



# The impact of COVID-19 on student equity and inclusion: supporting vulnerable students during school closures and school re-openings

19 November 2020

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A holistic approach to education – that addresses students’ learning, social and emotional needs – is crucial, especially in times of crisis. School closures related to the current COVID-19 pandemic mean that students from diverse backgrounds who are more at risk of increased vulnerability are less likely to receive the support and extra services they need, and the gap between students that experience additional barriers and that do not might widen. Closures can also have considerable effects on students’ sense of belonging to schools and their feelings of self-worth – these are key for inclusion in education.

This Policy Brief describes OECD Member Countries’ initiatives to address the different needs of vulnerable students during the COVID-19 pandemic. Beyond school closures, it also examines the issue of school re-openings by presenting countries’ current measures and providing policy pointers aimed to ensure that the pandemic does not further hinder the inclusion of vulnerable students in education systems.

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The current coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic is having a profound impact, not only on people's health, but also on how they learn, work and live. Among the most important challenges created by COVID-19 is how to adapt a system of education built around physical schools. At its peak, more than 188 countries, encompassing around 91% of enrolled learners worldwide, closed their schools to try to contain the spread of the virus.<sup>1</sup> School closures have a very real impact on all students, but especially on the most vulnerable ones who are more likely to face additional barriers.<sup>2</sup> Children and youth from low-income and single-parent families; immigrant, refugee,<sup>3</sup> ethnic minority<sup>4</sup> and Indigenous<sup>5</sup> backgrounds; with diverse gender<sup>6</sup> identities and sexual orientations;<sup>7</sup> and those with special education needs<sup>8</sup> suffer by being deprived of physical learning opportunities, social and emotional support available in schools and extra services such as school meals.<sup>9</sup> They risk falling further behind and becoming isolated with school doors closed. These students are likely to lose the most in terms of educational outcomes<sup>10</sup> and the support provided by schools if countries take insufficient measures to promote educational equity and inclusion.

The following sections describe OECD Member Countries' initiatives to address the different needs of vulnerable students during the COVID-19 pandemic. Beyond school closures, this Policy Brief also examines the issue of school re-openings by presenting countries' current measures and providing policy pointers aimed to ensure that the pandemic does not further hinder the inclusion of vulnerable students in education systems.

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1 <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse>.

2 In this Brief, the notion of "vulnerable" is used to qualify students in a situation of vulnerability and with diverse needs, with an emphasis on the dimensions encompassed by the OECD Strength through Diversity project framework which focuses on the inclusion of students from an immigrant background; students from ethnic groups, national minorities and Indigenous people; students with special education needs (SEN); gender; gender identity and sexual orientation; and gifted students. Because of a lack of available information, the last group is not mentioned in this Brief. The understanding of the terms "vulnerable students" and the groups they encompass vary across contexts. Moreover, some countries prefer the use of "disadvantaged students", "at-risk students" or, less commonly, "marginalised students". Other countries prefer the wording 'diverse student groups at risk of increased vulnerability' to emphasise and address the systemic barriers that increase the risk of vulnerability for students.

3 <https://oecdeditoday.com/immigrant-refugee-students-coronavirus/>

4 <https://oecdeditoday.com/including-marginalised-roma-students-during-coronavirus/>

5 <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-australia-51971891>; <https://www.nytimes.com/es/2020/04/10/espanol/coronavirus-grupos-indigenas.html>

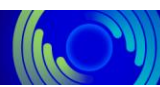
6 <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/multimedia/2020/4/infographic-covid19-violence-against-women-and-girls>

7 <https://www.hrc.org/blog/how-school-counselors-can-support-lgbtq-youth>; <https://outrightinternational.org/content/lbti-caucus-statement-response-covid-19-pandemic>

8 <https://oecdeditoday.com/coronavirus-students-special-education-needs/>

9 <https://oecdeditoday.com/coronavirus-school-closures-student-equity-inclusion/>

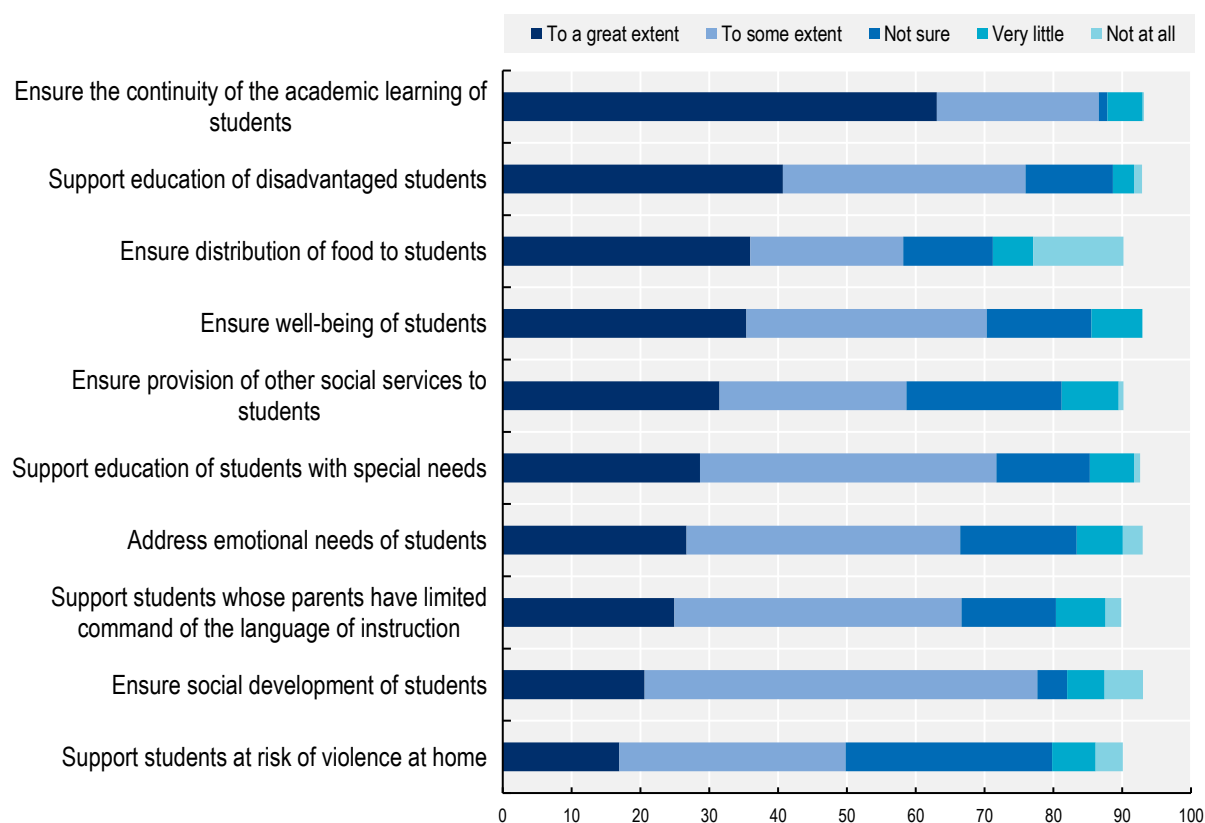
10 <https://www.edworkingpapers.com/sites/default/files/ai20-226-v2.pdf>



## How can countries and schools ensure equity and inclusion in education during school closures?

**Figure 1. Countries focus points in strategies of education continuity**

Countries self-reported focus on different areas of inclusion and equity during the school closures.



Note: The data used includes information from the 36 countries that have responded to the OECD/Harvard Survey, namely: Austria, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Croatia, Czech Republic, Dominican Republic, Estonia, Finland, France, Georgia, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Italy, Jamaica, Japan, Korea, Latvia, Lithuania, Mexico, Netherlands, Norway, Peru, Portugal, Slovenia, South Africa, Spain, Sweden, United Kingdom, United States of America and Uruguay. The answers have been weighted to account for the number of responses submitted for each country.

Source: Calculations based on data collection produced for the "A framework to guide an education response to the COVID-19" (Reimers and Schleicher, 2020<sup>[1]</sup>).

### Country policy responses

During the coronavirus crisis, many countries have been using digital pedagogical tools and virtual exchanges between students and their teachers, and among students, to deliver education as schools closed. Vulnerable students might however have little access to such tools and require further attention and support. To respond to the challenges they face, countries have developed specific and sometimes innovative policy initiatives such as providing equitable and inclusive access to digital learning resources and good learning conditions, ensuring that socio-emotional needs are being met, offering equitable and



inclusive access to extra services for vulnerable students, and ensuring support by and to teachers (Figure 1).

While the most vulnerable students might not have access to digital learning resources, some governments and civil society organisations have provided these students with computers or tablets as well as internet access, or they have organised teaching through television, phones or radio.

### ***Providing equitable and inclusive access to digital learning resources***

An almost universal response to school closures has been the creation of online learning platforms to support teachers, students and their families. However, not all students have the same access to information and communication technologies (ICTs), which also varies greatly across countries (OECD, 2020<sup>[2]</sup>). While the most vulnerable students might not have access to digital learning resources, some governments and civil society organisations have provided them with computers or tablets as well as internet access, or have organised teaching through television, phones or radio. A number of countries offer useful insights into some of the most equitable and inclusive solutions to provide access to digital learning resources and effective distance education.

#### *Partnerships with national educational media and free online learning resources to reach all learners*

- In New Zealand, a new online learning space, hard copy learning packs and special television programmes have been offered to reach all learners;<sup>11</sup>
- The French Ministry of Education created and strengthened partnerships with several national media such as culture and education-oriented television and radio channels in order to offer further educational material and reach as many students as possible;<sup>12</sup>
- Similarly, the Portuguese Ministry of Education launched the “#EstudoEmCasa”<sup>13</sup> educational programme to enrich students’ education during the crisis. This programme is mainly directed at primary students and has been broadcasted on the public television channel. To enhance this educational resource, a Roadmap with nine Guiding Principles was also disclosed to students, families and schools<sup>14</sup> with a set of information on the operation of this initiative. Weekly television grids were shared with students, families and schools in order to facilitate the planning and monitoring of transmissions;
- In Colombia, the government developed an online platform with more than 80,000 pedagogical resources to which low-income families have free access.<sup>15</sup> When these families do not have an internet connection, they can access the platform without consuming their mobile data;

11 <https://www.beehive.govt.nz/release/making-learning-home-accessible-m%C4%81ori-learners-and-wh%C4%81nau>.

12 <https://www.education.gouv.fr/lancement-de-l-offre-arte-sur-edutheque-2348>.

13 <https://www.dge.mec.pt/noticias/estudoemcasa>.

14 [https://www.dge.mec.pt/sites/default/files/escolas\\_estudoemcasa.pdf](https://www.dge.mec.pt/sites/default/files/escolas_estudoemcasa.pdf).

15 <https://www.mineducacion.gov.co/portal/salaprensa/Noticias/396244:Acceso-a-version-movil-del-portal-educativo-Colombia-Aprende-sera-gratuito-para-los-usuarios-con-servicios-de-telefon%C3%ADa-movil-prepago-y-pospago-de-hasta-71-214>.



- In the United Kingdom, the government has been collecting resources that can be useful for students with special education needs and their families.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, both Dyslexia Assist<sup>17</sup> and National Autistic Society<sup>18</sup> have developed and shared material for both children and adults that are affected by the two types of special education needs (SEN).

### *Distribution of free electronic devices and learning material*

- Some countries have worked on reaching students without any access to technology by distributing free material. For example, Chile distributed nearly 125,000 computers with an Internet connection in various cities across the country;<sup>19</sup>
- Likewise, the Government of Slovenia, with the help of private donors, collected thousands of electronic devices to support those vulnerable children without access to a computer;<sup>20</sup>
- The Italian capital, Rome, besides providing basic services to families from low socio-economic backgrounds, has worked on identifying Roma students without digital devices and internet connection.<sup>21</sup> The city offered them computers and tablets and tried to solve connection issues in order to ensure the continuity of their education;
- As an example of comprehensive guidelines for the continuity of migrants' education, the UNHCR has prepared advice<sup>22</sup> on how immigrant and refugee students can benefit from national virtual learning responses;
- Students in refugee camps in Greece received weekly homework packages if unable to connect to online platforms by phone or Internet;<sup>23</sup>
- The state of New South Wales in Australia has a long-standing practice of using technology to offer real-time distance teaching sessions through video conference lessons, phone lessons, satellite lessons and virtual excursions.<sup>24</sup> It also offers non-real-time teaching practices (e-mail and online learning management systems, such as Moodle) to students in remote regions who would otherwise be excluded from learning;
- In Portugal, schools, public and private organisations partnered in order to provide laptops and internet access to some students from disadvantaged backgrounds. When it was not possible, in co-operation with Post Office Services and the National Scouts Group, a mechanism was implemented allowing students who lived far from schools or without access to the Internet to receive hard copies lessons and tasks from schools. Deliveries of homework/assignments on paper to students and the following collection and return to the teachers were also organised;<sup>25</sup>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-online-education-resources/coronavirus-covid-19-list-of-online-education-resources-for-home-education#special-educational-needs-and-disabilities-send>

<sup>17</sup> <https://dyslexia-assist.org.uk/for-parents/>.

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.autism.org.uk/services/helplines/coronavirus/resources/tips.aspx>

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.mineduc.cl/apoyos-del-mineduc-durante-la-pandemia-del-covid-19/>.

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.gov.si/novice/2020-04-08-ministrstvo-za-izobrazevanje-znanost-in-sport-s-projektom-digi-sola-do-ucenk-in-ucencev-iz-socialno-ogrozenih-okolij/>.

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.imolaoggi.it/2020/04/22/coronavirus-roma-buoni-spesa-pc-e-tablet-per-i-campi-rom/>.

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.unhcr.org/5e81cf1d7.pdf>.

<sup>23</sup> <https://theirworld.org/news/education-delivered-to-children-on-greek-islands-refugee-camps-coronavirus>.

<sup>24</sup> <https://education.nsw.gov.au/policy-library/associated-documents/de-enrolproc.pdf>.

<sup>25</sup> OECD Strength through Diversity Webinar, 5 October 2020.



- Besides the creation of online learning platforms and the distribution of computers, the Ministry of Education of Chile distributed printed pedagogical materials to more than 380,000 students in rural schools, disadvantaged areas and locations with a poor internet connection. In the most remote regions, the Ministry partnered with the national Air Force to distribute the materials needed to many students.<sup>26</sup>

### ***Providing equitable and inclusive access to good learning conditions***

According to PISA 2018, on average across OECD countries, 9% of 15-year-old students do not have a quiet place to study in their homes (OECD, 2020, p. 2<sub>[2]</sub>). Some vulnerable student groups are likely to be the most represented among those who do not have a proper environment to study. For example, immigrant and Roma students living in camps or crowded households might struggle to find a quiet space to study and are more likely to lose motivation. Moreover, many students in vocational and educational training (VET) systems often cannot access an appropriate space to practice at home (OECD, 2020<sub>[3]</sub>).

Even though it is difficult to directly respond to these challenges (e.g. by providing a quiet and equipped space for each students), countries have nonetheless taken some measures to foster equitable and inclusive access to good learning conditions. In addition, in this context, parental support for home-schooling is needed more than ever to provide children with the best learning conditions and support them in their studies during school closures. However, not all students groups receive the same amount of parental support. A study conducted in the Netherlands found that during school closures, even if nearly all parents stressed the importance of helping their children in keeping up with their study at home, students from advantaged socio-economic background received more parental support and had access to more educational resources than those from disadvantaged backgrounds.<sup>27</sup> Some parents, such as parents of immigrant and refugee students, may not be able to work from home (due to their over-representation among those considered essential workers)<sup>28</sup> or support their children with home-schooling due to their limited education and/or lack of proficiency in the language of instruction. In this case, the continuity of limited physical educational services and the availability of multi-languages resources, respecting hygiene and social distancing, can be key for many students. Several countries, such as France, the United Kingdom and the Netherlands, authorised various schools to keep several classrooms open to welcome children whose parents worked in essential services and were working extra hours during the peaks of the pandemic. Furthermore, even though little information is available on gifted students during the pandemic, parental engagement is crucial for them as they are more likely than other groups to lose motivation due to a lack of intellectual stimulus or self-isolation from their classmates.

#### *Continuity of limited physical educational services for the most vulnerable*

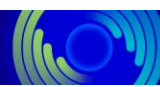
- In Australia, travel to remote communities for emergencies and for continuation of essential services was allowed and exempt from any travel restrictions in order to ensure basic services, including education, could still be delivered to all communities;<sup>29</sup>
- In the Netherlands, educational institutions in higher and upper secondary vocational education could remain open to facilitate students without access to distance learning at home. Also, primary and secondary schools could remain open for children whose parents were working in critical jobs (Reimers and Schleicher, 2020, p. 13<sub>[1]</sub>);

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.mineduc.cl/apoyos-del-mineduc-durante-la-pandemia-del-covid-19/>.

<sup>27</sup> <https://osf.io/preprints/socarxiv/hf32q/>.

<sup>28</sup> <https://www.axios.com/immigrant-work-coronavirus-nurses-health-care-744f5229-6381-4ac2-9f53-ef0a78e0489e.html>.

<sup>29</sup> <https://www.niaa.gov.au/indigenous-affairs/coronavirus-covid-19/information-individuals>.





- In Norway, schools remained open for a variety of students who were identified as vulnerable students, such as students with particular SEN, students with parents working in essential activities and students who could not be at home for other reasons, such as violent settings;<sup>30</sup>
- In Sweden there has not been any school closure during the COVID-19 outbreak to ensure that young children and vulnerable students could have continuity in accessing contacts with teachers and educators;<sup>31</sup>
- In Portugal, approximately 800 schools across the country hosted children whose parents worked in essential services, as well as provided food support to students from disadvantaged economic backgrounds.<sup>32</sup> Some Learning Support Centres also provided face-to-face and distance support. Schools reinforced their articulation with the Resource Centres for Inclusion, in order to ensure the continuity of their specialised support services for students.

### *Parental engagement*

- In Ireland, the Ministry of Education provided numerous resources online to support parents during school closures. Among the materials available, there are several documents providing guidance on the continuity of schooling for parents of children in primary schools. In addition, documents specifically dedicated to parents of children at risk of educational disadvantage and with students with SEN have been provided;<sup>33</sup>
- Various international organisations and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) such as Save the Children in Spain,<sup>34</sup> created and diffused online resources to support parents during the crisis. These materials range from mere recommendations and guidelines,<sup>35</sup> to short and condensed explanatory videos providing advice on how to help children manage their emotions, how to promote their participation at home and in society or how to play creative games;
- In Portugal, families with children younger than 12 years old (who did not return to school until after the summer holidays 2020) received extra financial support by the government.<sup>36</sup> This support has been extended to families with children who suffer from chronic illness or physical impairments, even if above 12 years old. A document on the role of Resource Centres for Inclusion in supporting families was also published on the *Apoio às Escolas* website. *CRI goes home*<sup>37</sup> is a guide of strategies and activities for children, young people, and families which contains a set of practical guidelines related to psychology, psychomotricity, occupational therapy, physiotherapy and speech therapy.

30 OECD Strength through Diversity Webinar, 5 October 2020.

31 OECD Strength through Diversity Webinar, 5 October 2020.

32 <https://dre.pt/web/guest/home/-/dre/130835147/details/maximized?serie=II&day=2020-03-29&date=2020-03-01>.

33 <https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Information/continuity-of-schooling/continuity-of-schooling.html#parents>.

34 <https://www.savethechildren.es/consejos-para-madres-y-padres-en-tiempos-de-coronavirus>.

35 <https://www.unicef.org/es/coronavirus/seis-maneras-en-que-padres-y-madres-pueden-ayudar-sus-hijos-durante-coronavirus>.

36 <https://www.portugal.gov.pt/pt/gc22/comunicacao/noticia?i=medida-de-apoio-excecional-declaracao-a-preencher-pelos-pais-em-caso-de-encerramento-de-escola>.

37 [https://www.dge.mec.pt/sites/default/files/cri\\_vai\\_a\\_casa.pdf](https://www.dge.mec.pt/sites/default/files/cri_vai_a_casa.pdf)



### ***Distributing information and providing online resources in different languages***

Language can be an important barrier to the inclusion in education of some diverse student groups, mainly for those from an immigrant background and some Indigenous communities. Language is an essential component of educational policy to guarantee not only improved educational outcomes, but also the well-being, sense of belonging and self-worth of these student groups (OECD, 2017<sup>[4]</sup>; Cerna, 2019<sup>[5]</sup>). During school closures, some countries have included a language component in their policy response in order to foster the inclusion of these vulnerable groups. Focusing on language enhances the accessibility and quality of information and learning materials. It might help avoid exacerbating existing educational gaps by leaving no one behind. Precisely, it might foster the engagement and the sense of belonging of some vulnerable student groups and their family who may feel left out by immediate responses to the pandemic. Most countries have worked on communicating information on health and education in relation to the COVID-19 in different languages. Though less common, a few countries implemented initiatives aimed at providing online multi-lingual learning resources in order to reach the students who may face language barriers in education.

#### *Information on health and education during the crisis*

- The Slovak government, with the help of staff from NGOs present on the ground, has been communicating in Romani to Roma families, informing them about the crisis and the measures to adopt in order to protect themselves and access basic services;<sup>38</sup>
- In Austria, the Education Minister prepared a letter for parents in 12 languages to inform them about school closures during COVID-19;<sup>39</sup>
- To reach non-native language speaking parents, the Oakland School District in the United States has provided flyers to families about school meals in five different languages.<sup>40</sup> Likewise, the state of Iowa established a “Multi-lingual COVID-19 Phone Line” in partnership with several local associations;<sup>41</sup>
- The Government of Sweden has offered online information in various languages on the country’s strategy in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. It also provides links to websites where recent events and measure related to the crisis are available in different languages, including in relation to education;<sup>42</sup>
- Similarly, in Norway, information and updates on school organisation during the COVID-19 crisis have been distributed in different languages to meet the needs of diverse families;<sup>43</sup>
- In Portugal, a campaign for the awareness and prevention within Roma communities was developed: “For you, for all, stay at home!”<sup>44</sup> It was promoted by *Sílaba Dinâmica* – Intercultural Association, in partnership with *Letras Nómadas* – Association for Research and Promotion of

38 [https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra\\_uploads/slovakia-report-covid-19-april-2020\\_en.pdf](https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/slovakia-report-covid-19-april-2020_en.pdf).

39 [https://www.bmbwf.gv.at/Themen/schule/beratung/corona/corona\\_elternbrief\\_bm.html](https://www.bmbwf.gv.at/Themen/schule/beratung/corona/corona_elternbrief_bm.html).

40 <https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1BfRqzr71bi21XXh6LFQ74gFfpHxDHmSF>.

41 <https://idph.iowa.gov/Emerging-Health-Issues/Novel-Coronavirus/ELL>.

42 <https://www.government.se/government-policy/the-governments-work-in-response-to-the-virus-responsible-for-covid-19/strategy-in-response-to-the-covid-19-pandemic---other-languages/>.

43 OECD Strength through Diversity Webinar, 5 October 2020.

44 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-CEIrluY-DY>.





Roma Communities and *Ribalta Ambição* – Association for Gender Equality in Roma Communities, with the support of the Portuguese High Commission for Migration;

- Canada, in collaboration with the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), developed new fact sheets for a refugee audience about COVID-19 and current quarantine/isolation requirements for travellers. The fact sheets entitled “Resettling to Canada during the COVID-19 pandemic” are available in multiple languages and the information they contain is provided to refugees by IOM before they depart for Canada;<sup>45</sup>
- Various cities across Europe, Australia and Canada have also been working in close relationship with local associations to provide ethnic groups and immigrant families facing language barriers with comprehensive information on the evolution of the pandemic, how to protect their health and how to access basic services.<sup>46</sup>

### *Multi-lingual learning resources*

- Through the National Institute of Indigenous Languages, part of the Ministry of Culture, the Government of Mexico not only shared information and prevention during the pandemic, but also shared learning materials in Spanish and Indigenous languages.<sup>47</sup> By the beginning of April 2020, there were 61 interpreters and translators as well as nearly 140 learning tools (audio, video, maps etc.) available in Spanish and most of the Indigenous languages spoken in the country;
- In the United States, Colorín Colorado, an educational website, provides advice to educators and families on supporting English language learners, from pre-primary to upper secondary school, throughout the pandemic;<sup>48</sup>
- To support learning of English as an additional language in New Brunswick, Canada, online courses for families and students were put in place and made accessible;<sup>49</sup>
- To respond to the language barriers faced by various Indigenous communities, a coalition of several universities around the world created the VirALLlanguages initiatives.<sup>50</sup> The recently started project aims to promote a “coronavirus education” reliable and accessible to all by providing culturally-appropriated translations.<sup>51</sup>

### ***Ensuring that socio-emotional needs are being met***

Ensuring that students’ social and emotional needs are being met and that the most vulnerable continue to receive extra services are challenges for governments and schools. During school closures, various countries have attempted to respond to the well-being needs of different vulnerable student groups (OECD, 2020<sup>[6]</sup>). Students’ sense of belonging to the school community may be lost unless they can keep in touch for learning, but also social activities, such as virtual games and reading buddies, via online resources like Zoom. The lack of social contact can be particularly impactful for vulnerable students: those with broken families, abusive families, in foster care, suffering from food insecurity or lacking housing. For example,

<sup>45</sup> <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/services/coronavirus-covid19/refugees.html>.

<sup>46</sup> [https://www.coe.int/en/web/interculturalcities/covid-19-special-page#{"62433518":\[7\]}](https://www.coe.int/en/web/interculturalcities/covid-19-special-page#{).

<sup>47</sup> <https://www.inali.gob.mx/>.

<sup>48</sup> <https://www.colorincolorado.org/coronavirus-ell>.

<sup>49</sup> OECD Strength through Diversity Webinar, 5 October 2020.

<sup>50</sup> <https://virallanguages.org/about-us/>.

<sup>51</sup> <https://globalvoices.org/2020/05/11/promoting-coronavirus-education-through-indigenous-language>.



many LGBTQI+ students may experience exclusion and even verbal or physical violence at home. Transgender students lacking family or community support may struggle to access hormones needed and emotional or psychological support, which can have a worrying impact on their education. When providing such services, it is also important to pay increased attention to the gender dimension of the current crisis. Girls incur additional risks compared to boys during school closures, which span from an increased burden in domestic duties, mental health disparities and lack of access to sexual and reproductive health care, to greater risk of gender-based violence, including sexual assault. All these factors may impact girls' well-being differently than for boys. Also, immigrant or refugees students that may not yet be fully integrated in their host communities may particularly struggle to maintain a healthy social life, without the occasions provided by their school life. This lack of socialisation – or socialisation mediated by online tools – may result in specific difficulties for students with SEN, in particular those who struggle with social and communication problems such as students with an autism spectrum disorder or those that have learning disabilities.

As already mentioned, the COVID-19 crisis may trigger symptoms of anxiety or other forms of mental disorders in children, adolescents and their parents. People with depression and bipolar disorder are particularly vulnerable to disruptions in routines and their usual patterns of daily life. They need routine, regularity and social interaction to be able to manage their mood symptoms and a breakdown in these factors can precipitate a relapse.<sup>52</sup> Moreover, parents that are experiencing anxiety symptoms during this crisis may inadvertently passed them on to their children. However, modelling how to react to stressful times by coping with anxiety in healthy ways can set an important example for their children.<sup>53</sup> It is thus important that parents adopt age-appropriate tools and ways to communicate with their children about the situation, as consideration of a child's development stage is key for a communication that is effective and neither underestimates or overestimates their understanding (Dalton, Rapa and Stein, 2020<sup>[7]</sup>). In particular, providing children with an accurate explanation that is meaningful to them will ensure that they do not feel unnecessarily frightened or guilty about the situation.

### *Counselling options and socialisation opportunities to support young people and their families*

- Access to social and medical services and counselling may no longer be available in person. To address this, the American School Counsellor Association provides advice to schools<sup>54</sup> about online counselling and other services during the COVID-19 related school closures;
- Kids Help Phone in Canada offers e-mental health services to children.<sup>55</sup> On 29 March 2020, the Government of Canada announced CAD 7.5 million in funding to Kids Help Phone to provide children and youth with mental health support and counselling services during this difficult time;
- Autism Spectrum Australia provides online diagnostic assessments and tele-therapy for affected students;<sup>56</sup>

<sup>52</sup> <https://www.otago.ac.nz/christchurch/research/mentalhealthclinicalresearch/lockdown/index.html>.

<sup>53</sup> <https://childmind.org/article/anxiety-and-coping-with-coronavirus/>.

<sup>54</sup> <https://www.schoolcounselor.org/asca/media/asca/home/EmergencyShutdown.pdf>.

<sup>55</sup> <https://kidshelpphone.ca/get-info/were-here-for-you-during-covid-19-novel-coronavirus/>.

<sup>56</sup> <https://www.autismspectrum.org.au/how-can-we-help/helping-you-to-navigate-covid-19>.



- Services such as *Kidshelpline* in Western Australia<sup>57</sup> and *Telefono Azzurro* in Italy<sup>58</sup> provide free, private and confidential 24/7 phone and online counselling services;
- UNICEF in Italy<sup>59</sup> offers remote counselling and psychological support for refugee and immigrant children, their parents or guardians, over the phone or on line;
- Being in quarantine can exacerbate feelings of isolation,<sup>60</sup> so providing opportunities for socialisation to immigrant and refugee students is crucial. That is why in Sweden an online initiative was launched to set up virtual meetings between newcomers and Swedes.<sup>61</sup>

### *Tools to discuss COVID-19 with vulnerable students and their families*

- In the United States, several states have advised educational staff and families to follow the “Recommendations to support and protect children’s emotional well-being during the pandemic” developed by the nation’s leading research organisation Child Trends.<sup>62</sup> These recommendations include the use of creative approaches for children to stay connected; provide age-appropriate information; seek professional help if children show signs of trauma that do not resolve relatively quickly; or emphasise strengths, hope, and positivity. Moreover, the National Association of School Psychologists has published some suggestions for communications with children, such as the importance to consider that children look to adults for guidance on how to react to stressful events, the need to acknowledge concern without panic and explaining preventive measures in appropriate terms;<sup>63</sup>
- The United States’ National Public Radio (NPR), the main independent and non-profit media organisation, also created a comic that helps demystify the virus. This comic explains what COVID-19 is, how to protect yourself, and helps separate fact from fiction;<sup>64</sup>
- The Spanish Ministry of Education and Professional Training created a web page informing on the measures adopted during the crisis,<sup>65</sup> where it dedicated a section to the well-being and care of students and families. Among other materials, the Ministry shared prevention videos, recommendations and contact to obtain socio-emotional support;
- In Portugal, with the involvement of the Order of Portuguese Psychologists, guidelines were produced for school psychologists and brochures for parents and students, were shared online, including: (i) Self-care recommendations for teachers and early childhood educators; (ii) Helping children cope with stress; (iii) How to deal with a situation of isolation; (iv) How to explain to a child the measures of social distance and isolation; (v) How to maintain distance teaching, learning and training activities; (vi) Families in Isolation during the Pandemic –

<sup>57</sup> <http://kidshelpline.com.au/>.

<sup>58</sup> <https://azzurro.it/coronavirus/>.

<sup>59</sup> <https://blogs.unicef.org/blog/covid-19-support-refugee-migrant-children-italy/>.

<sup>60</sup> <https://reimaginingmigration.org/covid-19-trauma-and-immigrant-origin-students-with-dr-maryam-kia-keating/>.

<sup>61</sup> <https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/intracat/coping-with-corona-swedish-language-buddy-online>.

<sup>62</sup> <https://www.childtrends.org/publications/resources-for-supporting-childrens-emotional-well-being-during-the-covid-19-pandemic>.

<sup>63</sup> <https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources-and-podcasts/school-climate-safety-and-crisis/health-crisis-resources/helping-children-cope-with-changes-resulting-from-covid-19>.

<sup>64</sup> <https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2020/02/28/809580453/just-for-kids-a-comic-exploring-the-new-coronavirus>.

<sup>65</sup> <https://www.educacionyfp.gob.es/destacados/covid19.html>.



Parents Kit / Activity Calendars for children and adolescents ; (vii) Studying in pandemic times – Guide for parents and caregivers;<sup>66</sup>

- National and international institutions such as WHO and UNICEF have also been very active,<sup>67</sup> mobilising their knowledge and expertise to support parents in, for example, explaining the situation to their children with autism, helping them manage a disrupted schedule or their already-existing anxiety;
- The Inter-Agency Standing Committee Reference Group on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Emergency Settings<sup>68</sup> published *My Hero is You – how kids can fight COVID-19!* –<sup>69</sup> a culturally and linguistically accessible book which explains how children can protect themselves, their families and friends from coronavirus and how to manage difficult emotions in a new and rapidly changing reality.

### ***Offering equitable and inclusive access to extra services for vulnerable students***

In times of crisis, ensuring access to extra services to vulnerable students is crucial to foster equity, inclusion and their well-being. It can make a substantial difference in the lives of students coming from low socio-economic backgrounds and help prevent widening educational gaps. To support these students, numerous countries have taken initiatives, often in partnership with local associations, and resorting to emergency funds. These measures have helped many students to return safely to their homes or have access to some basic needs usually provided by their school such as free meals.

#### *Financial support and free school meals*

- The Government of Australia has used an existing support mechanism dedicated to Indigenous students called ABSTUDY, which provides support for travel, accommodation and tuition. During the crisis, many students from remote areas, mainly Indigenous, returned home and were eligible for extra support and help to safely return to their families;<sup>70</sup>
- The existence of a National Emergency Aid Fund allowed the French government to support thousands of students.<sup>71</sup> Many received financial support, free food and plane tickets to return home when studying abroad;
- Municipalities across countries have been at the frontline of the crisis response. In partnership with educational staff and civil society organisations they often provide basic services to vulnerable population. In Italy,<sup>72</sup> Portugal<sup>73</sup> and Serbia,<sup>74</sup> among other countries, municipalities have worked

<sup>66</sup> OECD Strength through Diversity Webinar, 5 October 2020.

<sup>67</sup><http://www.euro.who.int/en/health-topics/health-emergencies/coronavirus-covid-19/news/news/2020/3/mental-health-and-psychological-resilience-during-the-covid-19-pandemic>.

<sup>68</sup> <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/the-inter-agency-standing-committee>

<sup>69</sup> <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/iasc-reference-group-mental-health-and-psychosocial-support-emergency-settings/my-hero-you>.

<sup>70</sup> <https://www.niaa.gov.au/indigenous-affairs/coronavirus-covid-19/information-individuals#students>.

<sup>71</sup> <https://www.education.gouv.fr/bo/2011/29/esrs1117348c.htm?menu=2>.

<sup>72</sup> <http://www.vita.it/it/article/2020/04/02/covid-19-tra-i-rom-e-sinti-in-emergenza-abitativa-regna-la-paura/154824/>.

<sup>73</sup> <https://www.publico.pt/2020/03/25/sociedade/noticia/sabao-nao-carro-preciso-agua-corrente-1909138>.

<sup>74</sup> <https://www.coe.int/en/web/belgrade/-/roma-communities-civil-society-and-local-institutions-from-serbia-react-in-crisis>.



with schools and associations to provide communities with running water, food and medication to many vulnerable Roma families from various communities;

- The Oakland Unified School District in the United States is offering “grab and go”<sup>75</sup> breakfast and lunch meals to the most vulnerable students and is supported by foundations such as eat.learn.play;<sup>76</sup>
- In the United Kingdom, the government explicitly requested that all schools provide free meals to students during school closures. If a family was unable to collect it, the school had to ensure the distribution of the meals;<sup>77</sup>
- Spain, in its Royal Decree-Law 7/2020 of 12 March 2020 that established the emergency measures to respond to the economic impact of the COVID-19, stated that families who benefit from a scholarship or a special support during the school year must receive economic support and direct services of food distribution;<sup>78</sup>
- In order to support tertiary students in case of school closures, the Swedish Government has considered that student loans that have been granted should not have to be paid back if no teaching is provided.<sup>79</sup>

### **Ensuring support to and by teachers**

Teachers’ role and skills are irreplaceable and their daily contact with students places them among the most important agents of inclusion in education. Amid the COVID-19 crisis, they are core actors, guiding their students through the intensification of online distance learning. Furthermore, teachers, as well as school leaders, are the most likely individuals to be close to students’ families and can have a major role in both reaching the most vulnerable students and keeping their family engaged in their education.

Teachers can help these students to remain connected during school closures by providing Internet hotspots, hosting video chats, sharing videos with closed captioning, providing translated material and engaging with the students’ families or guardians. While nearly 63 million teachers were touched by the crisis at the end of March 2020,<sup>80</sup> ensuring support by and to teachers during such a crisis constitutes a great challenge and a key policy area to ensure equity and inclusion in education during school closures. According to a brief published in May 2020 by the World Bank, three core principles must guide policies aimed to promote teachers’ effectiveness and well-being: (1) support teacher resilience; (2) support teachers instructionally; and (3) support teachers technologically.<sup>81</sup> This section focuses on examples related to teacher networks and initiatives that have supported the most vulnerable and countries’ initiatives to ensure accessible resources for teachers and teachers’ socio-emotional well-being during the crisis.

#### *Resources for teachers*

- The Portuguese Ministry of Education also developed the website *Apoio às Escolas* with a set of resources to support schools in the use of distance learning methodologies that allow them

<sup>75</sup> <https://www.ousd.org/covid-19studentmeals?fbclid=IwAR2EcmBQKVwVf96JFNylqyvNkV-iZnLkuvdqgsW0EeztXAMfH71et-IFtw>.

<sup>76</sup> <https://eatlearnplay.org/>.

<sup>77</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-free-school-meals-guidance/covid-19-free-school-meals-guidance-for-schools>.

<sup>78</sup> <https://www.boe.es/buscar/act.php?id=BOE-A-2020-3580#a8>.

<sup>79</sup> <https://www.government.se/articles/2020/03/the-governments-work-in-the-area-of-education-in-response-to-the-coronavirus/>.

<sup>80</sup> <https://en.unesco.org/news/teacher-task-force-calls-support-63-million-teachers-touched-covid-19-crisis>.

<sup>81</sup> <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/331951589903056125/pdf/Three-Principles-to-Support-Teacher-Effectiveness-During-COVID-19.pdf>.



to continue the teaching and learning processes. A dynamic space with the regular introduction of new resources and sharing of practices. A Facebook page was also created with information, documents and suggestions for working with students, as well as a YouTube channel for sharing classes and educational initiatives;<sup>82</sup>

- Some countries such as Italy have provided teachers with online teacher training resources on how to teach online. They also created online collaborative platforms that allow them to share their resources and give and receive peer feedback;<sup>83</sup>
- To support the teachers and parents in this new situation, Nordic countries have shared their e-learning solutions for free. They jointly shared 40+ remote learning solutions from Estonia, Finland, Denmark, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway and Sweden;<sup>84</sup>
- The European Commission published an online catalogue called “Education Gateway” providing teaching materials and training opportunities for teachers and stakeholders in European education systems available in 23 European languages;<sup>85</sup>
- In collaboration with universities, New Brunswick, Canada, developed an online module aimed at training teachers for culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms. It was put in place to support mainstream teachers in gaining the skills set required to teach English as an additional language to students from migrant backgrounds during school closures.<sup>86</sup>

#### *Support for teachers’ socio-emotional well-being*

- In May 2020, the Chilean Ministry of Education organised a seminar on “socio-emotional learning in times of pandemic.” Among the different topics addressed was a part dedicated to key concepts and initiatives for the self-care of teachers;<sup>87</sup>
- The Education Hub in New Zealand has several missions, including empowering teachers. During the pandemic, the Hub published guidelines to support teachers in taking care of their own well-being and shared contacts where they can receive counselling, health and psychological services.<sup>88</sup>

#### *Teachers’ initiatives and networks to support the learning and the inclusion of the most vulnerable*

- In Larissa, Greece, the municipality has been working closely with local associations to provide refugees with masks and daily support. There, in Koutsohero Refugee Camp, teachers are providing extended support to these students who have faced significant challenges to access quality education during the pandemic.<sup>89</sup> Mainly, they helped refugee students who do not speak Greek to register to local schools and have access to online platform. Thanks to this

82 OECD Strength through Diversity Webinar, 5 October 2020.

83 [https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/view/?ref=120\\_120544-8ksud7oaj2&title=Education\\_responses\\_to\\_Covid-19\\_Embracing\\_digital\\_learning\\_and\\_online\\_collaboration](https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/view/?ref=120_120544-8ksud7oaj2&title=Education_responses_to_Covid-19_Embracing_digital_learning_and_online_collaboration).

84 <https://education-nation.99math.com/>.

85 [https://ec.europa.eu/education/resources-and-tools/coronavirus-online-learning-resources/online-platforms\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/education/resources-and-tools/coronavirus-online-learning-resources/online-platforms_en).

86 OECD Strength through Diversity Webinar, 5 October 2020.

87 [https://www.mineduc.cl/wp-content/uploads/sites/19/2020/05/4claves\\_autocuidadodocente.pdf](https://www.mineduc.cl/wp-content/uploads/sites/19/2020/05/4claves_autocuidadodocente.pdf).

88 <https://theeducationhub.org.nz/advice-for-teachers-on-looking-after-your-wellbeing-during-the-covid-19-lockdown/>.

89 <https://uil.unesco.org/system/files/larissa.pdf>.





initiative, many students could access asynchronous distance education by approaching the educational material posted by the teachers whether in open lessons or in school blogs;

- In various Uruguayan upper secondary schools, school leaders and teachers have been closely collaborating since schools began to close to ensure that (1) schools acquire the necessary digital tools and (2) all students have access to online learning resources and stay engaged in their education. Among the different initiatives implemented are WhatsApp groups led by teachers to send educational resources to families; trainings for teachers and students on the use of ICTs; the involvement of students in curriculum adaptations; and extra support for students with SEN;<sup>90</sup>
- In Slovenia, within the frame of the project “Together for knowledge — Implementation of the activities of support mechanisms for the acquisition of knowledge for members of the Roma community”<sup>91</sup> Roma assistants and other educational staff have focused on ensuring provision of education for all Roma. They worked on maintaining regular communication with Roma children and parents, on collecting ICT equipment and on the development of an information infrastructure to ensure that distance education reaches all students;<sup>92</sup>
- In Portugal, teachers’ associations and scientific associations were involved in the production and sharing of pedagogical and didactic materials from the various disciplines of the national curriculum. Contacts were also developed with the main educational content publishers, in order to extend the online resources available to teachers. A digital library model was also developed where teachers can access and share content;<sup>93</sup>
- In response to the wave of school closures across the United States due to COVID-19, a few teachers of blind students and advocates collaborated to organise a free homework help hotline for students who are blind or visually impaired. They offer help in navigating accessible websites, and tutoring student in braille reading and writing.<sup>94</sup>

## Policy options to ensure equity and inclusion during school closures due to the COVID-19

- Providing equitable and inclusive access to digital learning resources:
  - **Partnerships with national educational media** (TV channels, Radio channels) to reach the as many learners as possible;

90 <https://www.ces.edu.uy/index.php/liceos/29808-mantener-el-vinculo-pedagogico-gran-desafio-en-tiempos-de-coronavirus>.

91 <http://www.skupajzaznanje.si/>.

92 OECD Strength through Diversity Webinar, 5 October 2020.

93 OECD Strength through Diversity Webinar, 5 October 2020.

94 <https://www.pathstoliteracy.org/resources/national-homework-hotline-blindvisually-impaired-students-nhh-bvi>.



- **Free online learning resources** to reach all learners: Developing free educational content to be offered online. Facilitating partnerships with national telecom companies to provide free use of mobile data;
- **Distribution of free electronic devices and learning material:** Distributing free electronic devices and providing internet connection to disadvantaged and vulnerable students, including in refugee camps and Roma settlements, and to students living in remote areas. Engaging in partnerships with grass-roots associations and other entities such as the country's National Air Force could ensure an efficient and broad distribution.
- Providing equitable and inclusive access to good learning conditions:
  - The **continuity of limited physical educational services for the most vulnerable:** Keeping classrooms and quiet spaces to study open for some students in difficulty. Allowing travel of educational staff to remote areas to ensure the continuity of educational provisions when distance learning is not possible;
  - **Parental engagement:** Encouraging such engagement to ensure support and good learning conditions to students, with a focus on vulnerable groups.
- Facilitating information in different languages:
  - **Information on health and education:** Offering online or distributing physically information on the pandemic and education-related issues in different languages to reach diverse populations such as Roma and immigrants, through partnerships with grass-root associations;
  - **Multi-lingual learning resources:** Offering online educational resources in different languages (e.g. Indigenous languages) and using culturally-adapted resources with the help of specialists and translators.
- Ensuring that socio-emotional needs are being met:
  - **Counselling options and socialisation opportunities:** Providing remote counselling services (e.g. virtual meetings, hotlines) to support the psychological and socio-emotional well-being of vulnerable students. Offering online initiatives to ensure socialisation activities from vulnerable groups such as immigrant students;
  - **Tools to discuss COVID-19** with vulnerable students and their families: Developing different tools across Ministries, international organisations, NGOs, national associations or media. Providing child-friendly videos and comics, organising press conferences and/or news broadcasts adapted for children to ensure children and adolescents have access to appropriate information and are equipped to take care of themselves and their surroundings.
- Offering equitable and inclusive access to extra services for vulnerable students:
  - **Financial support:** Unlocking or creating emergency funds for vulnerable students and their families. Providing extra funding to local authorities to support vulnerable children. Considering student loans waivers;
  - **Free school meals:** Ensuring the continuity of distributing free school meals for disadvantaged and vulnerable groups of students, in partnership with local associations.
- Ensuring support to and by teachers:
  - **Resources** for teachers: Making online resources available and designing training to support teachers in teaching diverse groups of students online;
  - Support for **teachers' socio-emotional well-being:** Organising fora and/or developing guidelines to set standards on how to best support teachers' well-being during school closures so that they are in turn able to support vulnerable students' well-being;
  - **Teachers' initiatives and networks** to support the learning and the inclusion of the most vulnerable: Providing opportunities for groups of teachers to organise locally or nationally to



share practices on how to best support vulnerable students. Facilitating teachers' access to online tools/groups to ensure educational continuity when other national initiatives are not well functioning, such as in informal settlements with no internet connection.

## How can education systems support vulnerable students with the re-opening of schools?

Following the school closures due to COVID-19 pandemic, a number of countries have re-opened schools (at least partially) if health conditions had improved and return was deemed safe by health professionals, ministries, education trade unions, parents associations and other stakeholders. Reasons for re-opening varied but included the need to develop students' knowledge and skills, catch up on learning losses, provide extra services, allow parents to return to work, among others (Reimers and Schleicher, 2020<sup>[8]</sup>). Other reasons that might impact school decisions towards school re-opening can be the progression of research describing to what degree children contribute to the spreading of the infection. If children are considered to play a small role in it, governments might consider it "safe" to open schools for these students. In Norway for example, this last point was an important reason that led to first re-open schools for the youngest students, coupled with the fact that the youngest children were overall considered to be the most vulnerable group. They also tend to benefit the least from online distance education.<sup>95</sup> Nonetheless, decisions based on this element are likely to be re-considered since our knowledge on the virus constantly evolves and important debates continue regarding the infectiousness of young children.<sup>96</sup> Other countries are planning to re-open schools in the following months. Initial concerns have focused around issues of hygiene and safety in schools, catching up on learning losses and providing support measures for the well-being of students.

Table 1 shows plans of 16 OECD countries for re-opening of schools with respect to well-being. Many of those countries have been planning to provide counselling for students, special support measures for students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, special support measures for students who may have been victims of violence at home and special support measures for students in psychological distress. Some countries have also planning to assess students' mental health. Nonetheless, only Greece and Korea indicated plans to hire additional school doctors, nurses, psychologists or specialised teachers.

**Table 1. Countries' plans for re-opening with respect to students' well-being**

Country	Assessment of students' mental health (efforts to identify students that may be experiencing particularly challenging circumstances)	Counselling for students	Hiring additional school doctors, nurses, psychologists, specialized teachers	Special support measures for students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds	Special support measures for students who may be victims of violence at home	Special support measures for students in psychological distress
Austria	YES	YES	N/A	YES	N/A	YES
Belgium	N/A	YES	N/A	YES	YES	YES
Chile	YES	YES	N/A	YES	YES	YES
Colombia	YES	YES	NO	YES	YES	YES
Costa	NO	YES	NO	YES	YES	YES

95 OECD Strength through Diversity Webinar, 5 October 2020.

96 <https://theconversation.com/children-might-play-a-bigger-role-in-covid-transmission-than-first-thought-schools-must-prepare-144947>.



Rica							
Finland	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO
France	YES	YES	N/A	YES	YES	YES	YES
Germany	YES	YES	N/A	YES	YES	YES	YES
Greece	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Iceland	N/A	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO
Japan	YES	YES	N/A	YES	YES	N/A	YES
Korea	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Norway	N/A	YES	N/A	YES	YES	YES	YES
Portugal	NO	NO	NO	YES	YES	YES	NO
Spain	YES	YES	N/A	YES	YES	YES	YES

Note: Given the rapid developments of events and measures, the information in the table may not be comprehensive or fully up to date.

Source: This table has been elaborated on the basis of the OECD and Harvard Graduate School of Education Survey on COVID-19 (Reimers and Schleicher, 2020<sup>[8]</sup>).

## Country policy responses – A holistic approach to education

While the COVID-19 crisis has been slowing down in many countries, education systems have planned or are planning their school re-opening strategies. As Table 1 shows, the well-being of students and support for those from a socio-economic disadvantaged background is an important part of re-opening strategies in several countries. However, ensuring inclusion requires broader engagement and a comprehensive set of measures in order to ensure that all students feel that they are safe and belong to the school. This can eventually impact their educational outcomes. Beyond general equity issues alone and logistical issues related to the safety of all at school, it is important to pay particular attention to the most vulnerable groups and their specificities. For these groups, some major issues to consider include a heightened risk of school dropout, as observed during past crises, and increased inequalities, often the result of unequal access to alternative learning delivery methods. In certain contexts, students may also be affected by lack of nutrition, or exposure to violence, displacement, child labour and other adverse conditions, with girls and women being particularly vulnerable. During school re-opening, special attention must therefore be given, among other groups, to those living in poverty, geographically remote areas or urban slums, students from ethnic minorities and Indigenous communities, immigrant and refugee students, LGBTQI+ students and students with SEN.

Growing evidence shows that disadvantaged and vulnerable students have been on average significantly less engaged in remote learning. For example, in a study conducted in schools across the United Kingdom, teachers reported that 62% of “vulnerable students” and 58% of students with SEN were less engaged in remote learning than their classmates.<sup>97</sup> Little data is available on specific groups such as Roma or students from an immigrant background but the challenges they face, such as lack to access to technology a quiet place to study or language barriers, suggest that the numbers could be similar and even higher. As such, the learning loss and impact on socio-emotional well-being might be the most severe for these student groups. In the long run, significant decrease in educational attainment, well-being outcomes and the exacerbation of existing educational gaps are likely to have a severe and lasting impact on OECD economies.<sup>98</sup>

Countries should adopt a holistic set of measures to ensure educational equity and inclusive environments in order to limit further educational gaps for these student populations. It is crucial to consider both learning

<sup>97</sup> <https://www.nfer.ac.uk/schools-responses-to-covid-19-pupil-engagement-in-remote-learning/>.

<sup>98</sup> <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/public-sector/our-insights/covid-19-and-student-learning-in-the-united-states-the-hurt-could-last-a-lifetime>.



and well-being needs of students. The second section of this Policy Brief focuses on countries' initiatives and provides recommendations for governments to respond to the educational needs of the most vulnerable students during school re-openings. It also pays special attention to the risk of repeated cycles of re-closures and re-openings as well as to hybrid models of education that might emerge from the COVID-19 crisis.

**Beyond general equity issues alone and logistical issues related to the safety of all at school, attention has to be paid to the most vulnerable groups and their specificities.**

### ***Adopting a holistic approach to education***

A holistic approach to education is one that considers the learning, social and emotional needs of students and that requires governments to work in partnership with other relevant agencies such as health and community organisations, social work agencies and other support services to address the complex needs of the most vulnerable students during and after the coronavirus crisis (Cerna, 2019<sup>[5]</sup>). In addition, partnerships with grass-root associations and, more broadly, recognising the legitimacy of non-formal education providers is also a crucial component as much during school closures as for school re-opening strategies. These actors are close to the field, might have tight relationships with vulnerable communities and can support local authorities in providing both educational services and extra support to vulnerable families and communities.

Inclusive education is a crucial component of broader social inclusion. As such, a comprehensive approach must take into account anti-discrimination frameworks to fight exclusion in education and in the broader society. Compliance with anti-discrimination and human rights policies and laws is key in order to ensure equity and inclusion during school-reopening, and that no child will be left behind. They can avoid, for example, that some children remain out of school because of unjustified refusals and might encourage the design of inclusive curriculum. At the school-level, anti-bullying campaigns can be powerful tools to encourage safe return to school, raise awareness, avoid stigmatisation and protect students for whom school may not necessarily be a safe place. Here, it might be important to consider programmes to address stigma and direct community mobilisation. Moreover, considering broad social inclusion entails giving everyone the possibility to feel a sense of belonging and communicate properly within the constraint imposed by the pandemic. For example, it has been highlighted that regular facemasks, though necessary to limit the spread of the virus, are ill-designed for certain student groups, such as students with specific SEN (e.g. students with hearing impairments), non-native speakers and young children who learn by observing mouth movements. In some countries, the use of transparent face masks in classroom settings with students with hearing/visual impairments and non-native speakers may be required and constitute an inclusive practice.<sup>99</sup>

In spite of alarming numbers on learning loss, the real impact of the crisis on students and especially vulnerable ones will yet need to be measured. Education systems across OECD should see the current situation not only as highly challenging, but also as an opportunity to place a stronger focus on reducing existing educational gaps by implementing initiatives to foster equity and inclusion for vulnerable student groups who might be the most impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

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<sup>99</sup> OECD Strength through Diversity Webinar, 5 October 2020.



## **Facilitating partnerships between different stakeholders**

### *Co-operation between relevant authorities and agencies to respond to vulnerable students' needs*

Re-opening schools safely while ensuring that no student is left behind will require strong partnerships between relevant ministries and state agencies responsible for equity and inclusion matters. Inter-ministerial delegations or specialised agencies working on multiple areas will also be crucial actors in the design and implementation of school re-opening strategies (Gouédard, Pont and Viennet, 2020<sup>[9]</sup>). Such actors will be important to strengthen co-ordination between different stakeholders while having a direct insight into vulnerable students' situation and needs in the area.

- In Ireland, the Department of Education and Skills is working closely with the Department of Health, particularly with a National Public Health Emergency Team, on a plan for re-opening schools. The planning strategy has specific references to vulnerable groups, such as students with SEN and marginalised students;<sup>100</sup>
- In Slovenia, the Ministry of Education collaborated with the National Education Institute and the National Institute of Public Health. They released a report on the “Education in the Republic of Slovenia in reference to COVID-19” which includes possible models of education provision and recommendations for schools;<sup>101</sup>
- The French inter-ministerial delegations for Lodging and Access to Housing (DIHAL),<sup>102</sup> for instance, was created in 2010 to ensure the co-ordination of the Government's policies in relation to lodging and access to housing for people in difficulty. Among other activities, the DIHAL works closely with several Ministries and grass-roots associations to support children and adolescents living in slums (most of which are Roma and immigrants) in accessing decent housing and a quality education. Such a body could be an efficient intermediary between local actors and national policy-makers.

### *Co-operation between authorities and education trade unions*

During school closures, teachers have been at the frontline for the implementation of alternative pedagogical strategies, sometimes designing their own methods to reach the most marginalised. Their proximity with students and families put them in a key position to understand students' needs (see above). Ensuring support by and to teachers and school leaders to guarantee equity and inclusion during school re-opening will also be a crucial element in countries' strategies (see below). Co-operation between policy-makers, teachers and school leaders is therefore key to ensure a holistic approach to inclusive school re-opening. Teachers can share their experience with students and families and contribute to developing more comprehensive initiatives.

In 2018, OECD TALIS found that across OECD countries, fewer than 50% of teachers thought that they could influence policy making. The rate does not exceed 30% when asked if they think that their views are valued (OECD, 2019<sup>[10]</sup>). These dynamics seem to have been at stake during the crisis when several unions have pointed out a lack of listening by national educational authorities. Education trade unions at different scales have however been very active during the pandemic and can make a difference in understanding the needs of students, including the most vulnerable ones. Unions worldwide have been

100 <https://www.education.ie/en/covid-19/planning-for-reopening-schools.pdf>.

101 [https://www.zrss.si/digitalnahnjznica/Covid\\_19/?fbclid=IwAR2e-FLDSw1dHw6fAFtbSGYvRt7j91JIVObVCVBBM6kepzx-vV7ur38NJ7Q](https://www.zrss.si/digitalnahnjznica/Covid_19/?fbclid=IwAR2e-FLDSw1dHw6fAFtbSGYvRt7j91JIVObVCVBBM6kepzx-vV7ur38NJ7Q).

102 <https://www.gouvernement.fr/presentation-de-la-dihal>.





asking authorities for more co-operation and to grant more importance to teachers' voice in law and policy making.

- In Germany, the German education union (VBE) called for a stronger inclusion of teachers in decision-making related to the crisis. Mainly, it mentioned the importance of participating in discussions around examination regulations, teacher trainings and common reflexion on school re-opening and more broadly on what comes after the crisis;<sup>103</sup>
- Likewise, at the European level, the European Trade Union Committee for Education issued a "Statement on the road to recovery from the COVID-19 crisis." Among its main recommendations, the document mentions the necessity of "effective social dialogue and collective bargaining", "boosting public investment in high quality public education for all" as well as specific guidance on how to ensure inclusion and equality in education during the crisis;<sup>104</sup>
- In Italy, the national education trade union wrote a Manifesto for inclusive education during COVID-19.<sup>105</sup> The Manifesto emphasises that students must be safeguarded to ensure value and continuity of the educational relationship. Specifically, they mention that (1) teaching must remain educative for students' critical abilities and citizenship; (2) distance teaching, an emergency tool, cannot replace the educational relationship between educators and students; (3) technologies and media are tools, not a panacea; (4) unequal access to remote education must be avoided; (5) collective elements in education are to be protected (schools' autonomy and collegial bodies); and (6) a comprehensive and constructive evaluation of students' performances is needed;
- In September 2020, in the Spanish Basque Autonomous Community, nearly 70% of education professionals conducted a strike to demand measures allowing for a safe return to school and to guarantee quality education.<sup>106</sup>

### *Co-operation between authorities and civil society*

Co-operation between official institutions and civil society organisations is also key. As previous examples mentioned in this policy brief show, Ministries of Education have partnered with unexpected actors, such as national Air Forces to distribute learning material and digital devices in remote areas, and local authorities have co-operated with various associations to distribute hygiene kits, food, and educational material to vulnerable students and their communities. Grass-root associations constitute important actors who work on the ground and in which families and communities may have more trust than in official institutions. As associations and charities are often more aware of the necessities of their audiences, institutional actors tend to rely on them for a more efficient distribution of resources.

- In the United Kingdom, the Ministry of Children and Family has announced a commitment to the Family Fund, a charity that provides grants for families raising disabled or seriously ill children and young people, of GBP 37.3 million for the 2020-21 biennium. Of the total, GBP 10 million has been committed specifically in response to the unique difficulties presented by the coronavirus pandemic, and will help low-income families with children with SEN with the cost of equipment,

<sup>103</sup> <https://www.ei-ie.org/en/detail/16715/germany-trade-union-wants-teachers%e2%80%99-voice-to-be-heard-in-new-coronavirus-legislation>.

<sup>104</sup> [https://www.csee-etu.org/images/attachments/ETUCE\\_Statement\\_on\\_COVID-19\\_Final.pdf](https://www.csee-etu.org/images/attachments/ETUCE_Statement_on_COVID-19_Final.pdf).

<sup>105</sup> <https://www.ei-ie.org/en/detail/16774/italy-a-trade-union-manifesto-for-inclusive-education>.

<sup>106</sup> <https://www.csee-etu.org/en/policy-issues/covid-19/294-latest-updates/3942-basque-country-thousands-of-education-workers-strike-for-a-safe-return-to-school-and-quality-education-for-all-students-2>.



goods or services – from household items to sensory and educational equipment that they might not otherwise be able to afford.<sup>107</sup>

Co-operation can finally take different shapes and involve different stakeholders:

- For example, in Sweden in March 2020, a partnership between the Swedish National Agency for Education, the Swedish National Agency for Special Needs Education and Schools, Research Institutes of Sweden (RISE), the Swedish Edtech Industry, the Swedish Educational Broadcasting Company, the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SKR) and a number of other collaboration partners was established. A new website<sup>108</sup> was launched quickly in order to put together different types of support and guidance concerning distance learning;
- Portuguese schools, together with the respective National Commission for the Promotion of the Rights and Protection of Children and Young People, organised students' welcoming and school work dynamics, through the Multidisciplinary Support Team for Inclusive Education in order to provide students at risk the conditions to promote their safety, training, education, well-being and integral development.<sup>109</sup>

### *Whole-school and whole-community approaches*

Holistic measures to respond to students' needs must be based on a whole-school and whole-community approach. Strong partnerships between schools and communities imply an ongoing communication between educational staff and families to ensure they are well informed and can work together to identify and efficiently respond to the needs of students, mainly those of the most vulnerable. For example, evidence from past initiatives for Roma inclusion shows that policies and projects that are based on a community approach with an ongoing communication between educational staff, the students and their families and other stakeholders are the most efficient in increasing educational and well-being outcomes of students. Such an approach might be needed more than ever to ensure vulnerable students and their communities are equipped and consulted to overcome the challenges sparked by the COVID-19 crisis.

- A joint report<sup>110</sup> from Harvard's Graduate School of Education (HGSE) and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) released in July 2020 suggests to promote strong relationships within the school community, among other considerations. The report, and its accompanying guide<sup>111</sup>, encourages the involvement of teachers, students and their families as key stakeholders in the planning process and advises the implementation of local group activities to support all students;
- In Ireland, the Department of Education and Skills published guidelines on how to support students with SEN in this crisis, highlighting the importance of communication between teachers, school leaders and families of students with SEN. In particular, they suggest that schools co-ordinate the key messages for parents and guardians of children with SEN and ensure that the tone of the messages is supportive and shows understanding of the exceptional situation families find

107 [https://www.gov.uk/government/news/37-million-to-support-children-with-complex-needs?utm\\_source=cd2ccf5f-e4da-48c3-9c73-a37a60f53cd8&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=govuk-notifications&utm\\_content=daily](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/37-million-to-support-children-with-complex-needs?utm_source=cd2ccf5f-e4da-48c3-9c73-a37a60f53cd8&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=govuk-notifications&utm_content=daily)

108 [www.skolahemma.se](http://www.skolahemma.se).

109 OECD Strength through Diversity Webinar, 5 October 2020.

110 <https://edarxiv.org/gqa2w>.

111 <https://edarxiv.org/ufr4q>.



themselves in. Moreover, school leaders and teachers need to agree on communication protocols with families in order to protect the personal details of the families and the teachers involved;<sup>112</sup>

- In Canada, Settlement Worker in Schools (SWIS) programming continues to support newcomer youth and their families. SWIS is a long-time partnership between Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC), settlement service providers, and school boards/districts. SWIS workers are closely collaborating with school staff and teachers in accordance with public health guidelines and explore alternative service delivery as required. They play an essential role by reaching out to newcomer families, addressing literacy issues, sharing multi-lingual resources, assessing needs and assets, ensuring referrals are effective through culturally-competent support.<sup>113</sup>

### ***Encouraging return to schools***

School re-openings have been, or will likely be, on a voluntary basis, as the health risks will probably not have reduced enough to impose mandatory attendance. Families will need to evaluate their own household risk levels and decide whether they want their children to go back to school. A recent survey conducted in the United Kingdom from the National Foundation for Educational Research suggested that about half of the families would keep their children at home. In particular, the surveyed school leaders expected that 46% of parents would keep their children at home, while the percentage would increase to 50% of parents when considering schools in a disadvantaged area.<sup>114</sup> Where schools started to re-open, attendance rates have been highly variable, ranging for instance from 40% to 70% in primary schools in England.<sup>115</sup> Nonetheless, from September 2020, England is planning to impose a mandatory return of students to schools<sup>116</sup> and is making provisions to offer remote learning and other measures in case of another COVID-19 outbreak.

It is expected that vulnerable children or children from poorer families will be less likely to return to school as they start to re-open, which could further increase the educational gap between students from more and less advantaged socio-economic backgrounds. The absenteeism of vulnerable students could be linked to a disengagement in education, but also to the fact that poorer families have been disproportionately hit by this health crisis in various OECD countries

It could be worthwhile for countries to consider introducing a system of incentives to promote attendance, in particular for more vulnerable students. For instance, countries could provide free or subsidised meals for low income families, so that sending their children to school could also offer an economic and health benefit, as they would be receiving a balanced and healthy meal while decreasing families' expenses in a context of economic uncertainty. Moreover, countries could provide public, free and safe transportation to schools to provide a safe alternative for families that would not have to bring children to school and create large gatherings of people outside structures.

112 <https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Information/National-Emergencies-Public-Health-Issues/guidance-continuity-of-schooling-supporting-pupils-with-sen-primary.pdf>

113 OECD Strength through Diversity Webinar, 5 October 2020.

114 [https://www.nfer.ac.uk/media/4060/schools\\_responses\\_to\\_covid\\_19\\_early\\_report\\_final.pdf](https://www.nfer.ac.uk/media/4060/schools_responses_to_covid_19_early_report_final.pdf)

115 <https://www.bbc.com/news/education-52854688>

116 <https://www.ft.com/content/74600603-7fa3-4238-bf2d-680682dfdf39>



## Addressing learning gaps

School closures might have created new educational gaps or exacerbated already existing ones. The evidence is clear that students from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds are the ones likely to suffer the most. Likewise, certain groups of diverse students (e.g. students from specific ethnic groups, students with SEN, etc.) who are already marginalised will be highly impacted, which could be even worse if they are also from a low socio-economic background.<sup>117</sup> Estimates from the United States,<sup>118</sup> for example, indicate that the learning loss from school closures in terms of reading and mathematics will be substantial for most students but particularly severe for vulnerable student populations, such as immigrant and refugee students or students with SEN. In the United Kingdom, a study conducted by the National Foundation for Educational Research with a sample of almost 3,000 school leaders and teachers in about 2,200 primary and secondary schools across England revealed that in most schools, teachers responded that they had covered less than 70% of the curriculum by July 2020. As a result, students are estimated to be three months behind on average in their learning. Moreover, the study suggests that boys are further behind in the curriculum compared to girls and that the learning gap for disadvantaged students has widened by at least 46%.<sup>119</sup> Likewise, a study on Flemish schools over a period of six years (2015 to 2020) found a significant learning loss for the students of the 2020 cohort. The study suggests that school closures led to a decrease in school averages of mathematics scores of 0.19 standard deviations and Dutch scores of 0.29 standard deviations as compared to the previous cohort. Furthermore, inequality within schools has risen by 17% for math and 20% for Dutch, while inequality between schools increased by 7% for math and 18% for Dutch.<sup>120</sup> Nonetheless, some studies showed different results, suggesting that the average performance of students remained unchanged.<sup>121</sup> There is still little evidence available on the topic and further research is necessary to consistently inform educational policymaking.

As reported by UNESCO,<sup>122</sup> it is fundamental to pay increased attention to the gender dimension of the impact of the pandemic on education. Girls that are staying at home from school may be asked to take care of household duties more than boys, which would subtract further time from their home-based studies. In some context, girls could be dropping out of schools at higher rates after such an extended period of school closures. Similarly, boys with lower socio-economic background may be forced to drop out of school to support their families' income that could be reduced or lost due to the pandemic. The gender gaps in education may worsen due to the crisis, affecting in different ways boys and girls. On the one hand, the reading gap among boys and girls, which on average disfavours boys, may be amplified by the school closures. A study from the UK reported that the gender gap in the numbers of children who say they take pleasure in reading and who read daily appears to have widened.<sup>123</sup> This fact raises concerns that boys could be at risk of losing out as a result of the coronavirus pandemic, as boys on average read less than girls for pleasure and score lower in reading in PISA. On the other hand, the impact of the shift to online or distance learning could also affect girls more significantly as most of OECD countries still experience a

<sup>117</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/05/us/coronavirus-education-lost-learning.html?action=click&module=Top%20Stories&pgtype=Homepage>.

<sup>118</sup> <https://www.edworkingpapers.com/sites/default/files/ai20-226-v2.pdf>.

<sup>119</sup> <https://www.nfer.ac.uk/schools-responses-to-covid-19-the-challenges-facing-schools-and-pupils-in-september-2020/>.

<sup>120</sup> <https://feb.kuleuven.be/research/economics/ces/documents/DPS/2020/dps2017.pdf>.

<sup>121</sup> See the example of France: <https://www.education.gouv.fr/evaluations-de-debut-de-sixieme-2020-premiers-resultats-307125> and <https://www.education.gouv.fr/media/66963/download>.

<sup>122</sup> <http://www.iiep.unesco.org/en/covid-19-school-closures-why-girls-are-more-risk-13406>

<sup>123</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2020/jul/13/gender-gap-in-childrens-reading-grew-in-uk-lockdown-survey>



digital gender divide,<sup>124</sup> which may prevent girls to engage fully in such modalities of instruction. Furthermore, women worldwide still have lower rates of access to the internet, with gender gaps that still amount to 5% in Europe and 12% in Latin America.<sup>125</sup> It is thus particularly important to account for all these factors, supported by disaggregated data by gender in order to analyse the gender dimension of the current pandemic and commit to incorporating it into decision making and reporting.

Initiatives will therefore be needed to support schools in helping students catch up on missed learning, especially those from vulnerable backgrounds. Countries have already begun to prepare catch-up strategies for students, sometimes with a special focus on disadvantaged ones. So far, several types of initiatives can be observed: summer schools, accelerated education programmes and other practices.

### *Summer schools*

Evidence shows that summer and afterschool learning programmes can provide motivation and substantial learning gains for disadvantaged populations. Enrichment programmes, accelerated learning programmes and other kinds of intensive “learning camps” targeted to the most disadvantaged children have proven to be effective in many developing country contexts, both for bridging periods of learning loss and pathways for successful re-entry of out of school children.<sup>126</sup> In several countries, educational authorities planned such catch-up strategies for the 2020 summer break, often with a special focus on the most vulnerable students:

- Among other initiatives, the Province of Québec, Canada, has offered summer courses and learning camps to primary and secondary students “who have difficulties or need remedial instruction.” These programmes are available on a voluntary basis, based on parents and schools’ selection and will be designed based on the needs of the students and their specific situations;<sup>127</sup>
- In the United Kingdom, the Prime Minister announced in June 2020 that a GBP 1 billion fund would be used to help children catch up on their educational loss due to school closures. The government is preparing catch-up strategies over the summer and special programmes for the most disadvantaged students;<sup>128</sup>
- In Germany, the Ministry of Education in the state of Rhineland Palatine offered EUR 500,000 to fund a summer school to enable students to catch up before the new school year. In collaboration with municipal umbrella organisations, educational offers were made for students from first to eighth grade. In the last two weeks of the summer holidays, three hours of lessons per day were offered, especially in school buildings in the cities and municipalities of the associations. The lessons were taught by student teachers, trainee teachers, teachers and pedagogical staff, retired teachers and older students who were specially trained;<sup>129</sup>
- Some countries such as Sweden (Cerna et al., 2019<sup>[11]</sup>) already offer summer camps where immigrant students can, for example, improve their language skills in an informal setting by interacting with other foreign-born and native students as well as educational staff. Sweden also

<sup>124</sup> <http://www.oecd.org/internet/bridging-the-digital-gender-divide.pdf>

<sup>125</sup> <https://webfoundation.org/2020/03/the-gender-gap-in-internet-access-using-a-women-centred-method/>

<sup>126</sup> <https://www.cgdev.org/blog/equity-focused-approaches-learning-loss-during-covid-19>.

<sup>127</sup> <https://www.quebec.ca/en/education/preschool-elementary-and-secondary-schools/etablissements-scolaires-prescolaires-primaires-et-secondaires-dans-le-contexte-de-la-covid-19/>.

<sup>128</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/education-53100881>.

<sup>129</sup> <https://bm.rlp.de/de/service/pressemitteilungen/detail/news/News/detail/gemeinsam-machen-wir-sommerschule-rlp-land-und-kommune-machen-sich-gemeinsam-fuer-schuelerinnen-und/>



offers summer camps to students failing one or more subjects in grades 8 and 9. Other countries such as Austria offer language camps to children aged 6 and above.

### *Accelerated education programmes*

Accelerated programmes could also be an effective response to the COVID-19 crisis. These programmes are flexible, age-appropriate and run in an accelerated timeframe in order to provide access to education for disadvantaged, out-of-school children and youth. In this case, countries may choose to follow an accelerated syllabus that focuses on core subjects. They can target especially those who missed out on or had their education interrupted for reasons such as crisis or conflict.<sup>130</sup>

- The Accelerated Education Working Groups (AEWG), an international network created in 2014 that gathers several international organisations and NGOs, published in 2017 a guide that establishes 10 common principles for inclusive and efficient accelerated programmes strategies.<sup>131</sup> In contexts of emergencies, these programmes have proven to strongly benefit vulnerable groups of students with little or no access to quality education;<sup>132</sup>
- In its guidance for COVID-19 control and prevention in schools, UNICEF recently advised considering accelerated education programmes to support children catch up on their lost learning due to the pandemic and help integrate previously out-of-school children;<sup>133</sup>
- In Norway, the government allocated a funding of approximately EUR 17 million to school leaders in order to help vulnerable students catch up learning losses. The funding could have been used for different initiatives, including the establishment of summer schools, the implementation of accelerated education programmes, homework assistance, hiring more teachers, etc.<sup>134</sup>

### *Other practices*

Other practices could limit learning gaps heightened by the pandemic and especially benefit vulnerable groups of students (IIEP-UNESCO, 2020<sub>[12]</sub>), such as:

- Applying universal design to curricula, i.e. ensure inclusive systems that fulfil each learner's potential. It implies to design flexible, relevant and accessible curricula, textbooks free from stereotypes and omission and use assessment methods that allow students to demonstrate learning in various ways.<sup>135</sup>
- Supporting non-formal learning activities at home or through partnerships with associations;
- At the school-level, encouraging after-school tutoring and peer-to-peer coaching initiatives as well as special after-school study classes (either mandatory or for selected groups) so that students can catch up on core subjects (IIEP-UNESCO, 2020<sub>[12]</sub>). Data from PISA 2018 shows that fewer than 50% of students are in a school providing such a form of study help. Peer-to-peer tutoring can be promoted in order to foster both learning and socialisation of students (OECD, 2020<sub>[13]</sub>);

<sup>130</sup> <https://www.unhcr.org/accelerated-education-working-group.html>

<sup>131</sup> [https://s3.amazonaws.com/inee-assets/resources/AEWG\\_Accelerated\\_Education\\_Guide\\_to\\_the\\_Principles-screen.pdf](https://s3.amazonaws.com/inee-assets/resources/AEWG_Accelerated_Education_Guide_to_the_Principles-screen.pdf).

<sup>132</sup> <https://archive.ineesite.org/en/accelerated-education>.

<sup>133</sup> <https://www.unicef.org/lac/en/media/12486/file>.

<sup>134</sup> OECD Strength through Diversity Webinar, 5 October 2020.

<sup>135</sup> See UNESCO webinar: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sJbYhtFEuYI>.





- The French Ministry of Education, for example, announced that reducing learning gaps between students will be a priority in its school re-opening strategy. Among other measures, it will finance 1.5 million additional hours for teachers to support students after school hours.<sup>136</sup>

### ***Ensuring that the well-being of students remains a priority***

The link between physical and emotional health and academic success is well-known. A core mission of education systems is therefore the promotion of students' well-being, which is closely related to academic performance. As many countries enter difficult economic times, efforts should be made to continue and boost social programming such as free school meals and emotional counselling, prioritising the well-being of all students (OECD, 2020<sup>[13]</sup>). Besides the need to provide vulnerable students with extra services, this crisis can also be an opportunity to establish a well-being culture in schools. Changes in the curriculum to put a stronger focus on health and self-care, workshops, focus groups to foster socialisation and exchanges, and ongoing communication with children can be exploited to make sure that students understand the situation and feel that they have the necessary tools to take care of themselves and their surroundings.

#### *Special focus on socio-emotional well-being*

The COVID-19 crisis has highlighted that schools are not only crucial as education provider, but also as a place to respond to socio-emotional needs and support the well-being of vulnerable students. Schools can ideally be a safe space for vulnerable students, providing psychological support, responding to their socialisation needs and creating a sense of community.<sup>137</sup> To this end, ongoing and clear communication with students (and their families) remains an important priority during school re-opening.

- For example, UNICEF has published a set of recommendations for parents and teachers to discuss with their students the COVID-19 situation in an age-appropriate fashion, and a list of “dos and don'ts” to avoid bullying, discrimination and stigmatisation that might be very useful for when schools re-open.<sup>138</sup>
- In France, the Ministry of Education created a page with resources and advice for teachers to best support students during school re-openings. These resources include guidelines for students with SEN as a priority and several resources to inform the youngest on the virus and on how to protect their health and that of their families.<sup>139</sup>

A focus on the well-being of students goes beyond socio-emotional needs. It is also important to consider what other provisions and extra services schools can offer to vulnerable students who might have been abused physically and psychologically, have not eaten and slept well, and might have experienced grief. Mitigating the impact of the pandemic on the mental health of students and their families might be a crucial component of policy responses. For example, a study conducted by the Chilean NGO *América Solidaria* among partner organisations across Latin America found that 80% of respondents considered deteriorating mental health as one of the main effects of the pandemic. Exclusion from education, increasing domestic violence and food insecurity were also among the main negative consequences mentioned by respondents.<sup>140</sup> As such, strengthening psychological support and counselling services during school re-

<sup>136</sup> [https://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2020/07/11/a-la-rentree-la-reduction-des-ecarts-entre-eleves-sera-la-priorite\\_6045947\\_3224.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2020/07/11/a-la-rentree-la-reduction-des-ecarts-entre-eleves-sera-la-priorite_6045947_3224.html).

<sup>137</sup> <https://www.thelancet.com/action/showPdf?pii=S2468-2667%2820%2930124-9>.

<sup>138</sup> <https://www.unicef.org/pacificislands/stories/coronavirus-disease-covid-19-what-parents-should-know>.

<sup>139</sup> <https://eduscol.education.fr/cid151499/reouverture-des-ecoles.html>.

<sup>140</sup> <https://www.elmorrocotudo.cl/noticia/educacion/salud-mental-violencia-y-exclusion-escolar-las-urgencias-de-la-ninez-en-pandemia>.



opening is a key component to ensure the well-being and inclusion of vulnerable students. While the return to school might be welcomed by many students, others may be feeling anxious or frightened. Educational systems too have to focus on their students' psychological health to ensure a safe transition back to school, or provide support in case of further lockdowns.

- UNICEF has developed some suggestions for parents to help their children manage some difficult or complicated feelings, such as health scares or anxiety induced by having to wear masks and keep social distancing;<sup>141</sup>
- In Canada, to support students' mental health during school closures and re-openings, material aimed at promoting positive mental health was produced and translated into the country's 14 most commonly spoken languages, including Indigenous languages and American sign language;<sup>142</sup>
- Schools in England are focusing on mental health while reopening schools, as teachers are instructed to use "well-being guides" to help children understand what's going on and talk about their feelings.<sup>143</sup>

### *Providing equitable and inclusive access to extra services for vulnerable students*

A broad approach to well-being must consider the socio-economic impact of the pandemic on families and the wider community as well as its effect on education. For example, school dropouts or transfers increase during crises as families lose income or resort to negative coping mechanisms such as child labour; inequalities are exacerbated due to lack of social services, health, nutrition and protection; female vulnerability is exacerbated, gender-based violence (GBV), including sexual and domestic violence rises, together with incidences of early marriage and pregnancy (UNESCO, 2020<sub>[14]</sub>). As such, financial support to vulnerable children and families already provided in many countries during school closures should be continued and adapted during school reopening.

- Canada will provide an additional CAD 75.2 million to support First Nations, Inuit and Métis Nation post-secondary students impacted by COVID-19.<sup>144</sup> The Prime Minister also announced an additional CAD 112 million in funding for First Nations to support community measures to ensure a safe return to school on reserves. The government will continue to work with First Nation partners to help protect the health and safety of students and staff this school year;<sup>145</sup>
- Still in Canada, up to CAD 2 billion is being unlocked in support for provinces and territories through the Safe Return to Class Fund. This will provide the complementary funding they need, as they work alongside local school boards to ensure the safety of students and staff members throughout the school year. For example, the Fund will help provinces and territories by supporting adapted learning spaces, improved air ventilation, increased hand sanitation and hygiene, and purchases of personal protective equipment and cleaning supplies.<sup>146</sup>

In addition, cash transfers and parenting programmes can be highly efficient, mainly to promote early childhood education and care that is likely to be significantly impacted by the crisis. In the past, cash transfer programmes, coupled with information and behaviour change efforts to help parents support their

141 <https://www.unicef.org/coronavirus/supporting-your-childs-mental-health-during-covid-19-school-return>

142 OECD Strength through Diversity Webinar, 5 October 2020.

143 <https://www.businessinsider.fr/us/english-schools-focusing-mental-health-while-reopening-during-covid-19-2020-6>.

144 <https://www.sac-isc.gc.ca/eng/1100100033679/1531406248822>.

145 <https://www.canada.ca/en/services/benefits/education/student-aid/notice-covid-19.html>.

146 <https://pm.gc.ca/en/news/news-releases/2020/08/26/prime-minister-announces-support-safe-return-school>.



children's development, have generated positive impacts in various countries, including improved cognitive outcomes in Colombia and Mexico.<sup>147</sup>

Free school meal distribution remains key to support the well-being of students. School meal distribution programmes conducted by various governments in partnership with the World Food Programmes (WFP) have proven to have a significant positive impact on vulnerable students' educational outcomes.<sup>148</sup> These programmes requiring strong partnership between different stakeholders tend to increase motivation, enrolment and attainment and have a strong positive impact on girls. In this area, partnerships are fundamental. Countries should therefore start to or keep distributing free school meals to vulnerable students both in and out of school. This is essential to ensure that their well-being needs are being met and they are in a good physical and mental condition when schools re-open.

During school re-opening, an overarching priority is therefore the overall health and well-being of students, but also of the school population (students, teachers, and other personnel). This should include approaches to deal with post-traumatic stress caused by COVID-19, and the resulting social isolation and confinement (UNESCO, 2020<sup>[14]</sup>) as well as foster ongoing communication and ensure basic economic nutritious needs for vulnerable students and families. Some initiatives and guidelines are already developed around the world by countries, grass-root associations and international organisations that work closely with governments.

- Initiatives include continuous distribution of hygiene kits, daily meals, conversation with children and their families and workshops with educational staff and staff in Ministries on how to deal with children and teachers' socio-emotional well-being during school re-opening. For example, UNICEF conducted such activities in Venezuela.<sup>149</sup>
- In Mexico, the government has announced that well-being as well as sensitivity to diverse contexts will be a priority in its school re-opening strategy.<sup>150</sup>

### ***Ensuring support by and to teachers and school leaders***

The switch to distance learning during school closures, though entailing advantages for both teachers and students such as continuity and flexibility, also caused some difficulties for teachers. They might face difficulties in adjusting to online teaching on a very short notice and ensuring that all students, especially the disadvantaged ones, stay engaged and take part in online classes. A survey administered to teachers in the European Union showed that increases in workload and stress were perceived as one of the main challenges by teachers during school closures.<sup>151</sup> Teachers' physical, psychological and socio-emotional well-being should be prioritised, which requires providing them with guidelines on expectations for teaching, learning and assessments. Teachers also need training on how to recognise and support students at risk, and to deal with traumatised students. Their role in identifying learning gaps and in organising instructional strategies will be key, in particular to support disadvantaged learners. Educational systems should support teachers to reorganise classroom work to deliver more individualised instruction and provide accelerated learning and remedial responses when necessary.<sup>152</sup>

147 <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/russia/brief/covid-19-response-learning-gaps-inequalities-russia>.

148 [https://docs.wfp.org/api/documents/WFP-0000102338/download/?\\_ga=2.218150425.1879704144.1594979139-1688459968.1592387731](https://docs.wfp.org/api/documents/WFP-0000102338/download/?_ga=2.218150425.1879704144.1594979139-1688459968.1592387731).

149 <https://en.unesco.org/events/joint-unesco-unicef-world-bank-webinar-series-reopening-schools>.

150 <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000373318>.

151 <https://www.schooleducationgateway.eu/en/pub/viewpoints/surveys/survey-on-online-teaching.htm>.

152 <https://teachertaskforce.org/sites/default/files/2020-05/Guidelines%20Note%20FINAL.pdf>.



The same survey also found that the teachers interviewed considered support in the following areas as particularly needed: (1) more free resources from education technology companies (45% of respondents); (2) clear guidance from the Ministry of Education (41%); and (3) professional development initiatives such as quick courses on online teaching (37.4%). This suggests the need for stronger support from education authorities, more accessible resources and capacity building. Though costly, these elements, with a focus on supporting marginalised students, could be an important part of school re-opening strategies.

The re-opening raises many questions also for school leaders, who need to ensure safety for both students and teachers and ensure that everyone has the tools to resume working. A survey on school leaders' response to COVID-19 conducted in 12 countries found that a large majority of school leaders consider the well-being of students to be a top priority.<sup>153</sup> The survey identified that most school leaders supported teachers' initiatives during school closures and considered it crucial to be in continuous contact with families and communities. School leaders moreover have a central role in creating strong links within the school community. It is crucial for authorities across countries to engage in an ongoing communication with school leaders in order to identify the main challenges they face and provide them with the necessary resources to support all learners, especially the most vulnerable groups who need extra support.

- The joint UNESCO/Teacher Task Force/ILO policy guidance found in the document “Supporting teachers in back-to-school efforts” provides guidance specifically for school leaders so that they can support their staff in the re-opening efforts. Through a set of guiding questions, tips and resources, this Toolkit aims to help school leaders identify actions to be taken in a series of key dimensions, such as teachers' psychological and socio-emotional well-being and teachers' preparation and learning, to better support and protect teachers and other education personnel in back-to-school efforts;<sup>154</sup>
- In order to raise the awareness on the central role of teachers in the post-COVID-19 education system, the European Training Foundation together with the Joint Research Centre (JRC) of the European Commission have created a set of “Teacher booster” videos, corresponding to a series of awareness-raising films on how teachers from all over the world are tackling the challenges of distance learning and how they are incorporating key competences into it;<sup>155</sup>
- Various countries, such as the United Kingdom,<sup>156</sup> have shared extensive guidelines and advice for teachers and school leaders on how to re-open schools safely, often with some attention to disadvantaged and vulnerable children. They might include information on preventions, classroom organisation and students' well-being;
- In Norway, the health authorities published similar guidelines for early childhood education and care (ECEC) and primary schools. The guidelines are continuously updated in co-operation with ECEC and school authorities;<sup>157</sup>
- At the end of August 2020, following the experience of school closures, some Slovenian education institutes such as the National Education Institute (ZRSŠ) and the Institute for Vocational Education and Training (CPI) implemented various trainings to support educational staff to make distance learning work more efficiently. Regarding vulnerable students, the training of SEN

<sup>153</sup><https://static1.squarespace.com/static/58af429103596eb1eb5acace/t/5e9f5c1a8e038953d9d502b9/1587502111355/GSL+COVID+Response+0421.pdf>.

<sup>154</sup> <https://teachertaskforce.org/fr/node/753>.

<sup>155</sup> <https://www.etf.europa.eu/en/news-and-events/news/boosting-teachers-promote-key-competences>.

<sup>156</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/actions-for-schools-during-the-coronavirus-outbreak/guidance-for-full-opening-schools>.

<sup>157</sup> <https://www.udir.no/kvalitet-og-kompetanse/sikkerhet-og-beredskap/informasjon-om-koronaviruset/smittevernveileder/in-english/>.



teachers and school counselling specialists has focused on formative assessment and the planning of distance instruction, as well as on how to maintain contacts with students, cross-curricular teaching and learning and interactive instruction;<sup>158</sup>

- New Zealand unlocked a NZD 66 million emergency fund to support well-being in education during school re-opening, among which NZD 16 million is exclusively directed at initiatives to improve the well-being of the education workforce.<sup>159</sup>

### ***Prioritising equity and inclusion in re-opening strategies with hybrid models and intermittent school closures***

One of the challenges to effective planning is that scientific knowledge about COVID-19 is constantly evolving and much is still unknown about the virus. Gaps in our knowledge mean that decisions taken at one point in time may need to be revised as knowledge about the virus evolves (OECD, 2020<sub>[13]</sub>). Various countries have chosen to intermittently close schools to contain new phases of contamination by the virus. Some countries such as Korea<sup>160</sup> already decided to first open and then to close again a number of schools to contain a resurgence of the virus. In the United States, for example, hybrid models of school re-opening seem to be a popular option in various states among both policy makers<sup>161</sup> and teachers.<sup>162</sup> Moreover, some parents may choose not to send their children back to school before the virus disappears or a vaccine is made available. In this case, schools will have to provide distance learning options that are adapted to all learners.

Improving the access to and the quality of remote learning, with special attention to vulnerable groups of students, will be particularly important. Evidence shows that in nearly all countries' remote learning strategy responses to the COVID-19 crisis, insufficient attention has been paid to inclusion for all learners and that most vulnerable groups of students have been left aside (UNESCO, 2020<sub>[15]</sub>). It is crucial for countries opting for hybrid models of school re-opening to work on strategies incorporating the needs of these student populations as one of the main priorities. This might ensure that all students have distance learning offers adapted to their needs and limit the emergence of further educational gaps.

- The specialised organisation Education Week,<sup>163</sup> while recognising the cost and logistical challenges of hybrid models, suggests that overall (1) students could attend only school for selected core subjects; (2) vulnerable student groups such as those with special education needs or immigrants learning the country's language could be prioritised for live school attendance; and (3) remote and in-class teaching could be combined using best practices and takeaways from distance learning experiences during school closures. While several hybrid schedule options are possible, these should be flexible so that they can be adapted at the school level according to the resources available and the composition of the student population that may greatly vary across schools;
- The Portuguese Ministry of Education implemented a set of educational support measures for students who, according to the guidelines of the health authority, should be considered at risk

<sup>158</sup> <https://www.zrss.si/objava/posnetki-krajsih-usposabljanj-e-urice-za-strokovne-delavce>; <https://www.zrss.si/objava/podpora-uciteljem-za-izobrazevanje-na-daljavo>

<sup>159</sup> <https://www.education.govt.nz/news/66-million-for-learner-and-educator-wellbeing/>.

<sup>160</sup> <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/05/29/asia/south-korea-coronavirus-shuts-down-again-intl/index.html>.

<sup>161</sup> <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/person-classes-online-learning-or-mix-reopening-schools-will-bring-n1231891>.

<sup>162</sup> <https://thenotebook.org/articles/2020/06/29/teachers-prefer-hybrid-reopening-model-to-to-full-time-online-or-in-school/>.

<sup>163</sup> <https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2020/06/25/hybrid-school-schedules-more-flexibility-big-logistical.html>





and who are unable to attend classroom teaching and training activities in a group or class context.<sup>164</sup>

### ***Encouraging monitoring and evaluation***

Monitoring and evaluation initiatives need to be conducted at different levels and will be key to support vulnerable students in returning to and staying at school. First, at the school level, it will be important for educational staff to identify the most vulnerable students and understand the challenges they face. This implies training, mainly for teachers, on how to monitor students most in needs and, as mentioned above, implement more individualised approach to help them catch up based on their individual situation. Second, it seems fundamental to collect data on education throughout the crisis, using gender and when relevant/possible ethnic-disaggregated data, to identify vulnerable groups and those most at risk of dropout. This could allow for targeted policy initiatives aimed at reducing educational gaps that might have been exacerbated by the crisis as well as ensure compliance with the provisions of compulsory education.

Furthermore, monitoring and evaluation could help capitalise on the momentum of using ICT to assist learning and keep up with technology after the crisis. Seeing the impact of different policies across OECD countries may help identify successful and unsuccessful practices in order to avoid potential inequities that may result from alternative these education delivery approaches that might be used in the future. Some examples of ongoing evaluation and monitoring initiatives are the following:

- In Norway, reports and research exploring consequences and management of COVID-19 from kindergartners to universities are currently being prepared;<sup>165</sup>
- Sweden has been conducting a mapping of the situation in numerous schools in order to continuously identify specific needs. For example, the situation of “vulnerable students” has been assessed through direct dialogues (by phone) with school leaders all around Sweden. This initiative was initiated in March 2020 and is still ongoing. Staff from the Swedish National Agency for Education perform and record the dialogues;<sup>166</sup>
- Slovenia monitored distance learning in schools across the country, looking at the channels that were used and the scope of their use. Among other elements, the study conducted by the National Education Institute (“Distance education in COVID-19 epidemic times in Slovenia”) found that 86% of teachers deal with one or more student(s) from a vulnerable group who needed an adapted approach. The study also shows that less than 2% of teachers reported that no adaptation for students with SEN was done, while a majority has used methods such as including teachers specialised on SEN and adapting learning materials.<sup>167</sup> Similarly, the Slovenian Educational Research Institute<sup>168</sup> carried out a research on “The Role of Emotional Competencies in Psychological Responding to COVID-19 Pandemic”, which investigated the role of emotional competencies (mindfulness and emotional self-efficacy) for psychological responding during the COVID-19 pandemic. They also examined whether practising mindfulness with inner (meditation-based) and body (yoga-based) exercises supports emotional competencies. They found that (1) such competencies are a viable source of support for psychological responses to COVID-19, and (2) practicing mindfulness fosters

<sup>164</sup> <https://dre.pt/application/conteudo/142124837>.

<sup>165</sup> OECD Strength through Diversity Webinar, 5 October 2020.

<sup>166</sup> OECD Strength through Diversity Webinar, 5 October 2020.

<sup>167</sup> <https://www.zrss.si/strokovne-resitve/digitalna-bralnica/podrobno?publikacija=274>.

<sup>168</sup> <https://www.pei.si/>.





several aspects of emotional competencies. These studies allow both to give an overview on the responsiveness of the education system and to identify efficient practices and initiatives to support students' learning and well-being;

- In New Brunswick, Canada, to support the sense of belonging for vulnerable students further, education authorities and schools are designing an indicator to measure quarterly students' sense of belonging. While the initiative is still to be implemented, educational authorities are thinking about how to assess the impact of COVID-19 on students' sense of belonging to school.<sup>169</sup>

## Policy options to support vulnerable students during school re-opening

- Adopting a holistic approach to education:
  - Implementing initiatives to **improve learning, social and emotional need** of students with a **focus on vulnerable groups**;
  - Considering **all relevant stakeholders (formal and non-formal) for inclusion** in policy design and implementation;
  - Ensuring **compliance with anti-discrimination and human rights policies and laws**. At the school-level, encouraging **anti-bullying campaigns** and addressing issues related to the stigmatisation of marginalised groups.
- Facilitating partnerships between different stakeholders to respond to vulnerable students' needs, which implies ensuring:
  - **Co-operation between relevant authorities and agencies**: Designing re-opening strategies jointly for a comprehensive approach, involving inter-ministerial delegations who can be an efficient intermediary between authorities and actors in the field;
  - **Co-operation between authorities and education trade unions**: Involving unions in discussion on school re-opening strategies, listening to unions' guidelines and views on inclusive education;
  - **Co-operation between authorities and civil society**: Recognising NGOs and grass-root associations as essential partners to reach vulnerable groups, supporting them financially during crises;
  - A **whole-school and whole-community approach**: Facilitating communication and strong partnerships between schools and communities (e.g. through guidelines), involving families and communities in the design and implementation of initiatives.
- Encouraging return to school:
  - **Limit absenteeism by introducing a system of incentives** to promote attendance, in particular for more vulnerable student (e.g. school meals subsidies, free and safe transportation).
- Addressing learning gaps: Supporting schools in helping students catch up on missed learning, especially those from vulnerable backgrounds through:
  - **Catch-up strategies**: summer schools, accelerated programmes and other practices with a focus on vulnerable student groups. Ensuring good **communication as well as the accessibility and quality** of these programmes;
  - **Universal design to curricula** that fulfil each learner's potential;

<sup>169</sup> OECD Strength through Diversity Webinar, 5 October 2020.



- Supporting **non-formal learning activities**;
- At the school-level, encouraging **after-school tutoring and peer-to-peer coaching** initiatives as well as **special after-school study classes**.
- Ensuring that the well-being of students remains a priority:
  - Paying **special attention to socio-emotional well-being**: Providing teachers with guidelines and resources to support vulnerable students' well-being;
  - Supporting the **mental health of students**: Developing guidelines for parents, supporting schools in increasing their share of non-educational staff (e.g. psychologists);
  - Providing **equitable and inclusive access to extra services** for vulnerable students: Distributing free school meals and hygiene kits, offering extra grants and financial support to vulnerable students, considering student loans waivers and designing cash transfers programmes.
- Ensuring support by and to teachers and school leaders:
  - Facilitating **ongoing communication with teachers and school leaders** to better identify vulnerable students' challenges and needs;
  - Prioritising the **well-being of educational staff**.
- Prioritising equity and inclusion in re-opening strategies with hybrid models and intermittent school closures
  - **Further improving the access to and quality of distance learning** for all in case of intermittent school closures;
  - Placing **vulnerable students as a priority in hybrid model strategies** (e.g. by giving them priority for in-person school attendance while other students only attend core subjects).
- Encouraging monitoring and evaluation:
  - Monitoring and evaluating the impact of initiatives implemented during the crisis, identifying gaps and collecting **disaggregated data**.

## Summary of policy responses to ensure equity and inclusion during school closures and school re-openings

School closures caused by the COVID-19 pandemic triggered significant challenges for education systems to respond to the needs vulnerable student groups whose learning and well-being tend to be the most impacted. Although substantial gaps remain, policy initiatives have been taken across OECD countries to support the educational, social and emotional needs of these students and their families. Most common practices to foster equity and inclusion have been the distribution of electronic devices with an internet connection in poor or remote areas, the distribution of free meals for eligible students, financial (emergency or in continuity with existing aid schemes) support for students and their families, and to a lesser extent, the availability of multi-language educational resources. Several countries also allowed some schools and other educational facilities to remain open for students with particular needs, such as students with SEN and students in VET. Regarding the emotional well-being of students, international organisations and NGOs have been dynamic actors, publishing guidelines, videos and organising webinars. Most often, countries shared these resources on official websites and created hotlines for counselling and psychological support. Finally, school leaders and teachers have been very active in supporting vulnerable students, often physically distributing material to families, creating online resources and organising WhatsApp groups to reach all families.

However, data show that a significant percentage of students have been “lost” in the process of school closures and that learning losses might be severe. Specifically, educational gaps between vulnerable



groups and others are likely to be exacerbated, generating higher dropouts and absenteeism. Furthermore, the long-term social and emotional impacts on students may be the most lasting legacy of the COVID-19 crisis. As such, countries' strategies to support these groups need to be clarified and strengthened during school re-openings in order to avoid lasting negative effects likely to generate both social exclusion and economic loss.

A holistic approach to inclusive education based on strong co-operation between different stakeholders and that address students' learning as well as their well-being needs is crucial. Considerable joint efforts by school leaders, teachers, parents, students, educational and health care professionals, and communities is needed to (re-)create schools as safe, supportive and inclusive places for all students.

Re-opening schools after months of closures and while the virus is still circulating represents a significant challenge for countries. Educational authorities across OECD need to design and implement strategies that would allow students both to catch up and begin a new school year in a safe environment, while ensuring that no one is left behind. This is particularly challenging considering that the rapid switch to distance learning seems to have paid insufficient attention to the inclusion of most vulnerable groups of students and might have exacerbated some existing educational gaps. Moreover, ministries of education in various countries may face substantial budget cuts.

Nonetheless, there are policy responses that countries can adopt to ensure equity and inclusion for all during school re-opening. Even if complex, the COVID-19 crisis can be taken as an opportunity for education systems to place a stronger focus on vulnerable student groups. Several countries have already started implementing initiatives to address learning losses, such as summer schools and accelerated curricula. Some have also developed guidelines on how to support vulnerable students and unlocked funds to support disadvantaged ones. The well-being of students is set as a priority by several governments. A mix of mainstream policies to support all learners and targeted initiatives to respond to the special needs of vulnerable group is needed in school re-opening strategies in order to ensure that all students have the same access to quality learning opportunities and feel that they belong to the school. In the case of hybrid models of school re-opening and intermittent school closures, improving the access and the quality of remote learning as well as prioritising marginalised groups are two important components.

A stronger focus should be put on (1) the well-being of teachers and (2) the co-operation between authorities and other stakeholders such as education trade unions and grass-root associations. This might ensure more transparency and efficiency in the implementation of initiatives to support vulnerable learners. Monitoring and evaluation with, when possible, the collection of disaggregated data, is also an area that requires stronger attention. It might allow education systems to identify the groups that have been hit the hardest by the crisis and the initiatives that were the most efficient in responding to their needs.



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