

Introduction

Education systems around the world are facing an unprecedented challenge in the wake of massive school closures mandated as part of public health efforts to contain the spread of COVID-19. Over 1.5 billion students at all levels are now affected by this educational disruption. In response, governments around the world have been making efforts to rapidly deliver distance education at scale in an attempt to ensure continuity in curriculum-based study and learning for all.

This report provides a global overview of national educational responses to COVID-19 related school closures that may help inform measures and strategies to ensure continuity of learning in different contexts based on the information collected from UNESCO's online survey.

UNESCO conducted this survey in English, French and Spanish over two periods: (1) between 23 and 31 March); and (2) 1 and 8 April 2020. 61 education systems responded to the survey from 59 countries and territories (Table 1).

Table 1: Education systems included

High-income (21)	<p>Europe and North America: 13</p> <p>Sub-Saharan Africa: 1</p> <p>Arab States: 3</p> <p>Asia and Pacific: 3</p> <p>Latin America and the Caribbean: 1</p>
Upper-middle income (21)	<p>Europe and North America: 13</p> <p>Sub-Saharan Africa: 1</p> <p>Arab States: 1</p> <p>Asia and Pacific: 7</p> <p>Latin America and the Caribbean: 8</p>
Lower-middle income (14)	<p>Sub-Saharan Africa: 1</p> <p>Arab States: 4</p> <p>Asia and Pacific: 9</p>
Low-income (5)	<p>Sub-Saharan Africa: 2</p> <p>Arab States: 1</p> <p>Asia and Pacific: 2</p>

Note: See Annex 1 for the list of respondent education systems

It is important to note that several respondent countries are federal states or have a federal structure in terms of the education system, such as Belgium, Germany, China, and Canada. Among these countries, some provided responses on a country-wide level, as in Germany and Micronesia. In contrast, some provided responses on a local/territory/community level, which is the case for Flanders and Wallonia plus Brussels of Belgium, the Mainland and Hong Kong of China, Saskatchewan and Newfoundland and Labrador of Canada, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa of Pakistan and Kurdistan Region of Iraq. When multiple replies were received from one country and the responses differ (unless they represent different education systems within a country), the responses from the government (e.g., Ministry of Education officials) were included in the analysis.

Summary of survey responses

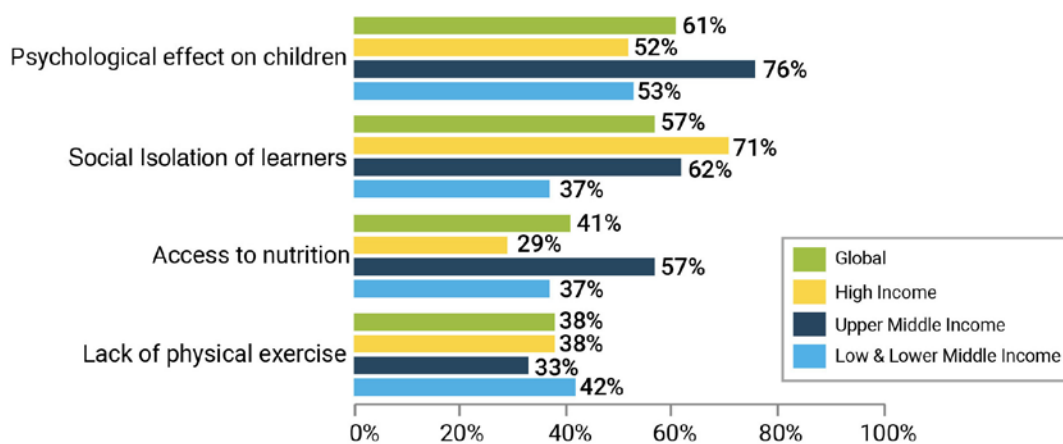
Key challenges faced due to school closure

In light of the COVID-19 pandemic and its effects on education systems around the world, there has been a rapid response from governments to minimize the impact. However, respondents reported their education systems were anticipating or facing a number of challenges due to school closure, some of which are presented below.

- **Most countries are concerned with the impact on students' health and well-being due to school closure**

The impact of school closure on students' health and well-being is a source of concern for many education systems across all income groups. 61% of respondents reported that psychological impact on students was a concern and challenge to address. 57% of education systems, especially 71% of high-income countries/territories, stated that social isolation of students would be a concern. Lack of physical exercise due to school closure and confinement was stated as a concern by 38% of the education systems. 41% of the education systems considered access to nutrition and school meals a challenge, as many children and youth, especially those coming from disadvantaged backgrounds, tend to rely on free or discounted school meals. Childcare during the school closure is also a challenge.

Figure 1: Key challenges of school closure: students' health and well-being

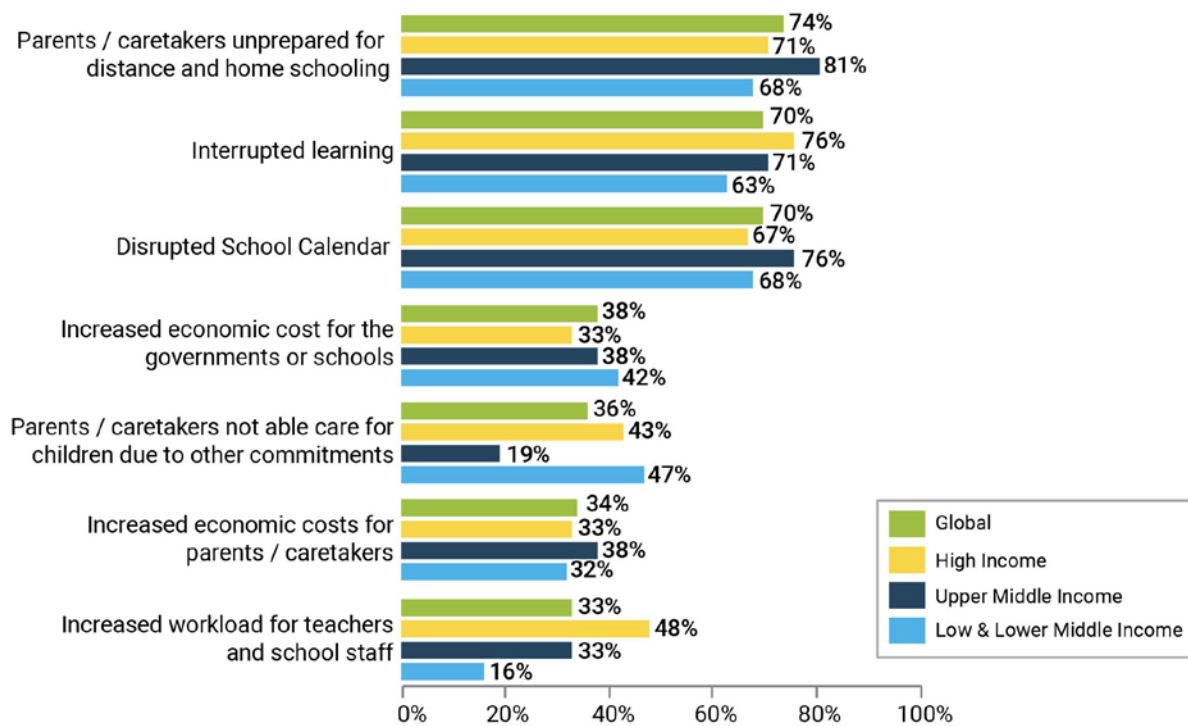


- **Ensuring learning during school closure is a challenge and many are concerned about the insufficient readiness and/or availability of parents/caretakers**

70% of the education systems answered that the interrupted learning and the disrupted school calendar are the main challenges. The main reason seems to be the unpreparedness of the parents and caretakers to facilitate learning at home. 74% of the responding education systems expressed concerns about the readiness of the parents and caretakers for home learning. 36%, including almost half of the education systems in low and lower-middle income countries/territories responded that parents/caretakers might not be able to care for the children due to other duties and commitments. Sudan said that illiterate parents would not be able to support their children's learning. The Republic of Korea raised the issue of inequity in accessing distance learning services among multi-child families or marginalised groups. Portugal also expressed concerns about the rise of inequality and exclusion of students from vulnerable backgrounds.

To a lesser extent, it may also be related to lack of time for teachers to prepare for home learning, especially to online learning, as almost half of the education system from high-income countries/territories responded that increased workload for teachers and school staff is a concern. Cost is also a challenge. Increased costs related to preparing for home learning both for schools and parents/caretakers, given the need to buy multiple extra devices to support distance education, was reported as a concern by almost 40% of the respondents.

Figure 2: Key challenges of school closure: learning and management



Going distance – what are the challenges?

In response to school closure, most education systems introduced distance-learning programmes using various media (e.g., internet, TV, radio). Some of the concerns related to the introduction of distance-learning programmes by different education systems are listed below.

- **Unequal access to ICT infrastructure at home is a major concern for most of the education systems, but electricity is also a challenge in lower income countries/territories**

Almost all (87%) of the education systems reported that unequal access to ICT at home was a key concern when introducing distance learning. 62% are concerned about insufficient internet infrastructure, particularly in low to upper-middle income countries/territories. 28% found power infrastructure (i.e., electricity) a challenge, mostly among education systems in low to upper-middle income countries/territories. [Tonga](#) stated the cost of connectivity as a concern.

Responding to this challenge, some education systems have introduced policy measures to mitigate some challenges. For instance, [Sri Lanka](#) is facilitating e-learning by providing free internet access to the Ministry of Education’s digital learning platform. [France](#) is developing offline learning materials for those who do not have access to the Internet. [Indonesia](#) is providing free access to online learning portals for parents and students including providing a dedicated website for continuous learning. The [Maldives](#) is providing mobile data to the parents of children who are grade 7 and above.

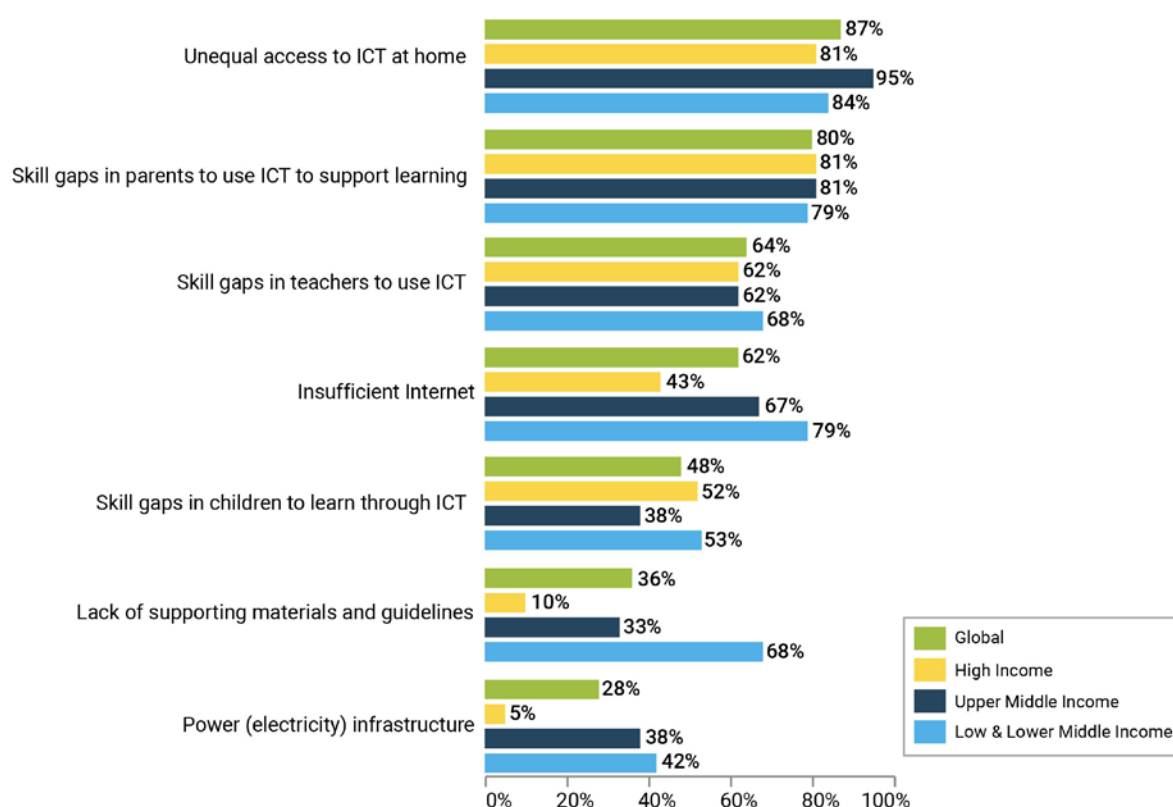
- **Regardless of the income levels, skill gaps in using distance learning platforms is a challenge across most education systems**

Most education systems (80%) responded that parents/caregivers might not have requisite skills to facilitate home-based distance education, regardless of the income groups. In addition, almost two thirds of education systems (64%) responded that their teachers did not have the necessary skills to facilitate distance education. Skills on the receiving side is also a concern across the respondent

education systems. Almost half of the education systems (48%) reported that the students might not have requisite digital skills for on-line distance learning, including in high income countries/territories.

Indonesia is concerned that some of the local governments are not ready to equip their teachers with online learning platforms and guidelines for their schools. Malta indicated that the quality and quantity of distance learning platforms highly depends on the initiative and motivation of the respective educators (including Senior Management Team, Teachers and Learning Support Educators) as well as how receptive the students and their parents/guardians are.

Figure 3: Key concerns in introducing distance-learning programmes



Ensuring access: distance learning solutions

Education systems have been taking measures to ensure continuity of learning through distance learning platforms deploying a mix of strategies and approaches, as presented below.

- **Most education systems chose the mixed-media approach to distance learning also using traditional media for learning (i.e. TV, Radio), including interactive classes by teachers**

Most (82 %) of the education systems are currently using media other than the internet for learning purposes (i.e. TV, Radio), more so among the education systems in low to upper-middle income economies, in many cases in combination with the internet. Indonesia is providing online courses and TV broadcasting for teachers and students every day. Interactive classes by teachers are offered in 61% of the education systems (though delivery channels may vary), including Rwanda and Syria.

- **Many education systems are using the existing national online learning portals or platforms, while some are developing new platforms**

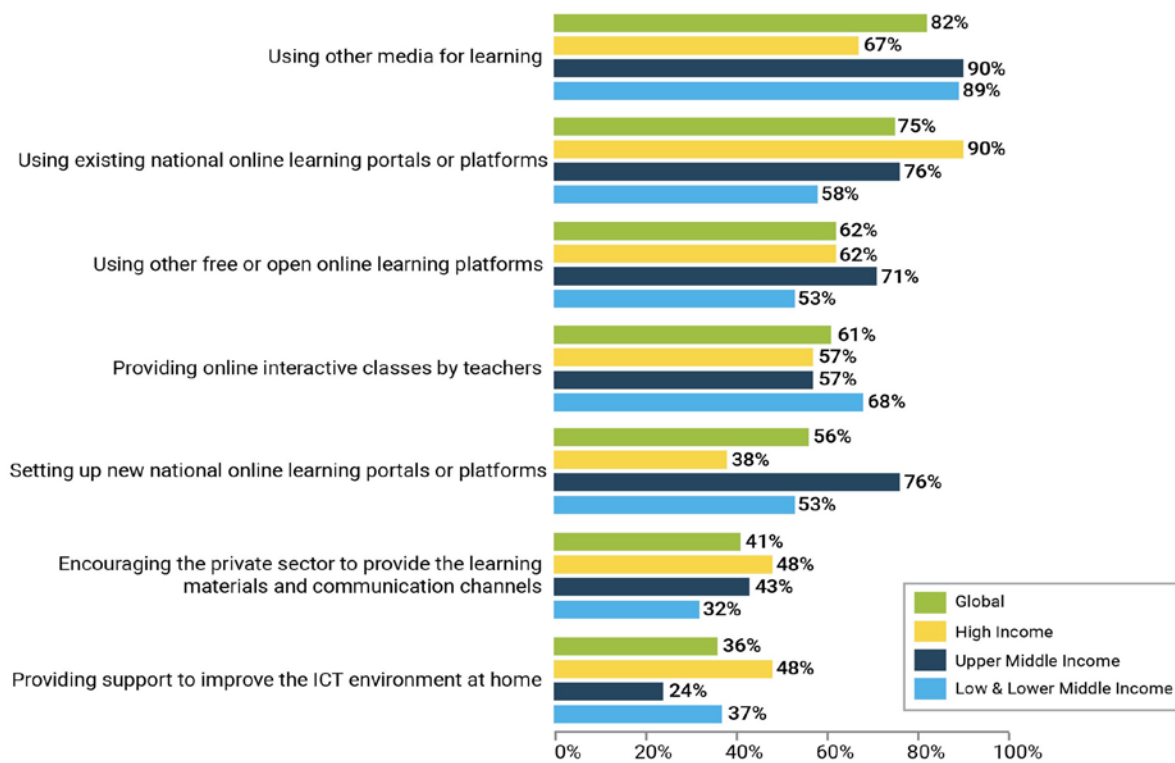
75% of the education systems reported that they were using their existing national online learning platforms, while 62% said that they were using other free/open online learning platforms, such as those curated by UNESCO via an online [list of educational applications, platforms and resources](#). While 90% of the education systems in high-income countries/territories are using existing platforms, only 58% of the education systems in low and lower-middle income countries/territories are doing so. Meanwhile, 56% of education systems are setting up new national online learning platforms, especially among those in upper-middle income countries/territories. To support the new learning conditions, 36% of the education systems are providing support to improve the ICT environment at home.

China has launched a nationwide campaign to accelerate the integration of ICT in education during the pandemic, including to facilitate the online learning activities, establish national platforms to accommodate millions of students learning online, select existing online learning platforms for nationwide promotion and demonstration, as well as provide financial support to ensure continuity of learning for students from poor families. The Republic of Korea has developed an education depository of video and online lectures in order to share educational materials. The Maldives was conducting nation-wide tele-classes from grade 9 and above and will be gradually expanding the program to other grades.

- **Some education systems are strengthening partnerships with the private sector to address the challenges**

During the school closure due to the pandemic, building partnerships and bridges was found to be relevant in offering the knowhow and innovation. 41% of the education systems are encouraging the support of the private sector to provide learning materials and communication channels. For instance, Rwanda is partnering up with the private sector, requesting Internet service providers to offer zero cost data to students.

Figure 4: Policy measures taken to ensure continuity of learning



Addressing students’ health and well-being

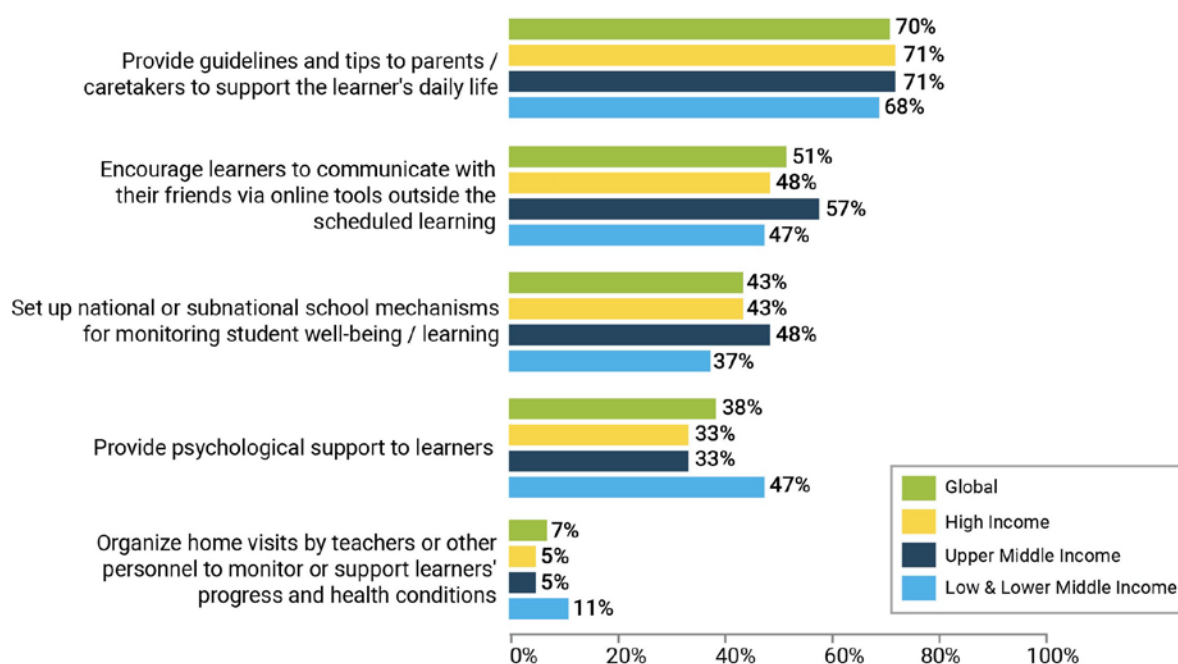
Schools provide a place not only for academic learning but also for the students’ social and emotional development. At the same time, with many schools closed and distance learning frequently adopted, considerations must be given to the home environment and the parents/caretakers. A question was asked to understand the policy responses in place to minimize the negative impact on students during the school closure and to identify the education systems’ efforts to ensure the schools’ social functions.

- **Various measures are taken to ensure students’ well-being and social development**

70% of the respondents reported that their education systems were providing practical guidelines to support students’ daily lives. In addition, 43% of all education systems responded that they are setting up school mechanisms for monitoring student well-being and learning. Moreover, 38% of the education systems are providing psychological support to students. There were only three education systems reporting that they are organizing home visits by teachers to minimize the impact on students: China, Myanmar and Palau. This might be due to a “lockdown” policy that is currently enforced in many of the respondent countries/territories.

From pre-schoolers to high school graduates, there has been a drastic change when it comes to socializing and meeting up with friends. ‘Social distancing’ or more ‘physical distancing’ has become the norm. To ease the impact of distancing, 51% of the education systems are encouraging students to communicate with friends online using different platforms. However, in some education systems, connectivity remains an issue for everyone, especially for those coming from low-income economies, as expressed by Nepal.

Figure 5: Policy measures to minimize the impact of school closure on health and well-being of students



Supporting and empowering teachers

Teachers are the foundation of education systems and the key to reaching learning goals, regardless of the context and the situation. In many countries/territories, teachers have been forced to adjust to the distance learning approach, sometimes with little preparation. Supporting teachers is therefore critically important.

- **Most of the education systems are providing extra ready-made materials that can be used by teachers**

67% of the education systems are providing ready-made teaching and learning materials (e.g. sample lesson plans) to support teachers to ease their workload. 61% of the education systems, with more in higher-income countries/territories, are providing teachers with practical guidelines for ICT-based teaching. This may reflect the type of media used as distance learning platforms in these countries/territories.

Examples of policy measures and experiences were shared by some respondent countries. For instance, [Bhutan](#) is providing ready-made lessons that is delivered through broadcast media. Similarly, the [Republic of Korea](#) is mobilizing teachers to create and exchange their own weekly learning plans and share self-made Open Education Resources (OERs) for their colleagues on a voluntary basis. [Finland](#) is providing guidance to teachers, schools and education providers, through a separate COVID-19 webpage, where a list of “Frequently asked questions” is gathered and constantly updated. To support teachers, [Estonia](#) is providing schools with guidelines for organizing distance learning with clear instructions to students and parents on how the distance learning will be organized in their school, as well as the contacts from whom the parent can obtain more information.

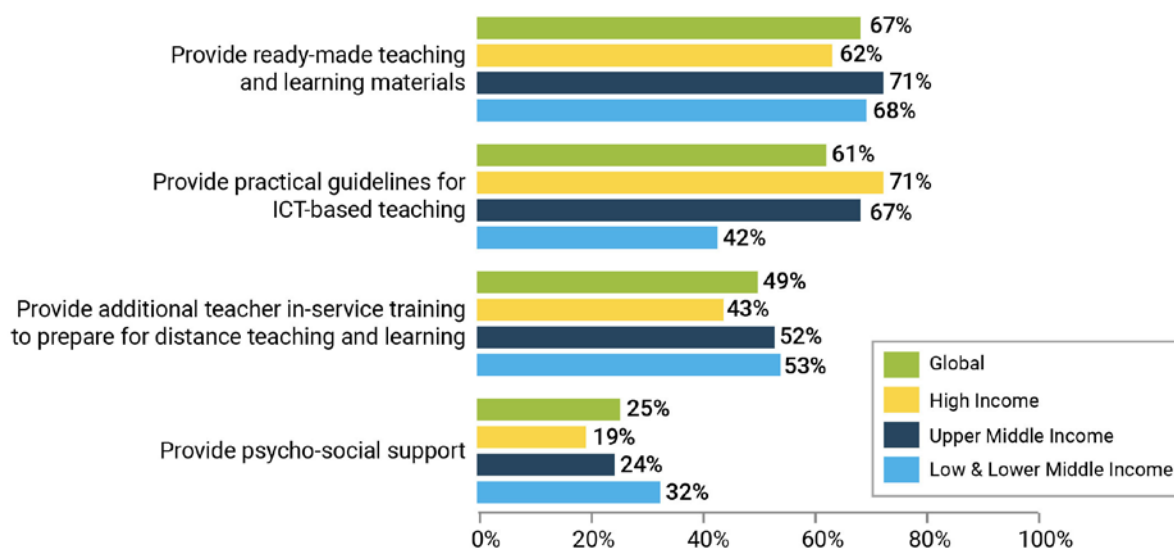
- **Additional teacher training on distance learning is provided in almost 50% of the education systems while only a quarter report the provision of psycho-social support**

Almost 50% of the education systems said they are providing additional in-service teacher training to prepare for distance teaching, regardless of the income level of countries. For instance, [France](#) is

providing new daily content on its ministry website dedicated to teachers. Qatar is providing computers to all teachers.

At the same time, 25% of all education systems said that they are providing psycho-social support to teachers such as counselling. Considering teachers may be facing additional burden and therefore stress due to school closure, it may be worth further exploring to what extent teachers' well-being is protected and/or considered in education systems' policy responses.

Figure 6: Policy measure taken to support teachers



Addressing parents' and caretakers' needs

Prolonged school closure and a shift towards distance learning are becoming burdensome for parents and caretakers. As the cases of coronavirus increase exponentially, as are the demands for parents and caretakers. Supporting the parents and caretakers during this difficult time is one of the main priorities for many education systems. Many of the policies may not be "education" policies but have major impact on parents' and caretakers' ability to support children' home learning. This also indicates the importance of inter-sectoral approach to supporting the continuity of learning.

- **Education systems are making efforts to make home-learning more effective**

66% of the respondent education systems said they are providing support to improve the home-learning environment (including support to online learning as well as other media and communication channels). At the same time, this means that more than one third of the education systems are not able to provide additional support to enhance home learning. 66% and 59% of the education systems are providing practical guidelines to support distance learning as well as awareness-raising materials, respectively.

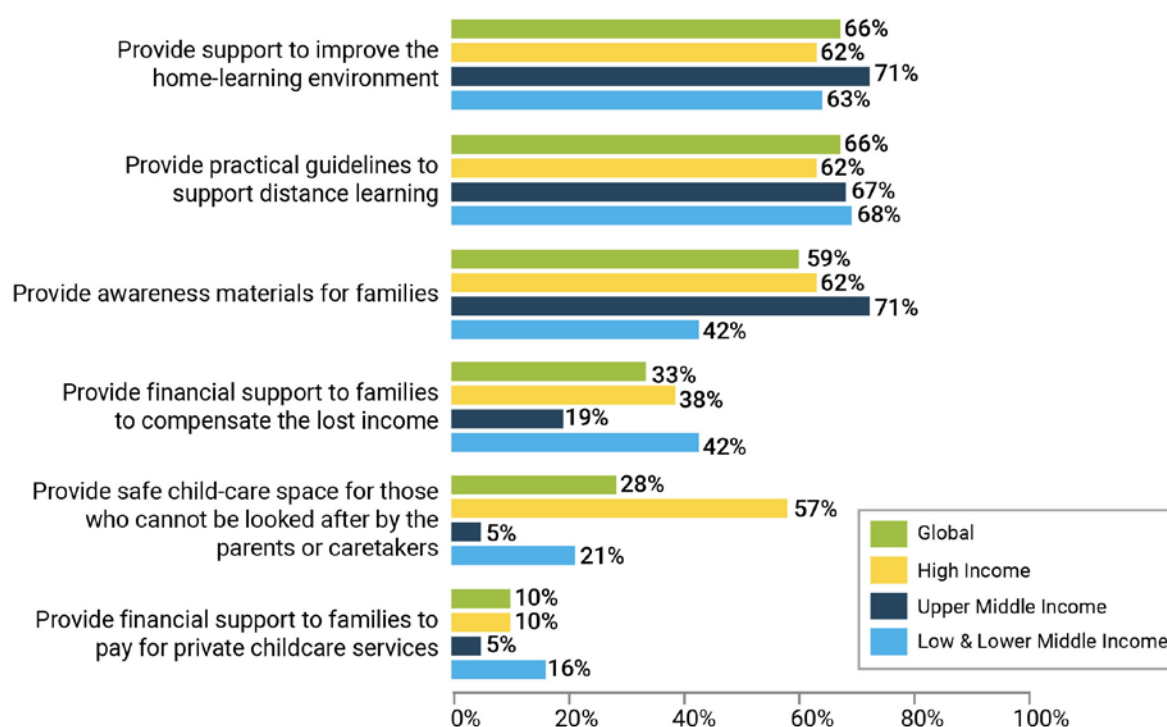
- **To ease the pressure on parents and caretakers, various support is provided**

33% of the education systems are providing financial support to families to compensate for loss of income. Meanwhile only 10% of the education systems are providing financial support to the abovementioned families to pay for private child-care services. This puts a burden on parents who cannot afford to support their families. In Finland, parents are provided financial compensation in the case that they are forced to stay home from work due to the quarantine of a family member, in accordance with their Communicable Disease Act. On the other hand, Sri Lanka is providing direct financial support to families from low-income backgrounds.

- **Providing safe child-care space for those who cannot be looked after by the parents or caretakers**

To provide safe child-care for parents working in crucial sectors, such as health, education, public transport, and food supply, 28% of the education systems are providing support, especially in high-income countries/territories (57%). Malta is providing, as from 16 March 2020, childcare services to healthcare workers. Fewer number of lower income economies reported that they are providing such service. This may result in many parents and caretakers in lower-income countries/territories having to make a difficult decision between work and childcare.

Figure 7: Policy measure taken to support parents and caretakers



Handling exams and assessments while schools are closed

In the context of the prolonged school and university closures occurring in many countries/territories, school calendars have been significantly disrupted. Disruption of exams and assessments may have serious consequences as some of the countries/territories, are approaching to the end of the academic year. A variety of coping strategies are being adopted by countries/territories with regard to exams, including cancellation, postponement, online assessment, organizing exams with special arrangements, and using alternative approaches for validation and certification. The main measures taken are:

- **Changing dates of high-stakes exams and assessments**

The measures most frequently adopted to address the disruption of school calendar include changing the dates exams and assessments. Among the surveyed education systems, 46% and 39% are changing the dates of high-stake exams and other summative assessments respectively.

- **Some education systems are moving towards online testing, but less for high-stakes exams**

Some governments are proposing to organize some of the exams and the assessments online. Survey results show 25% and 15% of all respondent education systems are organizing summative assessments and high-stakes exams online respectively.

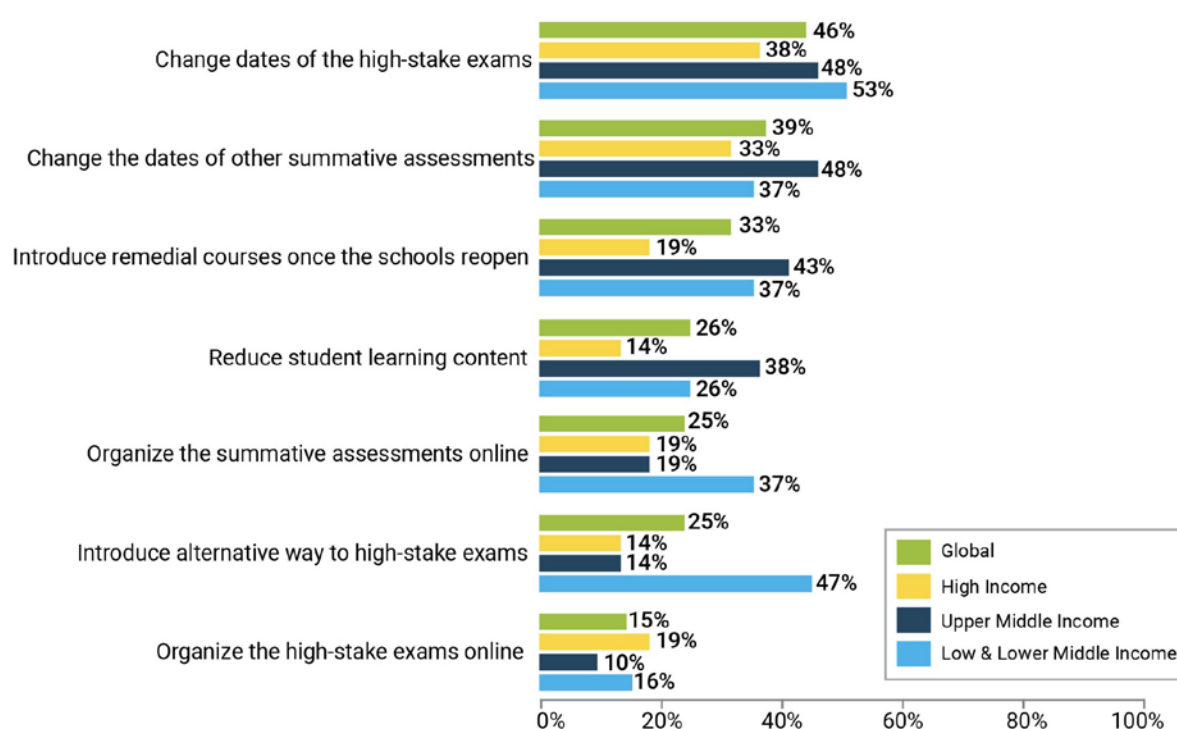
In Germany, a country where computer access at home is as high as 92.9%, schools are currently developing standards for the assessment of grades based on online work/course work and

coordinating such responses to ensure as much consistency as possible. Where possible, assessments and grading of students' work takes place online.

- **Alternative assessments are being introduced in place of exams**

Alternative ways to high-stakes exams are also being introduced in 25% of the education systems, many of them in low and lower-middle income countries/territories. In Mongolia, no end-term exams will take place for all grades except for graduation. Likewise, Indonesia sets to cancel the national examination for the end of school year of junior and senior secondary level, while graduation of the students will be determined by the student's rapport of five previous semesters. In Sweden, the national exams are cancelled. They are introducing new guidelines to assessment, due to cancellation of the national tests.

Figure 8: Policy measures taken to adjust to the disrupted school calendar



Summary and Recommendations

Summary

The situation is quickly evolving and the uncertainty of many factors such as the evolution of the pandemic, the duration of school closure, and the procedure of school reopening makes decision making difficult. Under this crisis, and despite the diversity across the respondent education systems, several commonalities emerge from the survey results, including:

- (1) Most of the education systems are trying to ensure continuity of education during school closure through distance education, using hi-tech, low tech and/or no tech approaches. The selection of technologies used to enable distance learning varies across education systems, from internet, mobile phones, to TV and radio. Often a combination of media is used to ensure accessibility. Lower income countries/territories face infrastructure challenges. Given the limitation inherent to TV and radio as pedagogical means for education provision, an increasing number of education systems have been trying to leverage online platforms with increased use

of ICT, while teachers, parents/caretakers, and students may not be ready. This can put considerable stress on education systems as well as parents, caretakers, and students, especially in developing countries;

- (2) Ensuring health and well-being of students during school closure has become one of the priority concerns for many of the education systems. Most countries/territories are trying to provide practical guidelines to support students' daily lives, while some of them are setting up school mechanisms for monitoring student well-being and learning as well as psychological support to students. Only few education systems are organizing home visits by teachers to minimize the impact on students, which might be due to a "lockdown" policy that is currently enforced in most countries. To ease the impact of social distancing, education systems are encouraging students to communicate with friends online using different platforms;
- (3) Equity is a key concern for education systems across all income levels, especially regarding access to learning platforms. Unequal access to ICT infrastructure at home is a major concern for most of the education systems, particularly in low to upper-middle income countries/territories. Even in developed economies, such as in the Republic of Korea, concerns have been raised on the issue of inequity in accessing distance learning services among multi-child families or marginalised groups. Furthermore, basic infrastructure, such as electricity, remains a challenge, mostly in low to upper-middle income countries/territories;
- (4) Teachers are the key to successful implementation of distance learning. A number of education systems are providing additional in-service teacher training to prepare for distance teaching, regardless of the income level of countries. While they are receiving additional support and training, their psycho-social health and well-being seems may be less attended. Only one fourth of education systems reported that they are providing psycho-social support to teachers such as counselling. Considering additional burden and stress that teachers are facing, there is need to further explore how to attend more to teachers' well-being as part of education systems' policy responses.
- (5) Monitoring learning during school closure is a challenging task. In addition, prolonged closure means that many of the scheduled assessments as well as high-stake exams are affected. Many of the education systems surveyed have postponed/rescheduled the high-stake exams and assessments, while more tests have been cancelled and replaced by alternative methods of assessments. Ensuring equity and inclusion is a priority.

Recommendations

While the contexts and challenges vary across countries/territories, several recommendations emerge from the survey results, which governments may consider in their further decision making.

1. Focus on minimizing the impact on learning with special emphasis on equity and inclusion

Education systems are facing multi-faceted challenges due to the COVID-19 crisis. Note that this is an emergency – the ultimate goal of the policy interventions during the current crisis is to minimize the negative impact of the pandemic on learning, learners' development and well-being, not to migrate the entire educational process to distance learning and try to continue learning at the same pace.

Ensuring continuity of learning is the top priority across countries/territories. At the same time, parents and caretakers are often struggling with multiple responsibilities, including work, childcare, household chores, and supporting students' learning. Teachers and administrators are also under pressure. It will be critically important to set the minimum learning targets during the crisis and ensure that all students have access to learning in one way or another.

2. Pay attention to social and emotional learning/development and well-being of students

Considering the social roles of schools, sufficient attention should be given to the health, social and emotional learning/development and well-being of students. Setting realistic minimum targets for learning during the closure may be useful for reducing the academic stress during the closure. Providing virtual space for students to communicate is a strategy taken in some of the education systems and could be effective in avoiding social isolation of the students, whose online safety should be taken into consideration as well. Providing distance counselling and consultations using various channels (e.g., internet, mobile phones, and letters) could also be a good strategy.

3. When moving to distance learning, deploy a mix of distance teaching, learning and monitoring options and approaches

While many education systems tend to rush towards online learning during school closure, a combination of the technologies and channels should be considered. They include the internet, mobile phone, Apps, TV, radio, DVDs/CDs, and printed materials mailed to/from students. Providing adequate support to improve home-learning environments for disadvantaged families, such as distribution of devices and materials as well as dissemination of practical guides and additional support to parents and caretakers, is critical.

4. Support and care for teachers and school administrators

Teachers and administrators are working hard under difficult and unpredictable circumstances. The quick shift to distance learning puts extra burden on many teachers and administrators. The transition has been more difficult for those who are not accustomed to using technologies. In addition, teachers and administrators are often directly or indirectly affected by the crisis themselves, juggling their school-related work and responsibilities at home. While addressing the day-to-day needs of the students, they also need to prepare for school reopening.

Providing training and guidance is critically important, so is providing ready-made materials that teachers can adapt and use to reduce their workload. At the same time, their personal needs and well-being should be considered. Providing support to childcare, counselling and guidance for teachers may be worth considering.

5. Ensure equity in monitoring and assessment of learning during and after the crisis

When making decisions regarding exams and assessments, broad consultations with experts (especially health experts for safety measures) and public communication will be needed. Ensuring equity and fairness should be at the center of the discussion. This could be particularly important in cases where localized school closure is enforced. At the same time, it should be anticipated that learning gaps will have increased during the school closure and additional considerations should be given to those with disadvantages. When on-site testing is not possible, online examinations and assessments can be options, but only when issues regarding equal access to infrastructure and connectivity, security and online proctoring methods, transparency, and students' digital skills and gaps have been thoroughly examined.

For more detailed analyses and recommendations on exams and assessments, see UNESCO Working Paper [“COVID-19: An overview of national coping strategies on high-stakes examinations and assessments”](#).

6. Based on the lessons learned, make education systems more resilient against future crises

While the current crisis is far from over, there is considerable evidence to think that this will not be the last one. More frequent disruptions to learning by either diseases, disasters, or conflicts are foreseen. It is therefore important to learn from the current experiences and make education systems more resilient for the future. Following the pandemic, setting up or expanding distance learning programs may be a priority for many education systems. Further integrating ICT in teaching and learning in classrooms can also be a priority in order to ensure smooth transitions to distance learning when schools are closed. Updating/developing contingency plans and funding mechanisms can be another priority. All these initiatives and programmes should be in line with the national visions and goals of education. Capacity of the education officials at all level in crisis-sensitive education sector planning should be developed.

Development partners including the private sector are recommended to support the relevant initiatives led by the education systems.

1. To address the immediate needs, **provide flexible funding for lower income countries to respond to the learning crisis cause by the COVID-19 pandemic.** This could be in form of providing additional aid, reprogramming existing aid projects, and rescheduling debt payment and/ or debt relief.
2. **Ensure equity and inclusion in COVID-19 responses** by supporting targeted interventions for the disadvantaged populations. Identifying and supporting the excluded populations during school closure is critical as these students are more likely to lag behind during the closure and in some cases may face higher risk of dropping out. Development partners may focus on: (1) supporting data collection and monitoring learning during the closure as well as after the school reopening; (2) supporting/funding the governments' effort to provide targeted support to the disadvantaged students; and (3) designing and implementing remedial programs.
3. **Invest in long-term development of more resilient education systems.** Development partners should also support countries to "build back stronger" after the crisis by enhancing education systems' preparedness for future crises. This includes supporting investment in using technologies in education, such as investing in infrastructure, developing content and assessment frameworks, training teachers and administrators, and developing capacity in strategic planning for using technologies in education. This also includes enhancing country capacity in crisis-sensitive planning, so that countries will become more prepared.

Annex 1: Education systems responded to survey and number of responses

Education systems	Number of respondents	Education systems	Number of respondents
Information received between 23 and 31 March 2020			
Europe and North America			
Armenia	1	Finland	1
Austria	1	France	1
Flanders, Belgium	1	Germany	1
Wallonia and Brussels, Belgium	1	Italy	1
Bulgaria	1	Malta	1
Saskatchewan, Canada	1	Portugal	1
Newfoundland and Labrador, Canada	1	Sweden	1
Estonia	1	Turkey	1
Sub-Saharan Africa			
Angola	1	Rwanda	1
Guinea	1	Seychelles	1
Mauritius	1		
Arab States			
Egypt	1	Morocco	2
Kurdistan, Iraq	1	Syrian Arab Republic	1
Asia and Pacific			
Afghanistan	1	Nepal	1
Bhutan	1	Palau	1
China	1	Myanmar	15
Fiji	1	Philippines	1
Hong Kong, China	2	Samoa	1
India	1	Sri Lanka	1
Indonesia	1	Thailand	2
Republic of Korea	2	Tonga	1
Federated States of Micronesia	1	Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan	1
Mongolia	1	Viet Nam	1
Latin American and the Caribbean			
Argentina	1	Ecuador	1
Brazil	1	Mexico	1
Cuba	1	Venezuela	1
Colombia	1	Uruguay	1
Costa Rica	1		
Information received between 1 and 8 April 2020			
Asia and Pacific			
Maldives	1		
Arab States			
Jordan	1	Sudan	1
Oman	1	Tunisia	1
Qatar	2	United Arab Emirates	2

Source: UNESCO Assessment of COVID-19 Education Response. 2020

About this report

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