School reopening: ensuring learning continuity

Introduction

Countries across the globe are gradually reopening or planning for the reopening of schools and other education institutions, after several months of closure, as part of wider efforts to curb the spread of COVID-19. UNESCO has been monitoring school closures and reopening and makes information available online.¹

Various resources have already been produced on school reopening, addressing key concerns around the timing, conditions and processes, as well as the preparedness of the education system and the school population to resume classroom-based learning. These include the Framework for reopening schools,² issued jointly by UNESCO, UNICEF, the World Bank and WFP, as well as a UNESCO Resource Paper³, synthesizing information from various resources, including a webinar⁴ on the same topic.

Building on these resources and other existing information, the current document focuses on measures and actions to be taken to ensure learning continuity once schools reopen.

¹ https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse
³ https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000373401
Defining the topic and related key issues

Schools and other education institutions are reopening against a backdrop of numerous concerns. Based on their needs and priorities, Ministries of Education (MOEs) will need to identify the most appropriate approaches to ensure continuity of learning and meet learning objectives, while implementing health protocols and social distancing measures. They will also need to anticipate and prepare for additional challenges resulting from the direct and indirect consequences of COVID-19 and the prolonged social isolation, both on the education system and on the school community. School closures have also brought about a major disruption in children’s lives, affecting their socio-emotional development and well-being, as well as their social life and relationships at school, which will require special attention.

From a pedagogical perspective, the immediate preoccupations from the prolonged school closures include, among others, learning loss, how to assess it and offer remedial action, exacerbation of existing learning gaps and inequalities and emergence of new ones, as well as an increased risk of psychosocial trauma and drop out. Managing the back-to-school transition will require remedial action and possible adjustments, including among others to the school calendar, learning objectives, delivery modalities, as well as assessment and certification practices. Administrative and staffing issues to address include absenteeism and potentially loss of education personnel, the need for additional education personnel to implement social distancing measures, teacher workload and demand for additional skills for teachers, such as in blended education delivery modalities and in offering psycho-social support, among others. The demanding task of enabling continued learning in the crisis context, often with limited or no resources and training, call for deeper examination of how teachers have been prepared and supported during the period of school closures and what lessons have been learned and will be applied once schools reopen.

Back-to-school strategies need to ensure the readiness of education systems for school reopening, learning continuity, and system resilience to anticipate, reduce the risk of and deal with a possible viral resurgence or other crises. Key steps MOEs can take to ensure learning continues as schools reopen, include the following:

1. **Protect** from infection
2. **Care** for mental and psycho-social wellbeing
3. **Support** quality and inclusive learning
4. **Prepare** for resurgence and future crises

Protecting the physical and mental health of the school population and preparing for a potential viral resurgence are shared concerns among countries, irrespective of their context. However, decisions around ensuring continuity of school-based learning will differ from country to country as these depend to a great extent on the school calendar. In some countries, school reopening will occur at the end of the school year, in others at the beginning or in the middle, posing different considerations and priorities in each context.
Lessons from past practices and current crisis

The current COVID-19 crisis has helped speed up processes in decision-making, has favoured the adoption of flexible approaches and has reinforced networking and communication among various partners. Many lessons can be drawn from this situation, below are just a few that can be mentioned with relation to facilitating learning continuity following school reopening:

✓ Flexibility over rigidity, from decision-making processes, planning and school calendar to pedagogy, delivery modalities, assessment and certification, has been the major *modus operandi*.

✓ Enhanced communication, networking and peer learning within and among various stakeholders at various levels - ministers, administrators, teachers, parents, students, development partners and others - has been catalytic, from ensuring programme implementation to reaching out to most vulnerable students. In Burkina Faso, for example, the MOE has set up committees from ministerial to communal levels to coordinate and monitor the implementation of the education response plan. In Curaçao, weekly meetings with all the school boards on the work of schools and teachers have enabled keeping track of vulnerable children.

✓ Students’ and teachers’ overall physical and psycho-social health and well-being is a human right but also a prerequisite to learning. MOEs are now taking extra measures to protect both the physical and the mental health of the entire school population.

✓ Distance learning, especially through online platforms, has brought along opportunities but also challenges and risks, including a widening digital divide and inequalities between those who have access to technology and the internet and those that do not, as well as the need to protect students and their personal information while online, among others.

✓ Predictable and unpredictable socioeconomic transformations, or other, such as the current COVID-19 crisis, call for diversified educational contents and curricula which build competences (knowledge, skills, values, attitudes, and behaviours) and not focus merely on academic achievement. Schools need to prepare students to navigate through life and deal with the challenges, uncertainties and opportunities it brings. Various UNESCO initiatives\(^5\) support the development of diversified curricula, including Education for Sustainable Development,\(^6\) the Futures of Education,\(^7\) Global Citizenship Education,\(^8\) Social and Emotional Learning for Global Citizenship,\(^9\) the Universal Learning Programme,\(^10\) as well as a new initiative which capitalizes on the science of happiness to enhance learning and promote well-being at school, to be launched soon.

✓ Crisis do not affect all students equally. Those from vulnerable socio-economic groups, living with disability, exposed to violence and other adverse conditions, particularly girls and women, require additional attention to prevent education and broader inequalities and foster social cohesion. A UNDP study found that in Sierra Leone, teenage pregnancy increased by 65% in some communities during the Ebola crisis, as school closures left them more exposed to gender-based violence.\(^11\)

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\(^{5}\) [https://en.unesco.org/themes/education](https://en.unesco.org/themes/education)

\(^{6}\) [https://en.unesco.org/themes/education-sustainable-development](https://en.unesco.org/themes/education-sustainable-development)

\(^{7}\) [https://en.unesco.org/futuresofeducation/initiative](https://en.unesco.org/futuresofeducation/initiative)

\(^{8}\) [https://en.unesco.org/themes/eced](https://en.unesco.org/themes/eced)

\(^{9}\) [https://mgep.unesco.org/socio-emotional-learning-for-global-citizenship](https://mgep.unesco.org/socio-emotional-learning-for-global-citizenship)


Key messages and practical tips for designing policy interventions

When it comes to reopening schools, the “consult, coordinate, and communicate” approach is key. School leaders should communicate with the community actively, transparently and widely, in order to ensure a smooth transition back to schools, where no one is left behind. Below are practical issues that MOEs need to consider in order to facilitate the back-to-school transition. The list is not exhaustive and can be complemented by other appropriate actions based on local contexts and needs.

1. Protect from infection

School closures have been implemented as part of wider measures to stop the further spread of COVID-19 and protect public health. This continues to be the overall priority of MOEs as schools reopen. Health protocols, with clear hygiene measures and guidelines on preventing, detecting and controlling infections, should be produced and communicated to schools and families. Special efforts should be made to reach vulnerable groups who might have less access to information channels. School Administrators need to raise awareness among the school population and ensure these health protocols are implemented. Available resources on this topic include the Considerations for school-related public health measures in the context of COVID-19, issued by the World Health Organization (WHO) and others.13

2. Care for mental and psycho-social wellbeing

Students’ overall physical and psycho-social health and well-being is a human right and a prerequisite to learning. Caring for the mental and psychosocial well-being of teachers and students upon their return to school, following months of confinement and social isolation, and having dealt with COVID-19 directly or indirectly, should be a priority to ensure their preparedness for teaching and learning.

For example, in China, the MOE has issued a guidance14 for strengthening mental health education. The guidance focuses on helping students adapting to back-to-school life; evaluating teachers’ and students’ mental health and adopting mental health education programmes, courses and activities; providing individual psychological counselling for students; relieving teachers’ professional stress; guiding staff to conduct education and teaching activities; setting up long-term professional psychological interventions; referral and support services for individual teachers and students affected by the epidemic; providing support to students in their final year to help them prepare for exams with confidence and stability; and, strengthening communication between families and school, guiding home education and assisting parents in establishing good parent-child relationships.

Students

The prolonged school closures have brought about a major disruption in children’s lives. Schools are important spaces for children’s development, not only for facilitating learning but also as spaces of socialization, protection and socio-emotional development. Lack of access to school also means lack of access to nutrition, protection, health and other social services for many children who live in disadvantaged or unsafe homes. Social isolation imposed by confinement measures have also kept children away from vital activities for their development, such as play and social interaction. A recent survey15 by Save the Children of over 6,000 children and parents in Finland, Germany, Spain, the United Kingdom and the United States reveals that almost one in four children are dealing with feelings of

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anxiety, with many at risk of depression. Lockdown measures have also increased the risk of children witnessing or experiencing violence, including domestic violence.\textsuperscript{16}

Health issues compromise children’s ability to learn and schools must provide holistic approaches to address their learning, physical health and socio-emotional needs. Options include hiring health specialists to support students, especially those from vulnerable backgrounds\textsuperscript{17} or training teachers and other focal points, establishing dedicated teams, telephone lines and other services. For example, in Mexico, the first weeks of school reopening are dedicated to assessing students’ emotional status and help them deal with their feelings. In France, the MOE issued a guide on how to manage students’ emotions,\textsuperscript{18} and in St Lucia, schools provide counselling services.

**Teachers**

Uncertainty linked to the crisis, additional workload and the reopening of schools is also generating stress among teachers too. Some countries have integrated psychological support into their contingency plans, manuals and guides for teachers, as is the case in Benin, Senegal, or India. In some places, mentoring systems have been introduced, through which teachers give news and share potential problems they encounter with distance education.

Teachers may also need training to support their students. Where health specialists are not available, teachers should be able to receive children and help them understand and deal with the situation and address stigmatization. For example, in Myanmar, as part of a pre-service teacher training programme\textsuperscript{19} and its emergency response to COVID-19, priority is given to the health, safety and wellbeing of staff and students of teacher colleges. A Psychosocial Support Focal Point System was established with teacher educators from 25 Education Colleges. Focal points received a two-day online training on the basic concepts of psychosocial support and psychosocial first aid in May 2020. Participants provided very positive feedback and reported feeling confident to offer counselling and support to both fellow teachers and students. In New Zealand, the MOE organized a webinar on teacher well-being.\textsuperscript{20}

Measures to raise teachers’ awareness on psycho-social risks are also taken in various countries, such as Burkina Faso, where a training module validated by the Ministry of Health will be made available to all teachers, and in Chad, where the government is working in partnership with humanitarian NGOs, particularly in refugee camps.

3. Support quality and inclusive learning

Once schools reopen, decisions about resuming classroom-based learning, adjusting the curriculum, textbooks, and pedagogy to ensure continuity of teaching and learning, will depend on the school calendar in each country. Adjustments will also be necessary due to social distancing rules, allowing only a specific number of students per class and which may necessitate a blended approach of both classroom-based and distance learning.

Countries at the beginning or in the middle of the school year will be more concerned with ensuring continuity of learning, identifying learning loss, readjusting learning objectives and priorities, implementing remedial and/or accelerated learning programmes, using blended learning approaches (classroom and distance learning) and consider assessment modalities. Countries at the end of the school year will be focusing on what is realistic and feasible, such as on offering psychosocial support,

\textsuperscript{17} https://theconversation.com/4-strategies-to-support-vulnerable-students-when-schools-reopen-after-coronavirus-136201
\textsuperscript{19} https://bangkok.unesco.org/content/emergency-covid-19-response-psychosocial-support-myanmar-education-colleges
teaching about living and dealing with COVID-19, assessing learning loss, organizing exams, planning for the next school year. A priority will be organizing examinations and assuring certification of qualifications, especially for graduating students or students transitioning to higher levels of education. All countries, including those planning for reopening in the next school year might be preoccupied about readjusting their school calendar and curriculum, designing blended delivery modalities, interactive pedagogy models, reconsidering the content and role of education and making long-term adjustments, such as incorporating crisis-sensitive planning or blended education delivery modalities.

Teacher mobilization and training

Teachers are at the frontline of education responses to COVID-19. During this crisis period they have been asked to perform multiple roles and functions to ensure continuity of learning inside and outside the classroom. To enable them to fulfil these tasks, they need appropriate training and support, especially in receiving children and offering psycho-social support, ensuring continuity of learning through combining distance and classroom-based learning and offering remedial action. Thailand, for example, seized the COVID-19 crisis as an opportunity to accelerate teacher professional development. MOE developed and launched the Digital Education Excellence Platform (DEEP), a learning platform to support teachers with tools for online teaching. 60,000 teachers have registered since its launch in May 2020. This platform will also allow MOE to monitor teachers’ performance and link it to their career advancement. MOE plans to eventually connect this to their school MIS. This is also the case in Egypt and the United Arab Emirates.

UNESCO, ILO and the International Task-Force on Teachers for Education 2030 have recently issued the Supporting teachers in back-to-school efforts: guidance for policy-makers, and a toolkit on the same topic will be issued later in June 2020. The document draws attention to the following key areas: social dialogue and communication, safety and health, psychological and socio-emotional wellbeing, teacher preparation and learning, deployment, rights and working conditions, financial resources and investments, monitoring and evaluation.

Assessing learning experience and learning loss during school closures

Many countries are implementing different types of assessments, including high-stake examinations, in order to measure the learning acquired or lost during school closures and organize remedial action and/or accelerated learning programmes. For example, standardized assessments are due to be organized in Senegal, through a national evaluation institute, to help schools, districts and central level officers estimate learning gaps, set exam dates and prepare for remedial activities. In Kenya, school assessments will be conducted once schools reopen to determine the student level of learning to design appropriate remedial programmes. In Spain, officials are considering informal assessments of all students on their return to school in an attempt to find out what level of remediation will be required. In Vietnam, the MOE conducts learning assessment once schools reopen to identify students’ knowledge gaps and groups students according to learning goals (e.g. students wishing to enter top universities will join more advanced classes).

Identifying priorities, and organising remedial actions and catch up strategies

Organizing remedial actions and catch-up strategies for students once schools reopen is necessary to ensure learning continuity and meeting learning objectives. Countries need to determine strategies and actions, both at national and school level, to mitigate impact and address immediate gaps, in consultation with concerned education stakeholders and other relevant sectors, ensuring a smooth transition from distance learning platforms to classroom delivery.

21 https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000373479
Depending on the school calendar, examples of strategies that can be implemented include: adjusting the curriculum and delivery modalities to enable the meeting of key learning objectives for the school year; promoting the use of more practical approaches to learning, such as project-based learning; implementing accelerated learning programmes, remedial and catch-up programmes, delivering a compressed or lighter curriculum; introducing supplementary teaching, tutoring, and extra-curricular non-formal learning activities. Many countries consider it important to adjust instructional time, timetables and school calendars. Countries can use selected approaches based on local context. Blended approaches, complementing classroom-based and distance learning approaches, will be useful not only during but also after the crisis. For example, in Singapore, the MOE decided to relieve the curriculum load for the graduating cohorts by removing selected topics. France is considering measures to support students during the summer, if the situation allows it. In Vietnam, Provincial Departments of Education and Training provide guidance for school-based teaching, learning and revision of curriculum content in accordance with the Ministry of Education and Training’s guidance. Schools adjust the teaching and learning timetables by assigning more instructional time (double than normal) for subjects of the national examination.

Arranging for examinations and certification

As schools reopen, countries, especially those at the end of the school calendar, are preoccupied with what to test and how, while maintaining fairness and validity. Different strategies adopted to cope with the situation include: maintaining scheduled examinations but tailoring them to the current situation; cancellation; rescheduling/postponing; holding high-stakes examinations online; and, introducing alternative approaches. The content and organization of the examinations need to be adjusted according to the situation. UNESCO developed an Issue Note and other resources on this topic, which are available online. In many cases, countries combine various approaches, such as maintaining and organizing examinations but with special arrangements (e.g. school-based examinations while applying social distancing or remote assessment with parental supervision). In certain countries exams have been cancelled, either for all or certain grades. For example, in Curacao, a ministerial regulation cancelled the central written examination for all candidates, who are given the opportunity to complete their school examinations in accordance with the Test and Closure Programme (PTA). Candidates can graduate or complete their graduation based on their school grades (except for vocational education and secondary education). Other countries introduce alternative approaches to examinations and validation of learning, based on adjusted curriculum and assessment standards (e.g. review of student’s past assessments/learning portfolio). In other countries, such as Lebanon and Syria, national examinations have been cancelled and learning assessment has shifted to teacher-based assessment.

Dealing with inequalities and vulnerable groups

During crises, existing learning inequalities are exacerbated, and new ones emerge. This is due to various factors, from lack of access to technology, basic infrastructure and services, hardships encountered by some families and their inability to adequately support their children’s learning, to broader social conditions and circumstances, such as violence, including domestic and gender-based violence, conflict, displacement, and others, with girls and women left particularly vulnerable. More information can be obtained from the UNESCO Issue Notes on conflict-affected, displaced and vulnerable populations and on the gender dimensions of school closures.

22 https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000225950
23 https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000373387
25 https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000373330
26 https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000373379
Students from vulnerable backgrounds are usually hit the hardest by crises and require particular attention to ensure that the temporary disruption in schooling does not become permanent and that all children return to school and continue learning on an equal basis. To this effect, multi-sectoral approaches that meet the needs of all students, based on the principles of inclusion, gender equality and equity, are indispensable. Back-to-school campaigns should be developed, targeting in particular children who are most at risk of dropping out of education permanently. For example, in Jordan, Field Directorates for Education examine and address the specific needs of marginalised learners. In Mexico, the MOE will deliver special training for teachers to develop a recovery programme that is inclusive of all students. In France, priority is given to vulnerable children in the progressive reopening of schools, including students with disabilities and students who have dropped out or are at risk of dropping out. In Canada, priority is given to students with learning difficulties, who are strongly encouraged to return to class as soon as possible in order to benefit from optimal educational support.

4. Prepare for resurgence and future crises

The COVID-19 crisis revealed that many countries were unprepared for crisis response. Currently, most countries do not have contingency plans and where they exist, very few mention the issue of pedagogical continuity or incorporate distance learning. One of the major lessons from the current crisis is the need to strengthen the resilience of education systems to better cope with emergency situations. Education systems need to anticipate and prepare for possible viral resurgence with multiple scenarios, from isolated, localized cases to a more widespread wave of infection. Preparing for resurgence will require system readiness to protect both the health of the school population and the learning process.

From the health perspective, health protocols need to be in place to prevent, detect early and control COVID-19 in schools. To prevent infection, ongoing communication between education and health experts in monitoring the evolution of the pandemic, at national but also local and school levels. Based on the infection rates observed, individual, localized or country-wide closures might be foreseen. For example, in Belgium health guidelines foresee a separate room for symptomatic students and staff, equipped with a thermometer, gloves and masks.

From the pedagogical perspective, countries need to consider blending education delivery modalities, both school-based and distance learning, so that there is a smooth transition between the two (or in combination), if and when the necessity arises. This will necessitate adjusting the curriculum, teaching and learning materials, preparing for necessary communication channels (e.g., internet, tablets, TV and radio), making teacher and staff contingency plans, teacher and student training, while drawing on lessons learnt from the ongoing practices.

Lessons can be drawn from experiences carried out during the Covid-19 crisis in various countries. For example, the use of social networks in Chad, Togo; messaging services in Comoros; the setting up of distance education platforms in Sri Lanka; and, the mobilization of private companies and start-ups in Tunisia to support teaching.

Incorporating crisis risk reduction and management into education planning processes can assist MOEs in planning and delivering education before, during, and after a crisis and also prepare them to better mitigate the impact of a crisis. More information about crisis-sensitive educational planning can be found in the UNESCO Issue Note on this topic.

30 https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000373277
Resuming school-based learning

Issue Note n° 7.3

Key references

UNESCO Education in Emergencies: [https://en.unesco.org/themes/education-emergencies](https://en.unesco.org/themes/education-emergencies)

UNESCO COVID-19 Education Disruption and Response: [https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse](https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse)


Teacher Guide Kit: Psychosocial Support and Learning in Difficult Circumstances [https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000265135?posInSet=76&queryId=6f673a2c-2bce49ea-a089-6118a45f7948](https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000265135?posInSet=76&queryId=6f673a2c-2bce49ea-a089-6118a45f7948)


About UNESCO Education Sector’s Issue Notes

UNESCO Education Sector’s issue notes cover key topics related to the COVID-19 education response. They provide evidence of good practices, practical tips and links to important references for each topic in an effort to mitigate the impact of school closures.

The issue notes cover several topics under nine thematic areas, namely: Health and wellbeing; Continuity of learning and teaching; Gender equity and equality; Teaching and learning; Higher education and TVET; Education and culture; Education policy and planning; Vulnerable populations, as well as Global Citizenship Education and Education for Sustainable Development.

They are prepared collectively by UNESCO education colleagues across the world. The present issue note was developed by the Section of Education Policy and the UNESCO International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP) with support from UNESCO Offices in Bangkok and Beirut.

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