

► ILO Sectoral Brief

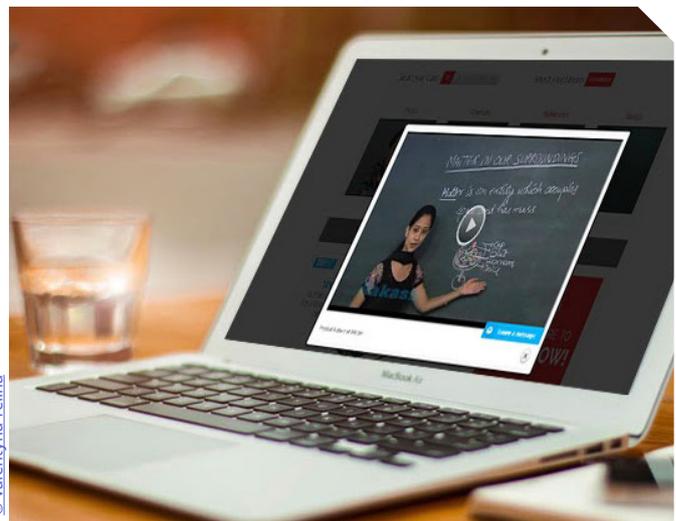
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COVID-19 and the education sector

As of 13 April 2020, schools and universities have been closed in most countries around the world in an attempt to limit the spread of novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19). Nationwide closures have been mandated in 192 countries, interrupting learning for close to 1.58 billion learners (91.4 per cent of total enrolled learners) and prompting almost all education systems to deploy distance learning solutions.¹ The disruption has also impacted the work of more than 63 million primary and secondary school teachers, as well as countless education support personnel. It has also affected early childhood education personnel, technical and vocational training personnel and higher education teachers.

While school closures can occur during times of armed conflict or in impoverished and rural regions, the global scale of the pandemic's disruption to education is unprecedented in terms of its reach, employment implications and transformative nature. The exceptional nature of the current situation is also reflected in the remarkable rate at which technology and distance and virtual learning have been embraced to mitigate the impacts of school closures, as well as in the capacity of virtual strategies to tackle education challenges.

Teachers and schools have been creative in adopting a variety of technology-based strategies as alternatives to the traditional classroom, providing lessons through videoconferencing and online learning platforms and sharing learning materials and worksheets through school-based intranets and messaging platforms. In some countries radio programmes and national television are being used to broadcast school lessons and educational materials, particularly in under-resourced areas that may be lacking in technological infrastructure.



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Learning at distance

While solutions to the disruption have been innovative and responsive, the reality remains that some schools and regions are better positioned than others to take advantage of resources, technological infrastructure and the education technology market to respond to the crisis in more effective and comprehensive ways. The emphasis on virtual learning can exacerbate existing inequalities in education, particularly in developing contexts, marginalized communities and rural settings, where access to technology and reliable Internet connections may be limited. Even within schools, inequalities such as those related to persons with disabilities or family income can hinder access to distance learning. Distance learning does not allow schools and teachers to carry out their important role in the socialization of learners and in the provision of social services, such as, for example, school meal programmes.²

¹ UNESCO: [COVID-19 educational disruption and response](#), 13 Apr. 2020.

² WFP: [Global Monitoring of School Meals during COVID-19 School Closures](#), 14 April 2020

Information from ILO projects to eliminate child labour indicates that school children who had been in or were at risk of child labour are less likely to access distance learning. In such disadvantaged communities, the quality of distance learning, usually low-tech or no-tech, may be poor. The risk that school systems will experience high rates of drop out, during the pandemic and in its aftermath, and that child labour will increase is clear.

Successful application of virtual and distance learning before the COVID-19 crisis involved teachers being trained and students being technologically-equipped and has generally taken place in non-crisis situations. Under the circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic, given the need to act quickly, focus has primarily been on securing access to technology. Greater attention needs to be paid to how technology and learning may be effectively integrated, including the vital role of teachers in that regard, and the skills that students need for self-directed learning.

Ensuring that quality learning continues in its new adopted forms during the crisis requires that teachers have access to adequately resourced and safe teaching environments and decent working conditions. Early experiences with teachers as they navigate the responses to COVID-19 have focused on professional support and training, occupational safety and health, employment and working conditions, and involvement in education responses.

► 1. The impact of COVID-19

Professional support and training

The sudden onset of the crisis has forced many teachers into virtual classrooms, unprepared for the demands and expectations of this new reality. The rush to transition to working remotely has left them with insufficient preparation time to learn and adapt to the modalities of virtual and distance teaching, managing virtual workspaces and classes, and engaging students in new and innovative ways of learning. For some teachers, these challenges are amplified by their own caregiving responsibilities and lack of access to technology and infrastructure, and for many more, the situation has required out-of-pocket expenses for supplies and equipment. In Quebec, for example, schools are required to provide computers for teachers who do not have them at home, but reimbursement of other charges, such as Internet access and telephone connections, are determined by local school administrations.³

Although ad hoc, some schools, tertiary institutions and education ministries have established crash courses on delivering online content, managing virtual classrooms and using technology, and have facilitated the transfer of teaching resources and learning materials to online platforms. In response to the ongoing pandemic,

the United Arab Emirates' Ministry of Education and Hamdan Bin Mohammed Smart University have provided an e-training course for more than 42,000 teachers and academics on how to manage online classrooms and use technology. With 22,000 certificates already issued, the course claims to be able to provide training within 24 hours.⁴ Although such measures address an immediate need, training must be consistent with professional standards, must not undermine education quality, and must be thoroughly developed to complement virtual teaching in the long term.

Occupational safety and health

While social gatherings all over the world are being limited, some national and state governments have yet to announce school closures, which raises the question of when teachers have the right to refuse work on grounds that it is reasonably believed to be unsafe. In some states in Australia, for example, schools remain open to ensure that childcare obligations do not prevent frontline health-care workers and first responders from reporting to work. Teachers, on the other hand, have been calling for the closure of schools, alongside all other non-essential services, to protect not only their own safety and health, but also that of their students and the general public, with many citing low

³ [Alliance des professeures et professeurs de Montréal.](#)

⁴ ["Ministry says 22,000 teachers now qualified to give e-training courses"](#), in Arabian Business, 16 Mar. 2020

morale and stress as a result of continued in-person teaching.⁵ In other countries, similar measures have been taken to ensure that parents working in essential services can report to work: in Belgium, kindergartens continue to operate for children of parents working in critical sectors.⁶ Even in situations where their services are deemed essential, teachers should be consulted regarding the potential health and safety risks of working, and should be involved in the design of appropriate strategies to ensure healthy and safe workplaces, including on access to hygiene supplies and training in preventative measures. In some districts in the United States, teachers have reported having to make out-of-pocket payments to purchase cleaning supplies for their classrooms.⁷

The socio-emotional and mental health impacts of COVID-19 and the pandemic response measures on teachers, parents and students – including anxiety, stress and feelings of uncertainty – have not been widely discussed, yet are as vital to occupational safety and health (OSH) as protective equipment and social distancing, and must therefore be taken into account when developing OSH strategies.⁸ Such mental impacts will likely be amplified as some countries prepare for a return to school, and teachers and education personnel need to deal with risks of infection and with issues related to discrimination against persons perceived to be an infectious threat.⁹

The extra burden of caregiving on families caused by COVID-19 is likely to disproportionately affect women workers given the gendered division of household labour. In many countries, particularly at the early childhood education and primary levels, teaching is a feminized profession and is thus likely to be particularly affected by this extra burden.

Employment and working conditions

Most school systems have guaranteed salaries for regular teachers in the transition to distance learning. The uptake of online and distance learning, combined

with school closures, has intensified concerns for job security among education workers who often have fixed-term employment relationships, including early childhood education workers, supply, substitute and contract teachers and teaching assistants. In many countries, education support personnel are employed on casual, part-time or contractually-limited basis and often lack collective representation. Owing to school closures, many supply and substitute teachers have found themselves without employment, income or benefits.

In higher education, contract teachers and support staff, such as cleaners and catering staff, have faced layoffs as campuses have closed and foreign students have returned to their home countries, sometimes disenrolling from programmes.¹⁰

In the United Kingdom, for example, some schools have terminated the contracts of supply (substitute) teachers, due to Government-mandated school closures, in addition to suspending payments of wages.¹¹ The teachers' union (NASUWT) is also reporting that fixed-term contracts are being prematurely terminated without pay, job offers are being withdrawn, and teachers are being threatened with pay deductions for self-isolating. The union further indicates that teachers with vulnerable health conditions, as outlined by the Government, are being instructed to be at work and that teachers on maternity leave are being encouraged to end their leave early, while the contracts of those providing maternity cover are being cancelled.¹²

Similar trends have been reported in the United States, with substitute teachers in some states not receiving salary payments during school shutdowns and risking loss of benefits.¹³ The crisis has exposed the vulnerability of fixed-term and non-unionized workers and those without other forms of collective representation. Supply and substitute teachers, as other education support personnel, could be integrated into any provisional teaching strategies developed as a result of the pandemic, and should not experience loss of income or access to benefits.

5 [“Coronavirus Australia: Teachers ‘afraid and angry’ over decision to leave schools open”](#), in 7 News, 22 Mar. 2020; [“Stress and anxiety high among teachers as schools remain open despite coronavirus pandemic”](#), in 7 News, 20 Mar. 2020.

6 [“Belgian kindergartens only open to babies whose parents work in a ‘critical’ sector”](#), in Brussels Times, 22 Mar. 2020.

7 [“Teachers pay out-of-pocket to keep their classrooms clean of COVID-19”](#), in Economic Policy Institute, 12 Mar. 2020.

8 [ILO: Care work and care jobs for the future of decent work](#), Geneva: ILO, 2018, p. 171.

9 NASUWT, [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) - Dealing With Harassment And Abuse](#).

10 [“As Coronavirus Drives Students From Campuses, What Happens to the Workers Who Feed Them?”](#), in Chronicle of Higher Education, 13 Mar. 2020; [“Hundreds of university staff to be made redundant due to coronavirus”](#), in Guardian, 2 Apr. 2020; [“Australian universities suffer job losses over coronavirus concerns”](#), in Independent Australia, 14 Mar. 2020.

11 [“Coronavirus in the UK: ‘Distraught’ supply teachers on long-term contracts fearing for their homes after being laid off by schools”](#), in iNews, 26 Mar. 2020.

12 NASUWT: [Coronavirus: Teachers’ rights ‘being trampled over’](#), in TES, 30 Mar. 2020; [“Callous decisions made at a time of national crisis”](#), 30 Mar. 2020

13 [“Substitute teachers facing financial hardship, loss of benefits in coronavirus shutdown”](#), in News Tribute, 19 Mar. 2020.

Job losses have also been reported in Kenya, with teachers working for certain low-cost private schools being placed on temporary layoffs without pay during school closures. For the course of their compulsory leave, staff will receive 10 per cent of their salary as well as their health benefits.¹⁴ Teachers working in private schools in Pakistan have expressed similar concerns regarding job and income loss, with the Government of Punjab recently requesting that private schools voluntarily reduce monthly tuition fees by 20 per cent to ensure job security for teachers.¹⁵

Social dialogue

In general, teachers and their organizations have been quick to adapt to the pandemic measures and have supported government efforts to implement distance learning. While a quick response on the part of governments and institutions is necessary to limit the spread of COVID-19, teachers and their representatives have not always been fully involved and consulted in response strategies. Their input is vital to ensuring education quality and maintaining the integrity of the profession. Suspending or overriding collective bargaining agreements with teachers could counteract these principles. In Quebec, Canada, for example, collective agreements with teachers and educational staff were suspended to allow assignments, schedules and workplaces to be modified to accommodate the extraordinary circumstances. The teachers' union was not consulted in advance.¹⁶

In other countries, a more proactive approach has been taken with teachers' organizations. In Argentina, the Ministry of Education established a commission, comprising representatives of six teachers' associations, to plan the modalities of distance learning.¹⁷ In Los Angeles, United States, the teachers' union (United Teachers Los Angeles) reached an agreement with the Los Angeles Unified School District setting terms and conditions for teachers in relation to online teaching and learning during the pandemic, including the flexibility to create their work schedules, discretion over teaching modalities, and protection from loss of pay or benefits during school closures. The agreement is expected to act as a model for other districts currently in negotiation.¹⁸ In Finland, the Trade Union of Education in Finland (OAJ) was consulted on emergency measures in education, which it supported.¹⁹

14 "[Bridge schools send teachers home amid coronavirus crisis](#)" in Daily Nation, 27 Mar. 2020.

15 "[Punjab govt directs private schools to give 20pc fee concession](#)", in Pakistan Today, 7 Apr. 2020.

16 "COVID-19: [Quebec teachers in shock after government suspends collective agreements](#)", in CTV News, 19 Mar. 2020.

17 Government of Argentina: "[Coronavirus: Trota encabezó una comisión de trabajo con gremios docentes](#)".

18 "[LA Unified, teachers' union reach agreement over distance learning guidelines](#)", in EdSource, 9 Apr. 2020.

19 Trade Union of Education in Finland (OAJ), [Schools and educational institutions switching to distance learning – salaries will be paid as normal](#), 17 March 2020.

► 2. Responses by constituents and partners

While most governments have closed schools and set up some sort of distance learning programmes for students, policy response on supporting teachers in this regard has been varied. According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), almost all governments have increased spending on education. Much of this funding has been used in the deployment of online and distance teaching technologies, and there is little evidence that funding has gone towards teacher wages or training in the use of online technologies.²⁰

Turning teaching materials into digital format at short notice has been a challenge as few teachers have strong digital and ICT skills. In many countries in South-West Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, only about 20 per cent of households have Internet connectivity, and few have personal computers. In Peru, 35 per cent of teachers have access to a computer and Internet connectivity. The Peruvian Government therefore uses television and radio channels to provide classes and content to students, as well as online platforms such as *Aprendo en casa* (I learn at home). In Cameroon, it is estimated that 20–25 per cent of teachers have Internet access and that the majority of teachers lack ICT skills. A national government task force was set up to establish the Protective Learning Routine, which enables teachers and learners to access education through platforms they are already familiar with, such as radio and television. In Uganda, teacher training institutions have been deployed to deliver capacity-building workshops for teachers without ICT skills.²¹

With regard to wages, in countries where private schools are widespread, such as Pakistan and Somalia, there are reports of teachers being laid off due to lack of demand, while in public schools, governments are making an effort to maintain teacher salaries. In the Philippines, the Government has striven to pay teacher salaries for March and April early, and teacher performance reviews have been suspended while under the state of emergency. Teaching staff and education personnel still in schools will receive a bonus hazard pay and clothing allowance. It is not clear if such measures have been implemented, as unions have expressed concerns about the financial situation of teachers in the crisis.²² In Uganda, the Ministry of Education and Sports has

reported timely payment of salaries so that teachers can stock essentials and focus on their mission.²³

At the international level, the United Nations Economic, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has launched a Global Education Coalition, of which ILO is a member, which seeks to bring together international organizations, non-governmental organizations and the private sector on supporting COVID-19 responses in education. The International Task Force on Teachers for Education 2030, of which the ILO is also a member, has issued a Call for Action on Teachers, calling on governments, education providers and funders – public and private – and all relevant partners to preserve teachers' employment and wages; prioritize teachers' and learners' health, safety and well-being; include teachers in developing COVID-19 education responses; provide adequate professional support and training; put equity at the heart of education responses; and include teachers in aid responses.²⁴

Numerous other international bodies have developed tools to support education during school closures, including United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) guidance on how teachers should talk to children about COVID-19.²⁵

Companies and foundations have responded by releasing several tools aimed at promoting distance learning management systems, mobile technology learning systems, massive open online courses, self-directed learning content, collaboration platforms that support live video communication, tools that can be downloaded for offline learning, and tools for teachers to create digital learning content. The wide use of digital technologies, many of which are offered free of charge, has been appreciated by governments, many of which are deploying them as part of distance learning strategies.²⁶ At the same time, this rapid spread of technologies in education has raised concerns about the penetration of commercial products into the public education market in many countries without passing through quality control and public procurement procedures.²⁷

20 International Monetary Fund: [Policy responses to COVID-19](#).

21 UNESCO: COVID-19 Webinar: [A new world for teachers, education's frontline workers](#), 27 March 2020.

22 "[DepEd urged to provide COVID-19-related assistance to public, private education workers](#)" Manila Bulletin, 4 April 2020.

23 UNESCO: COVID-19 Webinar: [A new world for teachers, education's frontline workers](#), 27 March 2020.

24 International Task Force on Teachers for Education 2030: "[Teacher Task Force calls to support 63 million teachers touched by the COVID-19 crisis](#)", 27 Mar. 2020.

25 UNICEF: [How teachers can talk to children about coronavirus disease \(COVID-19\)](#).

26 UNESCO: [National learning platforms and tools](#).

27 "[This is online education's moment' as colleges close during coronavirus pandemic](#)", MarketWatch, 18 March 2020.

The global union federation Education International has issued Guiding principles on the COVID-19 pandemic, which include principles on protection for teachers, social dialogue, and the promotion of equity in the provision of distance learning.²⁸

In recent weeks, some countries have reopened schools in areas where the rate of transmission of COVID-19 has flattened or diminished and economic activity has resumed. This move is based on the understanding that pandemic risk factors associated with schools are limited, and measures have been put into place to further reduce risk such as reduced class sizes and expanded sick leave policies for staff and learners.²⁹ Nonetheless, teacher unions have raised concerns about school safety and the need to protect teachers and school staff from infection, as social distancing between learners and staff is difficult to achieve in many school settings.³⁰ Some unions have made concrete proposals to implement safe return. The German Teachers' Association, for example, proposes a two-week alternating shift model.³¹ Unions have also expressed concern about widening inequalities exacerbated by the pandemic, and have called for social dialogue in the development of return to school policies.³² The global union Education International has issued Guidance on Reopening Schools and Education Institutions, which stresses social and policy dialogue with educators and their representative unions and organisations to assess needs and agree on health and safety measures for students and staff as well as the framework and resources for transitioning back to onsite teaching and learning.³³ The ILO and UNESCO, together with the International Task Force on Teachers for Education 2030, issued Guidelines to support national authorities in their back-to-school efforts which address social dialogue, safety and health of school staff, mental health, teacher preparation and learning, rights and working conditions, education finance, and monitoring and evaluation.³⁴

28 Education International: [Resolution outlining educators' key demands to all governments and international institutions dealing with the COVID-19 outbreak](#), 6 April 2020.

29 WHO (2020). [Considerations for school-related public health measures in the context of COVID-19, Annex to Considerations in adjusting public health and social measures in the context of COVID-19](#), 10 May.

30 South African Democratic Teachers' Union (SADTU) (2020). [SADTU North West Media Statement on the Reopening of Schools](#), 16 May; National Education Union (UK) (2020). [Coronavirus - what we say today](#), 14 May.

31 German Teachers' Association (2020). [Practice-oriented proposal for "Phase 2"](#), 27 April. Federación de Enseñanza CC.OO. (2020). [Resumen de la reunión de la mesa de negociación del personal docente no universitario](#), 19 May.

32 American Federation of Teachers (2020) [Plan to Safely Reopen America's Schools and Communities](#), 29 April.

33 Education International (2020). [Education International Guidance on Reopening Schools and Education Institutions](#), 30 April.

34 TTF (2020). [Guidelines to support national authorities in their back-to-school efforts](#), 18 May.

► 3. ILO tools and responses

The [ILO/UNESCO Recommendation concerning the status of Teachers \(1966\)](#) and the [UNESCO Recommendation concerning the Status of Higher-Education Teaching Personnel \(1997\)](#), in addition to setting out principles concerning the rights and responsibilities of teachers, also provide guidelines on engaging dialogue between teachers and education authorities. The [ILO Policy Guidelines on the promotion of decent work for early childhood education personnel \(2013\)](#) provide guidance on OSH for early childhood education personnel, and include specific reference to infectious diseases, which pose a common risk in this profession. Further guidance is also provided in the [ILO Handbook of good human resource practices in the teaching profession \(2012\)](#).³⁵

The [Employment and Decent Work for Peace and Resilience Recommendation, 2017 \(No. 205\)](#) sets out principles on the provision of education, vocational training and guidance in the context of crisis situations arising from conflicts and disasters. It calls for access to free, quality, public education at all stages of crisis and recovery, including second chance programmes for learners whose education was interrupted. The Recommendation also calls on countries to formulate or adapt a national education, training, retraining and vocational guidance programme that assesses and responds to emerging skills needs for recovery and reconstruction, in consultation with education and training institutions and employers' and workers' organizations, engaging fully all relevant public and private stakeholders.

Drawing on international standards on teachers, together with partners such as UNESCO and the [International Task Force on Teachers for Education 2030](#), the ILO is calling for:

- maintenance of wages and benefits for teachers and education personnel, regardless of their employment relationship, during the crisis;
- adequate training and support for teachers as they transition to distance learning;

- as learners return to school in some countries, adequate OSH protection for teachers and education workers; and
- social dialogue between governments, teachers' organizations and private school employers to design and implement immediate crisis-response education policies, taking into account the needs of learners and teachers, based on the principle of equity, and balancing the need for academic achievement with the management of well-being during this global crisis. Social dialogue will also be essential in the post-pandemic reconstruction phase to ensure investment in education in line with the [SDG4-Education 2030 Framework for Action](#).

An ongoing study on digitalization and the teaching profession in five African countries, funded by the German Development Cooperation (GIZ), is yielding insights into how distance learning can work in developing countries and how technology can assist in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The ILO, through its work on skills and employability, is monitoring how the pandemic and training centre closures have affected technical and vocational education and training and apprenticeships, and how learners and educators are being affected by the rapid transition to distance learning.³⁶ ILO projects to eliminate child labour and promote education are monitoring the effects of school closures on children vulnerable to child labour and are liaising with school systems with a view to supporting quality distance education.

³⁵ See: <https://www.ilo.org/education>.

³⁶ ILO: Discussion: Continuing online learning and skills development in times of the COVID-19 crisis, 27 March - 17 April.

Contact details

International Labour Organization
Route des Morillons 4
CH-1211 Geneva 22
Switzerland

Sectoral Policies Department
E: covidresponsesector@ilo.org