



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

# WHAT'S NEXT?

## Lessons on Education Recovery: Findings from a Survey of Ministries of Education amid the COVID-19 Pandemic

JUNE 2021

**U**nited Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the World Bank and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) have collaborated in the third round of the Survey on National Education Responses to COVID-19 School Closures, administered by the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) and OECD to Ministry of Education officials. The questions covered four levels of education: pre- primary, primary, lower secondary and upper secondary. While the first two rounds of the survey were implemented during the periods May–June and July–October 2020, respectively, the third round was implemented during the period February–June 2021. In total, 143 countries responded to the questionnaire. Thirty-one countries submitted responses to the OECD (“OECD survey”) and 112 countries responded to the UIS (“UIS survey”). Seven countries responded to both surveys. In these instances, the more complete set responses were used in analysis.

### MONITORING AND MITIGATING LEARNING LOSSES FROM SCHOOL CLOSURES

The intensity of school closures has evolved over time but has also differed considerably between countries. Key highlights on school closures and responses with respect to understanding and mitigating the impact and these losses include the following:

**1 SCHOOL CLOSURES AND CALENDARS:** In 2020, schools around the world were fully closed across all four education levels for 79 instruction days on average, ranging from 53 days in high-income countries to 115 days in lower-middle-income countries. As of 1 February 2021, 21 per cent of respondent countries reported that schools were fully closed due to COVID-19, none of which were low-income countries. Countries have responded to school closures with a variety of learning modalities, including fully remote learning or hybrid learning, as well as other measures to mitigate potential learning losses. For example, 41 per cent of countries reported extending the academic year and 42 per cent reported prioritizing certain curriculum areas or skills. However, more than half of the countries reported that no adjustments have been or will be made at all education levels.

**2 LEARNING ASSESSMENTS:** Preliminary evidence suggests that students affected by school closures are experiencing an absolute reduction in learning levels or slower progress than expected in a typical year. Such impact can disproportionately affect disadvantaged children, given the unequal distribution of opportunities to access remote learning. The survey results reveal that the extent of learning loss is often not measured: only a little over one-third of countries reported having taken steps to measure learning levels in primary or lower secondary education through standardized assessment in 2020 while 58 per cent

of countries reported having conducted formative assessments at the classroom level. Measuring learning loss is a critical first step towards mitigating its consequences. It is vital that countries invest in assessing the magnitude of such losses to implement the appropriate remedial measures.

**3 EXAMINATIONS:** Globally, the COVID-19 pandemic affected examinations at all levels significantly. Among low- and lower-middle-income countries, two in three at primary and three in four at lower secondary education rescheduled or postponed examinations, compared to four in ten upper-middle- and high-income countries. Globally, 28 per cent of countries in lower secondary and 18 per cent of countries in upper secondary education cancelled examinations. No low-income country cancelled examinations at either level. Seven in ten countries focused on improving health and safety standards at examination centres at the upper secondary level. One in four countries at the primary and lower secondary levels, and one in three at the upper secondary level adjusted the examination content, changing the number of subjects examined or questions asked. Among high-income countries, 35 per cent adjusted the mode of administration at lower and upper secondary education – but no low-income country did. Finally, graduation criteria were adjusted at 34 per cent of countries at the primary and 47 per cent of countries at the upper secondary level.

**4 REMEDIATION:** As a result of lower levels of learning during school closures, many children are at risk of returning to school without having properly assimilated the course content required of their grade. In these cases, remedial instruction will be required to get children back on track. Globally, over two-thirds of countries reported that remedial measures to address learning gaps were widely implemented for primary and secondary school students when schools reopened. This represents an increase from the previous round of the survey: Nearly two-thirds of countries that were not implementing a remedial programme previously, reported one in the current round. Most were high- or upper-middle-income countries, which earlier in the pandemic were less likely to report implementing remediation measures. Across all income levels, remedial measures were considerably less likely to be implemented at the pre-primary level. The use of pre- primary remediation was lowest among upper-middle-income countries

(only one in three reported this). Most countries implementing remediation reported broad-based programmes for all children who need them, as well as for targeted groups. At the primary and lower secondary levels, targeted programmes were frequently focused on students who were unable to access distance learning, while at the upper secondary level they were most often focused on students facing national examinations.



**Governments faced numerous challenges as they transitioned to distance learning, such as limited institutional capacity to support teachers, poor access for vulnerable populations, and lack of coherent policies and funds to support remote learning.**

## DEPLOYING EFFECTIVE AND EQUITABLE DISTANCE LEARNING STRATEGIES

Governments faced numerous challenges as they transitioned to distance learning, such as limited institutional capacity to support teachers, poor access for vulnerable populations, and lack of coherent policies and funds to support remote learning. Key highlights on the deployment of distance learning and related support include the following:

**1 REMOTE LEARNING MODES AND EFFECTIVENESS:** Responses to the COVID-19 school closures included remote learning solutions ranging from paper-based take home materials to broadcast media (such as TV and radio) and digital platforms. Broadcast media such as radio were more popular among low-income countries (92 per cent) than high-income countries (25 per cent). By contrast, 96 per cent of high-income countries provided remote learning through online platforms for at least one education level compared to only 58 per cent of low-income countries. Across income groups, most countries used multiple modalities to provide remote learning, with over half providing more than five modalities of remote learning. However, provision of remote learning solutions did not necessarily ensure uptake: less than half of countries reported that more than three in four students followed remote education during school closures at pre-primary level. Similarly, over a third of low- and lower-middle-income countries that provided lessons through

TV or radio reported that less than half of primary school students were reached. Ensuring take-up and engagement would require remote learning strategies suited to the context, along with parental engagement and support from and to teachers. Furthermore, the effectiveness of remote learning is not always assessed: 73 per cent of countries reported having assessed the effectiveness of at least one distance learning strategy. There is a critical need to produce more and better evidence on remote learning effectiveness, particularly in the most difficult contexts.

**2 ACCESS TO ONLINE LEARNING:** To ensure equitable access to remote learning for marginalised communities of students and teachers, it is important for countries to outline coherent policies and provide supporting resources. While 70 per cent of countries responding to the UIS survey had a plan to offer either internet access or devices at subsidized or zero cost in 2021, only 25 per cent of low-income countries did. Similarly, only 27 per cent of low- and lower-middle-income countries responding to the survey had a fully operationalised policy on digital learning accompanied with explicit guidance, compared to half of high-income countries.

**3 TEACHER MANAGEMENT OR RECRUITMENT:** Following school closures in 2020, most countries required at least three-quarters of their teachers to teach remotely/online, although this varied considerably by income level: 69 per cent of high-income but only 25 per cent of low-income countries called on all their teachers to engage in remote/online teaching. Of those countries, half required teachers to do so from the school premises. Globally, about 7 in 10 countries encouraged teachers to use phone and video conferencing, while only 1 in 4 countries encouraged home visits. On average, 3 in 10 countries in 2020 and 4 in 10 in 2021 recruited additional teachers to support teaching after reopening. Only 13 per cent of low-income countries recruited non-teaching staff (including cleaners, health workers, counsellors, security officers or ICT staff) compared to 43 per cent of upper-middle-income countries and 53 per cent of high-income countries that responded to the UIS survey.

**4 TEACHER SUPPORT:** Transitioning to remote learning can be a frustrating experience due to poor connectivity, lack of digital skills, or the need to adapt pedagogies to remote learning. The majority of

countries issued instructions to teachers on remote learning (89 per cent) and provided professional psychosocial and emotional support (78 per cent). Apart from low-income countries, most countries also provided teachers with teaching content adapted to remote teaching; ICT tools and free connectivity; and professional development activities on pedagogy and effective use of technologies with various pedagogies. Most countries reported that teachers were or would be a priority target for vaccination against COVID-19, either through a national immunization measure (57 per cent) or through the COVAX initiative (9 per cent). Governments should continue to prioritize teachers for vaccination to deliver on their commitment of safely reopening schools for in-person learning.

**5 DECISION-MAKING:** Governments have had to make multiple decisions on school closures, remote learning and reopening. Countries were asked to report at which administrative level they had made decisions on eight strategic policy measures during the pandemic: school closures and reopening; adjustments to the school calendar; resources to continue learning during school closures; additional support programs for students after school reopening; working requirements for teachers; compensation for teachers; hygiene measures for school reopening; and changes in funding to schools. Across all eight measures, decisions were mostly made centrally or by involving the central government together with some of the sub-national entities. This trend is especially true in lower income countries, while in higher income countries some of the decisions were more devolved. By and large, most countries made decisions either exclusively at the central level or through coordination across different layers of administration. This is especially true for school closure/reopening decisions, which were made exclusively at the central level in 68 per cent of countries and at multiple, including central, levels in an additional 21 per cent of countries. Decisions were also generally made centrally for school calendar adjustments (69 per cent), school funding changes (53 per cent) and school reopening hygiene measures (48 per cent). Decisions involving various levels were more common on teacher compensation (58 per cent) than on other policy measures. Finally, decisions on additional support programmes for students and on teacher working requirements were more likely to be taken exclusively at the school level, in particular in OECD countries.

## REOPENING SCHOOLS SAFELY FOR ALL

Reopening schools presents myriad challenges including health, financing and the development of initiatives to ensure all students return. Key highlights on how education systems around the world tackled these include the following:

**1 HEALTH PROTOCOLS:** Minimizing disease transmission in schools requires a range of measures. Schools can implement some of these with existing means, others require a limited additional investment, and still others entail more investment and coordination, including with other sectors. Countries that responded to the UIS survey largely promoted practices related to physical distancing, and hand and respiratory hygiene. There was an increase in the use of health and hygiene measures, notably self-isolation and the tracking of staff or students who had been exposed to or infected with COVID-19. Activities that require additional investment or coordination, such as contact tracing and testing in schools, exhibit lower rates of adoption. Low-income countries are lagging behind in the implementation of even the most basic measures: for instance, less than 10 per cent reported having sufficient soap, clean water, sanitation and hygiene facilities, and masks to ensure the safety of all learners and staff, compared to 96 per cent of high-income countries. A lack of commitment or culture of safety among the public was also a concern in the majority of low- and middle-income countries.

**2 FINANCING:** COVID-19 challenges the financing of education: Demand for funds is rising, in competition with other sectors, while governments' revenues are falling. Nevertheless, 49 per cent of countries increased their education budget in 2020 relative to 2019, while 43 per cent maintained their existing budget. Funding is set to increase in 2021, as about 60 per cent of countries plan to increase their education budget compared to 2020 (see Figure 6-1). Additional investment is critical to ensure blended learning, support vulnerable students, train teachers in digital learning and ensure safe school reopening. Low- and lower-middle-income countries were more likely to provide financial support to students, while high-income countries were more likely to increase teacher compensation. Likewise, only 25 per cent of low-income countries compared to 96 per cent of high-income countries reported regular or extra (on top of regular) expenditures on digital learning. An additional allocation from government was the most commonly cited source of additional funding across countries,

particularly among high-income countries, as 86 per cent of them reported. In contrast, 67 per cent of low-income countries reported receiving development assistance to support the education response to COVID-19. The majority of countries reported considering the number of students or classes when allocating additional funds for education.

**3 EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING PREVENTION:** Reopening school doors alone is not enough. Even after schools reopen, some students, especially the most vulnerable, may not return to school. Over 85 per cent of countries could provide an estimate of primary and lower secondary school in-person attendance after reopening, though one in four could not do so for the pre-primary level. Less than a third of low- and middle-income countries reported that all students had returned to in-person schooling. Most low- and middle-income countries reported using at least one form of outreach measure to encourage all students to return to school, most commonly modifications to water, sanitation and hygiene facilities or community engagement. Meanwhile, only one in four countries globally provided incentives (cash, food or transport) and fee waivers. Reviewing or revising access policies were also uncommon, especially for girls. This is a cause for concern, as adolescent girls are at highest risk of not returning to school in low- and lower-middle-income countries.

## PLANNING AHEAD AFTER SCHOOLS REOPEN

Reopening school doors should be a priority in all countries, but doing so alone is not enough. As schools reopen and begin a shift into the “new normal”, education cannot go back to “business as usual.” Following large periods of closure, students will return with uneven levels of knowledge and skills. Some may not return at all. This holds particularly true for children from more disadvantaged backgrounds. Mental health issues, gender-based violence and other setbacks may have also arisen or escalated closures due to the disruption in school-based services. Students will need tailored and sustained support as they readjust and catch up.

As education systems forge ahead, measuring learning levels will prove more important than ever. System leaders need to understand the extent of learning losses and ensure that students, including the youngest learners, receive adequate and targeted support. Building on the investments made in remote learning systems will create resilient systems that can withstand the impact of future crises. Low-income countries, in particular, should receive the support they need to do the same.