



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



# THE STATE OF THE GLOBAL EDUCATION CRISIS: A PATH TO RECOVERY

A JOINT UNESCO, UNICEF, AND WORLD BANK REPORT



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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**T**he global disruption to education caused by the COVID-19 pandemic is without parallel, and its effects on learning have been severe. The crisis brought education systems across the world to a halt, with school closures affecting more than 1.6 billion learners. While nearly every country in the world offered remote learning opportunities for students, the quality and reach of such initiatives varied greatly, and they were at best partial substitutes for in-person learning. Now, 21 months later, schools remain closed for millions of children and youth, and millions more are at risk of never returning to education. Growing evidence on the impacts of school closures on children's learning depicts a harrowing reality. Learning losses have been large and inequitable: recent learning assessments show that children in many countries have missed out on most or all of the academic learning they would ordinarily have acquired in

school, with younger and more marginalized children often missing out the most. Students in São Paulo (Brazil) learned only 28 percent of what they would have in face-to-face classes and the risk of dropout increased more than threefold. In rural Karnataka (India), the share of grade three students in government schools able to perform simple subtraction fell from 24 percent in 2018 to only 16 percent in 2020. The global learning crisis has grown by even more than previously feared: this generation of students now risks losing \$17 trillion in lifetime earnings in present value as a result of school closures, or the equivalent of 14 percent of today's global GDP, far more than the \$10 trillion estimated in 2020. In low- and middle-income countries, the share of children living in Learning Poverty—already over 50 percent before the pandemic—will rise sharply, potentially up to 70 percent, given the long school closures and the varying quality and effectiveness of remote learning.

**The crisis exacerbated inequality in education.** Globally, full and partial school closures lasted an average of 224 days. But in low- and middle-income countries, school closures often lasted longer than in high-income countries, and the response was typically less effective. Teachers in many low- and middle-income countries received limited professional development support to transition to remote learning, leaving them unprepared to engage with learners and caregivers. At home, households' ability to respond to the shock varied by income level. Children from disadvantaged households were less likely to benefit from remote learning than their peers, often due to a lack of electricity, connectivity, devices, and caregiver support. The youngest students and students with disabilities were largely left out of countries' policy responses, with remote learning rarely designed in a way that met their developmental needs. Girls faced compounding barriers to learning amidst school closures, as social norms, limited digital skills, and lack of access to devices constrained their ability to keep learning.

**Progress made for children and youth in other domains has stagnated or reversed.** Schools ordinarily provide critical services that extend beyond learning and offer safe spaces for protection. During school closures, children's health and safety was jeopardized, with domestic violence and child labor increasing. More than 370 million children globally missed out on school meals during school closures, losing what is for some children the only reliable source of food and daily nutrition. The mental health crisis among young people has reached unprecedented levels. Advances in gender equality are threatened, with school closures placing an estimated 10 million more girls at risk of early marriage in the next decade and at increased risk of dropping out of school.

**The COVID-19 crisis forced the global education community to learn some critical lessons, but also highlighted that transformation and innovation are possible.** Despite the shortcomings of remote learning initiatives, there were bright spots and innovations. Remote and hybrid education, which became a necessity when the pandemic hit, has the potential to transform the future of learning if systems are strengthened and technology is better leveraged to complement skilled and well-supported teachers.

**Building on the close collaboration of UNESCO, UNICEF, and the World Bank under the [Mission: Recovering Education](#),** this report presents new evidence on the severity of the learning losses incurred during school closures and charts a path out of the global education crisis, towards more effective, equitable, and resilient education systems.

**Reopening schools should be countries' highest priority.**

The cost of keeping schools closed is steep and threatens to hamper a generation of children and youth while widening pre-pandemic disparities. Reopening schools and keeping them open should therefore be the top priority for countries, as growing evidence indicates that with adequate measures, health risks to children and education staff can be minimized. Reopening is the single best measure countries can take to begin reversing learning losses.



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**To tackle the learning crisis, countries must first address the learning data crisis, by assessing students' learning levels.** While substantial losses in reading and math have now been documented in several countries and show variations across countries, grades, subjects and students characteristics, evidence on learning loss generally remains scarce. It is critical for policymakers, school administrators, and teachers to have access to learning data that reflect their context, and for learning data to be disaggregated by various sub-groups of students, so that they can target instruction and accelerate students' learning recovery.

**To prevent learning losses from accumulating once children are back in school, countries should adopt learning recovery programs consisting of evidence-based strategies.** Evidence from past disruptions to education, such as the 2005 Pakistan earthquake, show that without remedial measures, learning losses may grow even after children return to school, if the curriculum and teaching do not adjust to meet students' learning needs. Learning recovery programs can prevent this and make up the losses with a contextually appropriate mix of proven techniques for promoting foundational learning: consolidating the curriculum, extending instructional time, and making learning more efficient through targeted instruction, structured pedagogy, small-group tutoring, and self-guided learning programs. In addition to recovering lost learning, such measures can improve



learning outcomes in the long run, by improving systems' responsiveness to students' learning needs. But countries must act now to make that happen, taking advantage of the opportunity to improve their systems before the learning losses become permanent.

**Beyond addressing learning losses, addressing children's socioemotional losses is essential.** School closures not only disrupted education, but also affected the delivery of essential services, including school feeding, protection and psychosocial support, impacting the overall wellbeing and mental health of children. Reopening schools and supporting them to provide comprehensive services promoting wellbeing and psychosocial support is a priority. This will happen only if teachers are adequately equipped and trained to support the holistic needs of children. All teachers should be supported and prepared for remedial education, mental health and psychosocial support, and remote learning.

**Building back better requires countries to measure how effective their policy responses are at mitigating learning loss and to analyze their impact on equity—and then to use what they learn to keep improving.** Improving systems to generate timely and reliable data is critical to evaluate policy responses and generate lessons learned for the next disruption to education. The implementation gap between policy and improved student learning requires more research to understand what works and how to scale what works to the system level.

**Countries have an opportunity to accelerate learning and make schools more efficient, equitable, and resilient by building on investments made and lessons learned during the crisis.** Now is the time to shift from crisis to recovery—and beyond recovery, to resilient and transformative education systems that truly deliver learning and wellbeing for all children and youth.



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