



International
Parliamentary
Network for
Education

COVID-19 and education: Briefing for MPs

This briefing booklet for MPs provides an overview of the impact of COVID-19 on education worldwide, following a series of roundtable events for IPNEd member parliamentarians.

The briefings consider the effect of COVID-related school closures, as well as the pandemic's impact on learning, equity and financing. Key information and recommendations are provided for each topic, and further information can be found on IPNEd's website at www.ipned.org/covid19-and-education

COVID-19 & Education



COVID-19: Children and Schools

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to the greatest disruption to education in history, affecting 1.6 billion children and youth. It has exacerbated existing inequalities and magnified the global learning crisis.

The pandemic has profound implications for education financing, equity and learning, which are the keys to achieving Sustainable Development Goal 4.



The pre-existing learning crisis is becoming a catastrophe. School closures risk pushing an additional 72 million primary school-age children into learning poverty.



In addition to the 258 million children who were out of school pre-COVID, 24 million children and youth are at risk of not returning to school this year.



Low and middle-income countries already faced an education funding gap of \$1.5 trillion a year. The gap in education financing globally could now increase by a third.



"The longer schools remain closed the higher the risk to students whether it's academic loss, social-emotional impact or lack of access to nutrition"

Stefania Giannini

UNESCO's Assistant Director-General for Education

The impact of school closures

At the peak of the pandemic, governments in more than 190 countries closed educational institutions. Whilst almost all countries subsequently rolled out remote learning strategies, its delivery was hampered by widespread failures.

- At least a third of the world's schoolchildren – 463 million children – were unable to access remote learning.
- Meanwhile, schoolchildren in poorer countries have already lost nearly four months of schooling, compared to six weeks of loss in high-income countries.

It is not just children's education that has been affected by school closures. School-based services such as immunization and school meals have been disrupted.

- 350 million children have missed out on school meals - the only daily nutritious meal they could rely on receiving.
- Being out of school increases the risk of teenage pregnancy, sexual exploitation, child marriage, violence and other threats.

Keeping schools open

As of November 2020, schools remain shut nationwide in around 25 countries. With many parts of the world now experiencing second and third waves of the pandemic, many governments are considering whether to close schools again.

Whilst the World Health Organization acknowledges that the role of children in transmission remains to be fully understood, our understanding of COVID's effect on children and its transmission in educational settings is growing.

What we know about children and COVID-19

- COVID-19 is reported much less frequently in children than in adults - children and adolescents represent about 8% of reported cases and 29% of the global population.
- Children have much milder disease than adults.
- Most studies suggest that COVID-19 susceptibility rises with age - young children are less susceptible and less infectious than older children.

What we know about transmission of COVID-19 in schools

- Few outbreaks involving schools have been reported - in most COVID-19 cases reported in children, infection was acquired at home.
- Studies suggest that closing schools reduced community transmission less than other social distancing interventions.
- Large outbreaks have occurred as a result of weak prevention and control measures.

There is no zero risk strategy for the reopening of schools. It is ultimately a balance between pandemic containment alongside the continuity of full-time education and school-based services – but a lot can be done to make sure they are safe places to learn.



“All children should continue to be able to go to school despite the virus. Therefore we need to have really good protocols in schools”

Dr David Narbarro

WHO Special Envoy on COVID-19

Key recommendations

1. Prioritise the safe reopening of schools in line with scientific evidence, local context and the benefits and risk to children and staff of open schools.
2. Put in place pandemic containment measures in schools including physical distancing, respiratory etiquette, ventilation, hand hygiene, and early detection, testing and contact tracing.
3. Ensure school-based health services, immunization, meals and support services are maintained.
4. Support all teachers and educational staff as frontline workers, ensuring their safety and well-being, and their professional development.

Further reading

- [Q&A: Schools and COVID-19 - WHO](#)
- [Considerations for school-related public health measures in the context of COVID-19 - WHO](#)
- [Understanding COVID-19 in School Settings - Dr. David Narbarro and Katherine DeLand](#)
- [Framework for reopening schools - UNICEF](#)
- [COVID-19 Response Toolkit - UNESCO and McKinsey](#)



COVID-19 & Learning



Preventing a learning crisis becoming a catastrophe

Education was already in crisis

330 million children were in school but not learning the basics - and that was before COVID-19 caused the greatest disruption to education in history. Moreover a further 258 million children were out of school and not receiving any education.

It is against this crisis that the World Bank introduced the concept of [Learning Poverty](#).

Learning Poverty is the percentage of ten-year-olds who cannot read and understand a simple story.

- It takes the share of children who haven't achieved minimum reading proficiency and adjusts it by the proportion of children who are out of school.

As a result we know that:

- [53 percent](#) of children in low- and middle-income countries are in learning poverty.
- In some countries almost 90 percent of 10 year olds cannot read and understand a simple text.

The learning crisis is becoming a catastrophe

School closures caused by COVID-19 have affected 90 percent of the world's students in more than 190 countries. Despite efforts to put in place remote learning strategies, learning losses are accumulating rapidly.

- Over 60% of national distance learning strategies relied exclusively on online platforms – but [465 million](#) learners in these countries lacked access to the internet at home.
- [3 out of 4 students](#) not reached by remote learning live in the poorest households and/or in rural areas.
- [40% of countries](#) had no remote learning policies in place for the pre-primary level, excluding the youngest learners at a crucial stage of their development.



COVID could now increase the learning poverty rate by [10 per cent](#) - pushing an additional 72 million primary school-age children into learning poverty.



The economic costs will also be huge. Learning losses due to COVID could lead to [\\$10 trillion](#) of lost earnings, amounting to one-tenth of global GDP.



“In both rich and poor countries learning losses will be big but their impact will be unequal. Remote learning experiences have been extremely different.”

[Jaime Saavedra](#)

World Bank Global Director for Education

What happens when schools reopen is crucial

When schools reopen, students will return with differing levels of learning - with the most disadvantaged students likely to exhibit the greatest learning losses. The key to learning recovery in this context is meeting students at their level.

- Conduct rapid learning assessments of all students, and implement remedial action for children who have missed out on learning.
- Align teaching to the students' learning level, rather than age or grade level.
- Recognise and build on the key role of parents during the pandemic to strengthen continuity of learning across the school and home.



“When schools reopen meet children at their level, see where they are and begin from there”

Dr Rukmini Banerji

CEO Pratham Education Foundation

Key recommendations

1. Universalise foundational literacy and numeracy through focus, measurement, support and accountability.
2. Implement large-scale learning assessment and remedial programmes to mitigate learning loss.
3. Increase investments in evidence-based remote learning to help close the digital divide that has prevented so many children from learning.
4. Strengthen the resilience of education systems to ensure continuity of learning during future crises.
5. Increase and strengthen the education workforce, equipping teachers with the digital and pedagogical skills for learner-centred quality education.

Simply reopening schools and resuming education as it has been delivered in the past will not be sufficient. We must reimagine and accelerate learning so that all children benefit.

Further reading

- [Distance Learning Denied - UNESCO](#)
- [Learning Poverty Measures and Simulations - World Bank](#)
- [Accelerating Foundational Literacy and Numeracy - World Bank](#)
- [COVID-19: Are children able to continue learning during school closures? - UNICEF](#)
- [Lessons in Literacy: 8 principles to ensure every last child can read - Save the Children](#)



COVID-19 & Inclusive Education



Rebuilding for inclusive education

Identity, background and ability still dictate education chances

Even before the outbreak of COVID-19 more than 250 million children and youth were out of school. The groups most likely to be out of education are girls, children with disabilities, those living in conflict and emergencies, and the poorest in society.

- Only 25% of the poorest girls in low-income countries complete primary school.
- Nearly half of all children with disabilities are not in school.
- 3.7 million refugee children are out of school – more than half of all school-age refugee children. Many have no access to formal education.

Millions more children are marginalised in the classroom. Even if children from disadvantaged backgrounds are in school, their learning levels are typically significantly below their peers.



“Distance learning opportunities have expanded but they are imperfect substitutes. For hundreds of millions of children education has stopped in the last few months”.

Manos Antoninis

Global Education Monitoring Report, Director

COVID-19: Exacerbating educational exclusion

Whilst nearly 1.6 billion students in 190 countries have been affected by school closures, the impact of the pandemic on children’s learning has not been equal. About 40% of low and lower-middle income countries have not supported learners at risk of exclusion at all during the pandemic.

- 11 million girls and half of all refugee girls in secondary school may not return to school when they reopen.
- Pushed out of education by poverty, millions more children could be forced into child labour.

Distance learning is an imperfect substitute

Inequalities have been exacerbated by accessibility gaps in distance learning, which has magnified the digital divide.

- Only 47% households in developing countries and 12% in the least developed countries have internet access at home. In addition to poor access, online approaches are not suited to all learners.
- Learners with disabilities are the least likely to benefit from distance learning solutions.
- Poor access to remote learning has prevented a large number of refugee and displaced students from learning.

Put inclusion at the heart of building back better education systems

Inclusive education is the foundation of an education system of good quality that enables every child and young person to learn. However many governments are yet to base their laws, policies and practices on this principle.

Now more than ever, governments must put inclusion front and centre of their policies. As COVID-19 deepens the learning crisis, education budgets must be protected and focus must be placed on the most marginalised children.



“Evidence clearly highlights that education systems that are designed for the most marginalised children function for everyone”

Dr Nidhi Singal

Professor of Disability of Inclusive Education,
University of Cambridge

Key recommendations

1. Widen the understanding of inclusive education to include all learners.
2. Target financing to the most marginalised and invest in remedial, re-enrolment and second chance education programmes.
3. Engage in meaningful consultation with parents and communities to support the most marginalised to return to school and catch up on learning.
4. Apply universal design to fulfil every learner’s potential - acknowledging that all learners are different and education systems should respond to individual learner’s needs.
5. Collect and report disaggregated data on inclusion to identify and support the most marginalised learners.

Further reading

- [#AllMeansALL: Putting learner diversity at the heart of education post Covid-19 - Global Education Monitoring Report](#)
- [Leveraging Lessons from the COVID-19 Crisis for Learners with Disabilities - World Bank](#)
- [Coronavirus a dire threat to refugee education - UNHCR](#)
- [COVID-19 in humanitarian contexts: no excuses to leave persons with disabilities behind! - Humanity and Inclusion](#)
- [Profiles Enhancing Education Reviews \(PEER\) - Global Education Monitoring Report](#)



COVID-19 & Financing for Education



Protecting and growing financing for education

Education is severely underfunded

The annual financing gap for achieving Sustainable Development Goal 4 in low- and low-income countries already stood at \$148 billion.

One in four countries do not meet either of the international benchmarks of allocating at least 15% to 20% of total public expenditure, or 4% to 6% of GDP to education.

Aid is falling to close the shortfall

Whilst increasing national spending on education is key to achieving SDG 4, aid to education is vital in helping to close the financing gap. However, education aid has stagnated since 2010, and is not targeted, either to basic education or the countries most in need.

- In 2018, education received just over 7% of total official development assistance - despite the recommendation that donor governments invest at least 15% of their aid in education.
- Moreover, education remains one of the most underfunded areas of humanitarian aid, receiving only around 2% of global humanitarian funding.

COVID increases the financing gap

Additional costs due to COVID-19 related school closures could increase the financing gap by up to one-third, or \$30 to \$45 billion. The longer schools remain closed, the higher the cost.

This includes the cost of putting in place public health protocols and getting children back to school.

The triple shock to education funding

On top of those additional costs, the impact of the pandemic on the world's economy has caused a "crisis like no other", leaving education budgets facing a triple funding shock:

- Slow or negative growth and the shifting of resources to other sectors such as health and the economy.
- Shrinking household budgets and remittances will mean many parents struggle to maintain the resources they devote to their children's education.
- Falling aid to education as the economies of the major bilateral donors contract by an expected 8% in 2020.

Education budgets are projected to shrink by as much as 10%. Despite education being central to the recovery from COVID-19, education budgets now risk being a victim of the pandemic.



"In developing countries the education financing gap is expected to widen and they are likely to find it increasingly difficult to adequately finance education".

Elyas Abdi Jillaow OGW

Director-General, Ministry of Education, Kenya

Investment in education must be at heart of COVID recovery

Despite the pandemic causing the greatest disruption to education in history - affecting 1.6 billion learners - education has been largely invisible in the fiscal response to the pandemic.

\$12 trillion has been allocated so far in stimulus packages across 192 countries but the share allocated to education and training amounts to less than one per cent.

By investing now in education governments can prevent the worst education outcomes, and mitigate the additional pressure on the education financing gap by as much 75%.

A critical role for education aid

In 2021 the world's two global education funds require urgent support.

- The Global Partnership for Education is the largest source of multilateral funding for education. GPE seeks to secure a \$5 billion replenishment to transform education systems for more than 1 billion children in up to 87 countries at its financing summit in 2021.
- Education Cannot Wait is the only global fund dedicated to education in emergencies and protracted crises. ECW requires \$400 million of funding up to 2023 so that children and youth caught up in crises receive an education.

Act on debt relief

There is a pressing need for the G7 and G20 to agree a comprehensive debt relief initiative. This will free up resources to invest in education, with more than 30 countries currently spending the equivalent of half or more of their annual education budgets servicing public sector debt.



"Now there are less resources available, we have to think hard about how we achieve efficiency and effectiveness in education spending, and direct money to the most vulnerable groups".

Andreas Schleicher

Director for Education and Skills, OECD

To view all of our resources for MPs on COVID-19 and education visit www.ipned.org/covid19-and-education

Key recommendations

1. Safeguard education budgets and ensure spending is efficient, accountable and prioritises equity and inclusion.
2. Commit to increased funding for education to recover from the crisis and build back better.
3. Target financing to the countries and children furthest behind.
4. Protect and prioritise aid to education, including fully financing the Global Partnership for Education and Education Cannot Wait.
5. Convert debt liabilities into investments in education.

Further reading

- Act now: Reduce the impact of COVID-19 on the cost of achieving SDG 4 - Global Education Monitoring Report
- COVID-19 is a serious threat to aid to education recovery - Global Education Monitoring Report
- How Much Will COVID Cut Education Budgets?- Centre for Global Development
- Creating a virtuous circle between better education and a more sustainable tax system - OECD

As governments start rebuilding their economies, it is vital that protecting and growing investment in education is a top priority.

