesco.org/sites/planipolis/files/ressources/pakistan-national-education-response-resilience-plan-covid-19.pdf>

¹⁰⁷ Ministère De L'enseignement Supérieur, De La Recherche Et De L'innovation. République Du Tchad (2020). Plan De Mise En Œuvre De La Continuité Pédagogique Dans Le Contexte Du Covid-19. [Online]. Available At: https://Planipolis.Iiep.Unesco.Org/Sites/Planipolis/Files/Ressources/Chad_Plan_De_Mise_En_Oeuvre_De_La_Continue_Pedagogique.Pdf

¹⁰⁸ Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education. Government of Sierra Leone (2020). COVID-19 Emergency Response Plan. May 2020. [Online]. Available at: <https://planipolis.iiep.unesco.org/sites/planipolis/files/ressources/sierra-leone-covid19-education-response-plan-pdf.pdf>

¹⁰⁹ Carvalho et al. (2020).

girls continue their education after school closures.¹¹⁰ Additionally, providing economic incentives to send children to school, such as waiving school fees, providing free meals or even enabling cash transfers, can increase the percentage of children returning to school, rather than engaging in child labour.¹¹¹ In Sierra Leone, the government waived school fees for two years after the Ebola epidemic, and to offset the education costs borne by families, development partners, civil society organisations and NGOs provided books, uniforms, and school supplies.¹¹²

The education response and recovery plan produced by the government of Sierra Leone has rightly emphasised the importance, for the foreseeable future, of supported home learning. The distance learning ‘pillar’ of the plan includes five components: i) access to continuous learning opportunities using radio, digital and community learning centres; ii) content development and validation for continuous teaching and learning; iii) review, assess and evaluate teaching and learning via distance learning; iv) procurement and dissemination on enabling devices (radios, phones) to support engagement; and v) engagement and inclusion of teachers in continuous distance learning.¹¹³

While there are examples of thoughtful responses at the planning stage, it is difficult to understate the challenge of school reopening in resource-poor contexts, where schools are often overcrowded. Ensuring safety and hygiene measures is proving problematic for many high-income countries, but many of the measures being introduced in high-income countries to ensure the health and wellbeing of students and staff during school reopening will be even more difficult to manage in poorer countries. Student-teacher ratios are, of course, much less favourable than is the case in high-income countries. According to the World Bank, the average number of students per teacher in the European Union was 13, compared to 29 students in lower-middle-income countries and 40 students in low-income countries.¹¹⁴ In some low-income countries, teacher-student ratios are, of course, much higher than this average figure. Moreover, according to a 2018 UNICEF report, less than 25% of schools in sub-Saharan Africa can provide running water and soap, and less than half of the schools in Philippines, Indonesia and Cambodia have the sanitary facilities to enable regular handwashing.¹¹⁵

Much of the current uncertainty around planning for reopening apparent in low-income and lower-middle-income countries is an understandable response to a policy problem of great magnitude. There is an urgent need to help schools in low-resource settings to become hubs for learning where social distancing is possible and teachers are able to provide a mix of classroom and home learning. Technology can play a part in this mix, but policies need to recognise that millions of the least advantaged students lack access to even the most basic forms of technology.

¹¹⁰ World Bank (2020a).

¹¹¹ Carvalho, S., Rossiter, J., Angrist, N., Hares, S., & Silverman, R. (2020). Planning for School Reopening and Recovery After COVID-19. Centre for Global Development. Policy Papers. 29th May 2020. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.cgdev.org/sites/default/files/planning-school-reopening-and-recovery-after-covid-19.pdf>

¹¹² World Bank (2015). *Back to School after the Ebola out- break*. Washington, DC: World Bank. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2015/05/01/back-to-school-after-ebola-outbreak>

¹¹³ Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education. Government of Sierra Leone (2020). COVID-19 Emergency Response Plan. May 2020. [Online]. Available at: <https://planipolis.iiep.unesco.org/sites/planipolis/files/ressources/sierra-leone-covid19-education-response-plan-pdf.pdf>

¹¹⁴ World Bank (2020b). Pupil-teacher ratio, primary — European Union, Low income, Lower middle income. [Online]. Available at: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.PRM.ENRL.TC.ZS?locations=EU-XM-XN&view=chart>

¹¹⁵ UNICEF & World Health Organization (2018). Drinking water, sanitation and hygiene in schools: global baseline report 2018. New York: United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and World Health Organization. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.unicef.org/media/47671/file/JMP-WASH-in-Schools-ENG.pdf>

Section 3: Recommendations to policymakers

Effective planning

Policy for the reopening of schools should be based on a secure, evidence-informed, theory of change, with major risks, and action needed to mitigate each risk, precisely identified. The risks should cover both health and education issues and should address the danger that school reopening will exacerbate problems of equity in educational outcomes.

School reopening needs to be planned in a way that is consistent with public health advice and based on a detailed assessment of readiness for opening at the level of every individual school. Before being granted permission to open, each school should meet agreed hygiene standards. Effective arrangements should be put in place for vulnerable students who are not able to return to school due to health risks.

In some countries there will be a need to take vigorous action to ensure that specific groups of students, such as girls or students with disabilities, return after school reopening.

Planning should ensure that schools- at whole system or local level- can be closed again at short notice in case of a rise in infections. Appropriate arrangements for educational continuity need to be in place in the event of further closure.

In most countries, policymakers will need to restrict the hours of classroom time in order to reduce class sizes and ensure social distancing. This will require decisions about how to ration face-to-face time through shift or daily rota systems. In this context, there will be a need to ensure that reopened schools offer students a well-planned programme of blended learning opportunities, comprising some face-to-face classroom time integrated with home learning activities.

Data analysis and adaptive implementation

Policymakers need data from the frontline to ensure effective implementation of school reopening. Checks should be put in place to ensure compliance with health and safety requirements. There should also be systems to monitor the quality of education provision at school level. Disaggregated data should be gathered and analysed so that the engagement levels of different groups of students are carefully tracked. The level of learning loss of students should be measured. Policy implementation should be adaptive, using quality assurance data and data relating to student engagement and learning to identify and correct implementation problems.

Coordination and communication

Successful reopening will depend upon a high level of trust based on the part of key stakeholders, including students, parents and caregivers and teachers. Stakeholder engagement should be a priority. There will be a need to persuade students, parents, and teachers that the reopened schools are safe. Policymakers should consult formally with representative bodies and make good use of mass media and social media to communicate key messages.

Expectations regarding the work of education professionals in the process of reopening should be clearly communicated. The definition of roles should cover teachers and school leaders and others such as district level officials.

The potential of technology

There is a possible role for technology in every aspect of the process of reopening schools. Mass media and social media should be used to promote key messages about reopening to stakeholders, including students, parents/caregivers and teachers. Monitoring of arrangements for reopening should involve student, parent and teacher 'voice'; policymakers should use technology to elicit the frontline perspective of key stakeholders through digital surveys. Once schools reopen, appropriate technology should be used to gather and analyse data relating to such key indicators as student attendance and student learning loss. There will be an ongoing need to collect, transfer and analyse data relating to attendance and achievement levels over time. Policymakers should consider the use of appropriate technology, such as adaptive learning software, in the design of remedial 'catch up programmes'.

Plans for the home learning component of the blended learning offer should make use of forms of technology available to the great majority of learners. Policy decisions about the role of 'high-tech' (online learning) and 'low tech' (radio/TV broadcasting) should be based on the need to ensure equitable access. Action may be required to ensure comprehensive access to devices, such as laptops, and radios or TVs. Internet connectivity and costs might also constitute a barrier to equitable provision requiring action by policymakers. In all countries, technologically-enabled provision should be linked to a 'no tech safety net' which enables students without access to technology to learn when at home.

Teachers will require training in the delivery of the 'blended learning' offer and the use of technology.

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