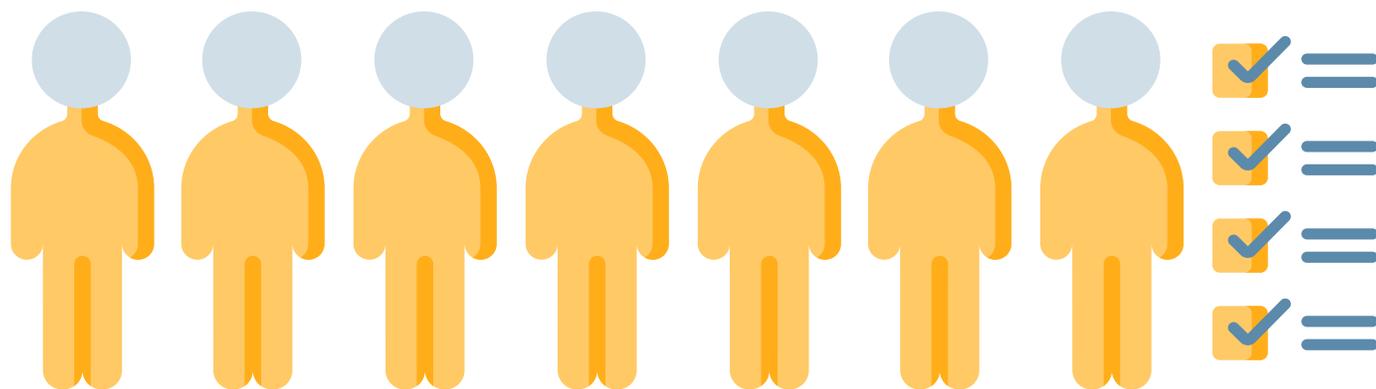


LEARNING ASSESSMENT AND HIGH-STAKES EXAMS

APRIL 2021

At the time of reopening and throughout the school year, learning assessments help teachers, schools, and education systems identify learning needs so that they can adjust instruction and target resources accordingly to stem learning losses induced by school closures and economic shocks accompanying the pandemic. These assessments should focus on students in early grades or transition years and start with covering the content missed during closures from core subjects like reading and math. To ensure safety and to give every child an equal opportunity to demonstrate what they know, understand, and can do, education systems can modify or replace high stakes examinations that certify school completion or determine transitions to higher levels of education.



Without the opportunity to learn new content and with ample time to forget what had been learned earlier, all students affected by school closures have likely experienced learning loss, the stagnation or decrease in student achievement relative to expected performance, attributed to the disruption of in-person schooling. The greatest losses are likely to be among disadvantaged children who have had limited access to remote learning experiences or support for learning at home.

Learning assessment – gathering and evaluating information on what students understand, know, and can do – will help educators identify the learning needs of their students and help policy-makers better target resources within and across schools. Given the disruptions to learning, education systems may also have to modify high stakes examinations that typically certify school completion and screen students for higher levels of education.

Learning assessments

School closures may exacerbate heterogeneity within classes as some students would have benefited from remote instruction, while others may have had little to no access to such resources. Throughout the reopening process, learning assessments can provide evidence on the extent of learning loss and identify students and schools that might require additional interventions; they can also help to monitor progress and identify curricular changes that may be required. Even prior to the pandemic, evidence suggests that providing assessment scores to schools can improve subsequent student achievement (de Hoyos, Ghanimian, and Holland, 2019). These assessments can be administered by teachers (diagnostic, formative, and summative assessments) or by a country's national assessment agency (large-scale or national assessment).

Assessment in the classroom

Focused on content from core subjects and administered after students have had a couple of weeks to readjust to classroom culture, diagnostic classroom assessments can help teachers adjust their classroom instruction and identify students who might need additional help.

Early on, these assessments can focus on core subjects like mathematics and language to align with any COVID-induced curricular adaptations, and students in early grades and transition years can be prioritized. The Ministry of Education can provide schools with these assessments, or schools can use assessments used in classrooms or as part of national assessment in previous years. The assessments should be easy to score and interpret for teachers. They could even be quick, oral exams administered by a teacher or teacher's aide one-on-one to students.

In Indonesia, the national assessment agency provides diagnostic assessment tools for core subjects in each grade, along with guidelines for teachers to score and interpret results. In Chile, in response to the pandemic, the national assessment agency developed new assessment tools for assessing reading, math, and social-emotional skills (along with video tutorials, guidelines for administration, scoring, and interpretation). Schools can upload the assessments onto a portal developed and maintained by the national assessment agency and receive score reports back.

Some countries might lack the infrastructure, materials, and personnel to do this. In these cases, policymakers can distribute guidance on developing these assessments to schools, such as the guidance developed by the Indian NGO Pratham to assess reading (recognition of letters and reading of words, paragraphs, and short-stories) and mathematics (number recognition and fluency in basic operations like addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division).



Story	Paragraph														
<p>A big tree stood in a garden. It was alone and lonely. One day a bird came and sat on it. The bird held a seed in its beak. It dropped the seed near the tree. A small plant grew there. Soon there was another tree. The big tree was happy.</p>	<p>Rani likes her school. Her class is in a big room. Rani has a bag and a book. She also has a pen.</p>														
	<table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>Letters</th> <th>Words</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>e d w</td> <td>hand star</td> </tr> <tr> <td>s c</td> <td>bus</td> </tr> <tr> <td>g h z</td> <td>cat book</td> </tr> <tr> <td>i q</td> <td>day few</td> </tr> <tr> <td></td> <td>old</td> </tr> <tr> <td></td> <td>sing bold</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	Letters	Words	e d w	hand star	s c	bus	g h z	cat book	i q	day few		old		sing bold
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Here is an example of a short and simple reading assessment designed by the Indian NGO Pratham to check if students can recognize letters, read words and paragraphs, and comprehend a short story. Based on students' mastery of these tasks, teachers can adjust their instruction for the class or groups of students within the class.

Large scale assessment

If resources permit, countries can administer a common large-scale assessment to a nationally representative sample of students to determine the extent of COVID-related learning losses across the country and identify where learn needs are greatest, allowing resources (financial, human, and instructional) to be efficiently deployed across schools and grades. This would also help identify system wide reforms that might be required to deal with learning loss, such as changes to the curriculum, academic calendar, or the content of teacher training.

In Kenya, for example, while schools were closed the Kenya National Examinations Council developed a census-based national large-scale assessment to be administered by schools immediately after they reopened to grades 4 and 8, which were among the first grades to return to school. The assessment is paper-based and, along with supporting tools and materials, is available on the council's assessment portal. Teachers are meant to undertake the scoring of the assessments and to upload the scores on the portal. Schools receive an online report, and the Council will produce a national report on learning.

In non-emergency situations, these assessments can take 12-18 months to develop and are typically the responsibility of a national assessment agency with inputs from subject-matter experts and curriculum specialists. Given the tight time and budget constraints stemming from the pandemic, countries can re-use materials from previous assessments.



High-stakes examinations

The school closures and economic shocks associated with the pandemic have likely compromised students' ability to prepare for high-stakes examinations. Many countries, however, cannot completely cancel examinations since schools and universities have completion and entrance criteria based on exam performance. There are alternative options school systems can consider.



Modifying examination content or format

To minimize disease transmission, some countries have modified the format of exams. Hong Kong, for example, removed the oral assessments of its university entrance exam. Ecuador decreased the content of its higher education admission exam and moved it online. Children without digital access at home could take the exam in computer labs in schools, and a mock exam was made publicly available so that students could familiarize themselves with the new format and reduced content. High schools stopped using the exam for certifying graduation and replaced it with a capstone project.



Postponing examinations

Many countries have altered the usual timing of their exams. Postponing examinations buys school systems time to see if exam content should be modified and if exam format can be changed. Delaying exams also gives students additional time to prepare.



Cancelling examinations

Worried about the safety of in-person exams, other countries like Ireland and the United Kingdom have cancelled them, replaced them with school-based teacher assessments, and arranged training for teachers to make grades as fair and consistent as possible. Not all stakeholders, however, may be satisfied with this solution. External examinations are sometimes considered more objective, particularly for disadvantaged students (whose performance teachers may underestimate). Moreover, if teachers award higher grades and more students meet entrance qualifications, then universities may have to increase (and sometimes fund) additional slots for students.

Useful Resources



Diagnostic classroom assessments

- [Guidelines to develop very basic tool covering reading and mathematics](#)
- [Indonesia \(in Bahasa\)](#)
- [Chile \(in Spanish\)](#)
- [Early Grade Reading Assessment \(EGRA\)](#)
- [Early Grade Mathematics Assessment \(EGMA\)](#)
- [Student assessment course for policy-makers and practitioners](#)
- [Guidance on using assessment in the process of school reopening](#)

Country responses to high-stakes exams

- [Summary by country](#)

