



ACCELERATED EDUCATION
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COVID-19: Pathways for the Return to Learning:

Guidance on Condensing a Curriculum

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COVID-19 PATHWAYS FOR THE RETURN TO LEARNING: Guidance on Condensing a Curriculum

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented education systems around the world with a unique set of challenges. By the end of April 2020, school closures in 188 countries had affected 90% of students worldwide. While a variety of distance learning approaches were rapidly implemented, there was little time to plan quality instruction, equitable access, feedback to learners, or assessment. The result has been a loss of learning time with learners in marginalised and rural communities disproportionately affected.

Education systems are now faced with developing pandemic response plans that address complex instructional needs. They need to address the impact of lost learning time, while ensuring students continue to learn grade-level skills. They need to address new health and safety measures, as well as the social-emotional needs of learners and teachers. And they need to do so within the context of an upcoming school year that is likely to include instructional disruptions, such as reduced in-class time, the use of distance learning to supplement or replace face-to-face instruction, and unpredictable school closures. A condensed curriculum may be one part of the response education systems employ to meet these needs.

A condensed curriculum supports learners' acquisition of key knowledge and skills in a compressed time frame that may include discontinuous face-to-face instruction. A well-organised condensed curriculum helps teachers teach more effectively through school-year disruptions and stoppages. While a condensed curriculum is not a stand-alone strategy for addressing lost teaching and learning time, it can be an important element of the overall instructional response when countries implement national catch-up programmes or non-formal options, such as accelerated education.

Purpose

The goal of this document is to assist Ministries of Education (MoEs), district offices, curriculum developers, and implementing partners in developing a condensed curriculum for primary school or guiding practitioners to do so.¹ The key considerations and planning tools in this document are not meant to be prescriptive, but instead to provide a broad overview of best practices that can guide decisions about condensing a curriculum in a way that best meets the needs of learners and teachers in the local context.

In early April, over

1.6 BILLION

learners were out of school.

For the first time in human history an

**ENTIRE
GENERATION**

had their education disrupted.

Even before coronavirus

258 MILLION

children were out of school.²

A condensed curriculum

is focused on literacy, mathematics, thinking skills, and problem-solving. It may also include essential concepts from other subject areas.

MoEs can decide whether to reduce instructional time for subject areas such as social studies, science, health and religion, or eliminate some of them altogether for the duration of the pandemic response.

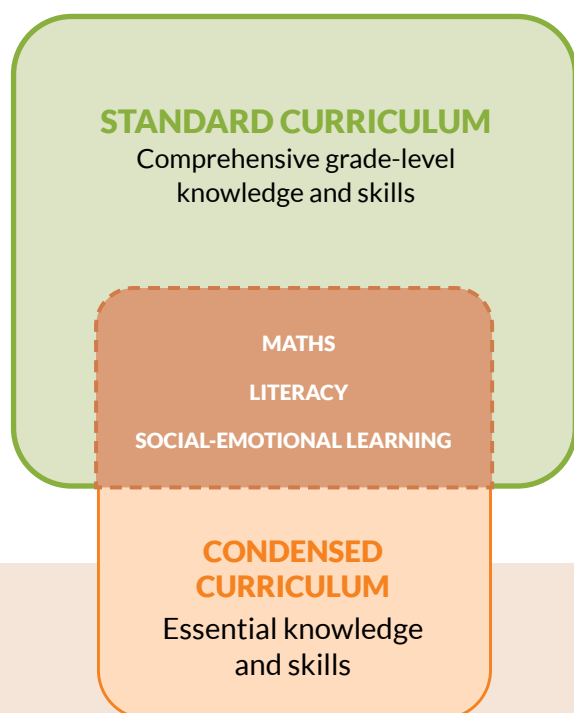


For more information on education options in response to COVID-19, see the [AEWG COVID-19 Decision Tree](#).

1. Please note that when we use the acronym, MoE, we are referring to the Ministry of Education or the relevant education authority in a given context. The AEWG recognises that the name of such an education authority may differ between contexts.

2. Save the Children, July 2020: [Save Our Education: Protect every child's right to learn in the COVID-19 response and recovery](#)

Condensing a Curriculum: An Overview



What is a condensed curriculum?

A condensed curriculum **identifies and maps out the most important knowledge and skills** that learners need so that they can achieve grade-level proficiency in a shortened time frame. To create a condensed curriculum, a standard curriculum is purposefully modified to focus on essential knowledge and skills in literacy and mathematics, including thinking skills and problem solving. Ideally, social-emotional learning is also an important part of a condensed curriculum.

A condensed curriculum focuses on essential knowledge and skills in literacy and mathematics, and includes social-emotional learning.

How does a condensed curriculum help learners both catch up on missed content and continue to progress with grade-level content?

A condensed curriculum does not teach all subject areas faster. Rather, it centres teaching and learning activities on “priority outcomes”. Priority outcomes describe essential skills and knowledge that are transferrable across multiple subject areas: reading, writing, mathematics, critical thinking, and problem solving. Priority outcomes give learners the tools they need for future, self-directed learning.

In a condensed curriculum, priority outcomes are reinforced by purposefully applying them to a variety of learning tasks and by combining them with key concepts from other subject areas. **This focus on priority outcomes prepares learners for the next school year and prevents them from falling further behind.**

Teachers in ordinary circumstances are faced with the challenge of meeting the needs of learners with a range of abilities and learning levels. The instructional impact of the pandemic will only increase this challenge. Teachers will be overwhelmed by teaching a standard curriculum while trying to address learning loss, and, as a result, learning gaps will increase, especially for the most vulnerable learners.





What are learning outcomes?

The phrase “learning outcome” is used in different ways in different countries. For the purpose of this paper, a learning outcome describes what learners should know and be able to do after a series of lessons. Depending on the terminology used in a country’s standard curriculum, it may be equivalent to a competency or objective. A learning outcome is broader than the learning goal of a single lesson, yet more specific than an end-of-course, end-of-term, or end-of-year learning goal.

What are priority outcomes?

Priority outcomes are comprehensive, complex learning goals that describe the essential knowledge and skills learners need to acquire at their current grade level. They comprise knowledge and skills that learners can use across multiple subject areas and set learners up for success at the next grade level.



There are two ways to establish a priority outcome:

1. A priority outcome can be selected from the standard curriculum. The standard curriculum is reviewed. Existing learning outcomes that describe the application of essential skills and knowledge are identified as priority outcomes.

Example: Grade 3 Mathematics. The priority outcome is an existing learning outcome that represents the application of skills and knowledge. In order to add and subtract within 1000, learners need to apply what they know about reading and writing those numbers and the place value of their digits.

Topic	Learning Outcomes from the Standard Curriculum	Priority Outcome
Whole numbers	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Read and write numbers to 1000. 2. Demonstrate an understanding of place value. 3. Use place value to add and subtract within 1000. 	Use place value to add and subtract numbers within 1000.

2. A priority outcome can be developed by synthesizing learning outcomes in the standard curriculum. There may be instances in which a priority outcome is not in the standard curriculum. In this case, a priority outcome can be developed by synthesizing existing learning outcomes. The resulting priority outcome describes the application of essential skills and knowledge.

Example: Grade 2 Reading. The priority outcome is a synthesis of existing learning outcomes. In order to demonstrate an understanding of the most important details of a story and its main message, learners need to apply what they know about story elements, like characters, setting and events.

Topic	Learning Outcomes from the Standard Curriculum	Priority Outcome
Reading Comprehension	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Correctly respond to questions about stories. 2. Identify story characters, setting and events. 3. Use elements of a story to gain deeper understanding. 	Demonstrate an understanding of the most important details in a story and its main message or lesson.

Condensing Curriculum: Basic Design Principles

The basic principles that guide the design of a standard curriculum are also relevant to the design of a condensed curriculum. Just as with a standard curriculum, a condensed curriculum should be built on a framework that is outcome-based, coherent, comprehensible, relevant, supportive, and inclusive.




In the context of a condensed curriculum, the basic principles should be used to centre instruction on priority outcomes and support their achievement by all learners. The special considerations for a curriculum condensed in response to COVID-19 are shown below.

DESIGN PRINCIPLE	STANDARD CURRICULUM	CONDENSED CURRICULUM
Inclusive	Practices, pedagogy, and materials are gender-sensitive and inclusive of all learners, including girls, learners from marginalised communities, and learners with disabilities.	
Outcome-based	Learning outcomes describe <i>everything</i> learners are expected to know and be able to do by the end of the school year. All outcomes are accorded equal importance in the curriculum.	Limited number of priority outcomes, with a focus on literacy, mathematics, thinking skills and problem-solving. Priority outcomes address knowledge, skills, and attitudes that learners can use across multiple subject areas.
Coherent	Lesson objectives and learning experiences are logically sequenced to build knowledge and skills at the current grade level.	Lesson objectives address both grade-level and key prerequisite skills. Lesson experiences are logically sequenced to support the acquisition of priority outcomes and include lessons that directly teach prerequisite knowledge and skills.
Comprehensible	Learning activities, cognitive tasks, language, materials, and pacing are developmentally appropriate.	Pacing gives sufficient time for learners to master foundational literacy, mathematics, and critical-thinking skills. Decisions are made about reducing instructional time for other subject areas and/or integrating them into literacy or mathematics, where appropriate.
Relevant	Model lessons include examples of instructional practises and learning materials that engage and motivate learners.	Model lessons include examples of instructional practises and learning materials that engage and motivate learners in physically distanced and distance learning settings.
Supportive	Learning experiences should address learners' physical, social, and emotional well-being.	Social-emotional learning is an integral part of the curriculum. Learners' well-being is addressed through structures and strategies that help them cope specifically with the trauma and disruption cause by the pandemic.

Condensing Curriculum: Planning Tips

1. Use clear criteria to establish priority outcomes. It is important to use consistent and clear criteria to establish priority outcomes and to communicate both the priority outcomes and criteria to school-based practitioners. School-based practitioners can use the same criteria that established priority outcomes to guide their instructional decisions.

The three main criteria for priority outcomes are:

 <p>ENDURANCE</p>	<p>Priority outcomes should focus on knowledge and skills that learners will need throughout their lives.</p>	<p>Examples: Reading comprehension, writing, mathematics, and critical thinking are enduring skills that learners will need throughout their lives.</p>
 <p>LEVERAGE</p>	<p>Priority outcomes should focus on knowledge and skills that can be used across multiple subject areas.</p>	<p>Examples: Understanding informational texts and identifying important information helps learners in science and social studies, as well as language arts. Creating graphs and interpreting data helps learners in science and social studies, as well as mathematics. Analysing the meaning of a question or problem and responding to it are skills that can be applied to any subject area</p>
 <p>ACADEMIC SIGNIFICANCE</p>	<p>Priority outcomes should focus on knowledge and skills learners need to be successful in the next level of instruction and to do well on required exams.</p>	<p>Examples: Learners need to understand subtraction and know how to subtract in order to learn long division. Learners need to learn to write a well-organised paragraph in order to learn how to write a well-organised essay.</p> <p>Knowledge and skills that are most likely to appear on nationally mandated exams should also be addressed in priority outcomes.</p>

2. Determine a learning sequence that focuses instruction on the attainment of priority outcomes and includes revision of prerequisite knowledge and skills. Lessons need to be sequenced so that each learning experience builds upon the last. In addition, key skills from the previous school year, particularly those instructed through distance learning when schools closed, need to be included in the learning sequence. It is important that prerequisite skills that support priority outcomes are revised at the point in the curriculum when they are needed. It is not effective to try to address them all before or during the first term.

Example: Grade 3 Mathematics

Priority Outcome: Use place value to add and subtract numbers within 1000		
Learning outcomes and objectives from Grade 3 curriculum	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Read and write numbers to 1000. 2. Demonstrate an understanding of place value in numbers to 1000. 3. Use place value to add and subtract within 1000. 	<p>Sample learning sequence</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Revise: Read and write numbers to 100. Revise the meaning of place value and identify the place value of numbers to 100. 2. Teach: Read and write numbers to 1000. 3. Teach: Demonstrate an understanding of place value in numbers to 1000. 4. Revise: Use place value to add without regrouping within 100. 5. Teach: Use place value to add and subtract without regrouping within 1000. <p>and so on...</p>
Prerequisite skills from Grade 2 curriculum.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Read and write numbers to 1000. 2. Demonstrate an understanding of place value in numbers to 100. 3. Use place value to add and subtract within 100. 	

3. Develop a pacing guide that includes the suggested number of lessons for each part of the learning sequence. A general pacing guide should be developed to ensure teachers are helping learners progress through the curriculum at a pace that is challenging without being overwhelming. Research shows that younger learners experience more negative academic impact when instruction stops or slows down, and that they have trouble acquiring foundational skills through distance learning. Therefore, even in a condensed curriculum, it is important to allocate sufficient time to high-leverage foundational skills in literacy, including decoding and basic reading comprehension, and to foundational skills in numeracy, including counting, basic operations and problem-solving.

Example: Condensed Curriculum lesson sequence and pacing

Priority Outcome: Use place value to add and subtract numbers within 1000 Estimated total instructional time: 18 – 20 days	
Learning Sequence	Suggested Pacing
1. Revise: Read and write numbers to 100. Revise the meaning of place value and identify the place value of numbers to 100.	1 lesson
2. Teach: Read and write numbers to 1000.	1-2 lessons
3. Teach: Demonstrate an understanding of place value in numbers to 1000.	2 lessons
4. Revise: Use place value to add without regrouping within 100 (including story problems).	1 lesson
5. Teach: Use place value to add without regrouping within 1000 (including story problems). <i>and so on...</i>	2 lessons

4. Build social-emotional learning activities that support the well-being of both teachers and learners into the condensed curriculum. In order to teach and learn effectively, teachers and learners need to feel safe, connected and supported. Social-emotional learning (SEL) activities help both teachers and learners cope with the stress and uncertainty of life during the pandemic. SEL can be taught through free-standing skills instruction, or SEL practices can be incorporated into instruction throughout the day. It is an important part of both face-to-face and distance learning. The resources below offer practical ideas that can be quickly deployed in face-to-face, distance or blended learning environments.

SEL planning resources

- <https://casel.org/resources-covid/>
Free SEL resources to support face-to-face and distance learning developed by The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) to help educators, parents, and learners.
- <https://mgiep.unesco.org/covid>
Wide array of SEL resources curated by UNESCO MGIEP to help educators, parents and learners.
- <https://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/pages/kernels-of-practice-for-sel-low-cost-low-burden-strategies.aspx>
Free downloadable brief from the Wallace Foundation describing low-cost, low-burden strategies that can be taught quickly.

5. Create sample lesson plans that show inclusive and engaging instructional practises that can be used in physically distanced and distance learning settings. Health and safety requirements for in-class teaching may make some forms of learner-centred instruction, such as group work and partner work, impractical or unsafe. Teachers will need other strategies to engage learners both in-class and through distance learning. These strategies may include physically distanced or virtual class discussion, learner choice in tasks like writing or project-based learning and an interactive process for feedback on learning progress. Practitioners may be able to contribute and share other ideas that help teachers rely on methods beyond lecture-style teaching.

