PREPARING AND SUPPORTING SCHOOL LEADERS

School administrators have taken on a significant amount of additional responsibility since the beginning of the pandemic. They have needed to rewrite policies, communicate with stakeholders, institute distance learning programs, and otherwise engage in crisis management on a regular basis. Countries can empower their school leaders by communicating clearly, providing resources for creating school reopening plans, encouraging collaboration among schools, and helping schools monitor their reopening progress.

Reasons for Countries to Prioritize Support of School Leaders

Better school management is associated with better student outcomes (Bloom et al. 2015). A recent study indicates that school leaders could be as important to student learning as teachers are, once the direct and indirect effects of school leaders are take into account. Currently, school leaders are under significant pressure due to the pandemic. Rather than supervising normal day-to-day operations, they are forced to engage in crisis management on a nearly constant basis. School leaders have to recreate a large portion of school policies in order to reopen successfully—a daunting task for which they need extra guidance (Fotheringham et al. 2020). School leaders are key to the reopening strategy because good country-level policies accomplish nothing unless they are well implemented. School leaders need support from their ministries of education to translate such policies into action.

Ways for Countries to Prepare and Support School Leaders

Create Taskforces or Working Group

To address such a complex issue, it may be necessary to create a dedicated team for reopening schools post-shutdown. During other crises, such taskforces have allowed countries to return to normal more quickly by enabling rapid communication and streamlining decision-making for school leaders. For example, Nigeria established the Education in Emergencies Working Group in 2012 to direct the education response to the Boko Haram revolt (UNESCO 2020). This working group helped to coordinate responses between schools, government agencies, and private organizations in the affected states. When building a team for the response, potential team members include project managers, policy experts, curriculum and instruction experts, technology experts, stakeholder engagement experts, and data analysts (UNESCO 2020). Although the teams dedicated to coordinating crisis response may look different, when this strategy is applied well, it can remove some of the burdens and confusion from a school leader's job without taking away their agency to make the best decisions for their school context. In addition, these taskforces can also work with school leaders to reduce their stress and burnout. For more on this point, see also our guidance on Preparing and Supporting Teachers.

Communicate Clearly with School Leaders

During the current crisis, school administrators need to stay up to date on a wide variety of constantly shifting information and expectations. Governments should give school administrators the information and guidance they need without extraneous or redundant information. A survey of school administrators in 12 countries indicated that one of their top needs during the pandemic has been clear communication and definition of responsibilities (Sampat and Oommen 2020). Government agencies may need to coordinate communications to ensure that schools do not receive similar information from different agencies. Within policy updates, agencies should clearly identify which portions of a policy have changed since the last update. Finally, each shared document should be clearly identified as either recommended guidance or required by law, as Norway did by creating an infection control guide with guidelines clearly marked as "must-follow" or "should-follow" regulations (UNESCO 2020). For more information see also our guidance on Communication with Stakeholders.

Provide Resources for Creating School Reopening Plans

Many details must be covered in an effective school reopening plan, from mask requirements, to cleaning procedures, to safe food preparation, and more. To ensure that each school includes appropriate information in a thorough reopening plan, many countries are creating a general reopening plan that can be customized for specific school contexts. These plan templates tend to be 10–20 pages long and cover topics including health and safety, remedial education plans, monitoring and evaluation,
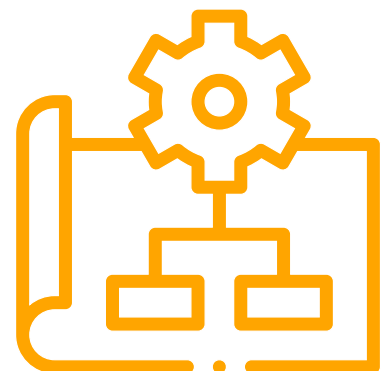
supporting teachers, including vulnerable children in the reopening, and creating a stronger school system in the long term. The level of detail varies from country to country, but overall these reopening plans need to be flexible enough for each school to adapt the plan to its context. Examples of such plans, as well as tools that are helpful in creating them, are included in the Useful Links section of this note.

Support School Leaders to Ensure Reopening Plans Are Inclusive of All Students

While we have covered extensively ways to ensure that all students are encouraged to reenroll in school getting students from vulnerable groups back through the door is not enough. It is important to ensure that reopened schools constitute an inclusive environment, particularly for learners with diverse educational needs. One structural issue that school leaders may need to evaluate is their school's WASH facilities. Accessible WASH facilities are always important, but particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, leaders must ensure that children with disabilities are not excluded from the ability to maintain proper hygiene ([IEI 2020](#)). School leaders can employ a twin-track approach in which the mainstream curriculum is as inclusive as possible and extra attention is focused on students with special educational needs ([IEI 2020](#)). Creating an inclusive reopening plan that works for the specific school context will be easier if school leaders communicate and collaborate with local persons with disabilities and families of children with disabilities, as well as with disability-inclusive experts and teachers ([IEI 2020](#)). Reopening plans and safety measures should be accessible to all students, including students who are blind or have low vision, who are deaf or hard of hearing, or who have intellectual disabilities ([Leonard Cheshire 2020](#)).

Create Mechanisms for Collaboration among School Leaders

During this time of crisis, schools are undergoing massive changes with very little ability to refer to precedent. Collaboration, therefore, is increasingly important. Some literature suggests relying on distributed leadership practices to approach crisis management as a team effort ([Harris and Jones 2020](#)). The importance of collaboration between school leaders during COVID-19 is borne out by nascent evidence. Networks between schools were identified by school administrators as an important and growing source of support during the first few months of lockdowns in England ([Fotheringham et al. 2020](#)). It is a necessity right now for schools to be able to collaborate within and among themselves, and ministries of education, state- and local-level educational authorities, and other educational stakeholders can create opportunities for these networks to grow and flourish ([Harris and Jones 2020](#); [Sampat and Oommen 2020](#)). A few countries have put this idea into action in concrete ways. Indonesia, for example, is helping school leaders to connect in peer groups to share best practices with each other ([INSPIRASI 2020](#)). An organization in Malaysia used an online workshop for school leaders to help train and connect administrators with each other for ongoing support ([Sampat and Oommen 2020](#)). Directly sharing best practices with schools as concrete examples of policy implementation may also be helpful.

Help Schools Monitor Their Own Reopening Progress

As school leaders begin the reopening process, it is important that they be able to track the effectiveness of the interventions schools are using to counter disease transmission as well as learning loss. Thus, school leaders should be encouraged and enabled to engage in data collection on COVID-19 cases, learning loss, enrollment, and other aspects of the reopening process (Carvalho et al. 2020). Countries may want to consider creating a monitoring and evaluation plan that can be used by school administrators in their specific contexts, such as an easy-to-follow checklist. In addition to being used directly by school leaders, countries can also use these data to target support toward the individual schools that need it most.

Useful Resources

Teacher Well-Being
- Measuring teachers' well-being
- Interventions to improve well-being

School Reopening Plans
- Republic of Rwanda Ministry of Education COVID-19 response plan
- Federal Government of Somalia Ministry of Education, Culture, and Higher Education school reopening guidelines
- Ghana Ministry of Education COVID-19 education response plan
- AASA: The School Superintendents Association guidelines for reopening schools
- WHO checklist to support school reopening

Collaboration
- Supporting Teachers in Back-to-School Efforts: A Toolkit for School Leaders

Monitoring and Evaluating Mitigation Strategies
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention COVID-19 mitigation toolkit

Cross-Cutting Resources
- Supporting Teachers in Back-to-School Efforts: A Toolkit for School Leaders
- Guidance on how other countries handled the shift to distance learning