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RESPONSE TO COVID-19 IN EUROPE AND CENTRAL ASIA

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RESPONSE TO COVID-19 IN EUROPE AND CENTRAL ASIA:
Policy and Practice Recommendations

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The Europe and Central Asia (ECA) Education Team's vision is for education systems to empower all to reach their full potential. In line with this vision, the purpose of this guidance note is to provide recommendations and policy advice for decision-makers on potential education responses to the COVID-19 crisis. The note includes measures for mitigating learning losses and preparedness for school re-openings and/or a second wave based on the following scenarios: (i) schools remain closed until the end of June and reopen in July allowing for the possibility of summer school; and (ii) schools remain closed through the summer, reopening for the next school year but with protracted disruptions.

Empty lab in Denmark

We are in an unprecedented fight against a global pandemic, COVID-19 (coronavirus). Education provides the opportunity for governments, people, and their families to continue building human capital, protect the poor and vulnerable, and kick-start the economic recovery while promoting sustainable economic growth and poverty reduction. Therefore, well-designed education policy should be the cornerstone of any response to this crisis. The world's accumulated human capital – widely accepted as a major contributor to the wealth of nations – is at risk. The repercussions for the overall economy will last for years. As part of the necessary social distancing measures, school closures are in place throughout the world. These affect most school systems in Europe and Central Asia. No other region has more school closures in terms of the number of countries, currently 45, which represents about 185 million children out of school.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic primarily affects public health, but spillover effects can already be observed in the education systems of many countries, stemming largely from school closures (marked in red, Figure 1). While a short time away from school is easier to recover from, a longer absence will negatively impact learning. Learning loss affects short term and long-term economic gains, human capital growth, and, most importantly, widens the equity gap in terms of student learning.
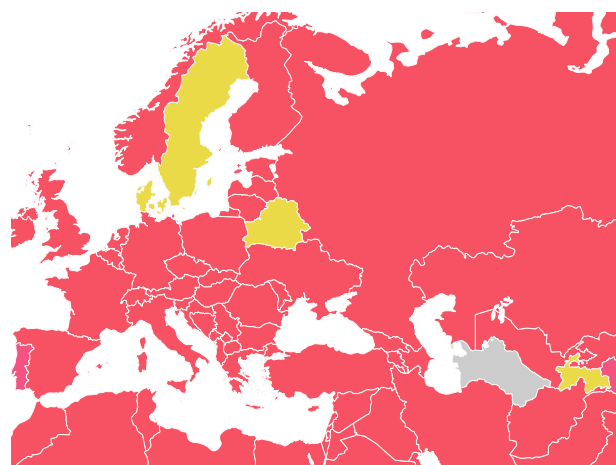

Figure 1. School closures in ECA - countries in red enacted blanket national closure; countries in pink have schools closed in selected areas; and countries in yellow have schools open with restrictions.

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Social distancing poses risks to education in ECA:

» More than **185 million schoolchildren are at home**; some are learning through remote technologies.

» Of these, 22 million are children in 19 ECA countries living below the national poverty threshold; most children and predominantly **the poor will suffer a loss in learning of up to half a year.**

» In addition to learning loss, **another third of school-year learning will be lost over the summer break,** with the greatest effects on those from lower-income backgrounds.

» **Due to the crisis and/or loss of learning, school dropouts could be significant.** For example, in Romania, the last economic crisis doubled the number of out-of-school children from 192,000 in 2009 to 378,000 in 2018 - even with declining demographic trends.

» Despite mass higher education, **under-represented students are more likely to drop out during their tertiary education studies** or attain a lower level of qualification than their more privileged peers.

» **Increased income disparities - due to the coronavirus pandemic and likely recession - will depress skills development** (e.g., years of schooling, skills proficiency) among individuals from low socioeconomic backgrounds.

» **The effectiveness of learning loss mitigation measures is limited.** In Europe, 16 percent of teachers report a high need for professional development on the use of ICT for remote learning, despite ICT being central to remote teaching efforts deployed as mitigation measures.

» The effects of **COVID-19 may widen the gap of learning outcomes** between the 104 million learners from High-Income Countries (HICs) and 59 million living in Middle-Income Countries (MICs). A gap of 13 percent is noted between the average Human Capital Index (HCI) of HICs and MICs.

Finland classroom

While this crisis has a painful impact, an opportunity has been created for adapting school systems to remote learning without creating further inequity over the medium term. This is an opportunity to:

• Catalyze innovations in education, creating ways to learn at home through interactive apps, live television broadcasts, online classrooms, and teleconferences;

• Upgrade the ICT education infrastructure through solutions provided by public-private partnerships, including governments, education professionals, NGOs, technology providers, and telecom network operators;

• Prioritize investments in vulnerable children through the targeted provision of ICT equipment to decrease the current digital divide between wealthy and poor, or urban and rural areas (see the World Bank Blogs for more on this topic).

Governments and their partners must sustain education progress by prioritizing and investing in keeping all students engaged and learning, to prevent further human capital loss. In this context, governments are best placed to pursue three objectives:

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OBJECTIVE 1 - Continuity of Learning (short-term)	OBJECTIVE 2 - ADEQUATE FINANCING (short to medium-term)	OBJECTIVE 3 Build Resilience (medium-term)
Provide continuity in the supply of learning during COVID-19 crisis, or catch up solutions, especially for low-income students at risk of dropping out.	Maintain adequate education funding to support targeted interventions, especially for students at risk of not returning to school.	Ensure a resilient recovery and more robust education systems with increased capacity for remote learning and improved practices.

Accelerated learning or learning recovery

OBJECTIVE 1.
Provide Continuity of Learning

Preschool in Serbia

School systems have largely been shutdown, with some opting for a restricted operation while employing significant social distancing measures. To provide continuity of learning in the short-term, while schools are closed, potential response measures for students, teachers, and communities include the following:

• **Use remote learning to mitigate the loss of learning and maintain student engagement.** Many countries have shifted to remote learning to provide continuity in the supply of education services. Some countries uploaded resources on dedicated websites, others offered interactive online classes, like Russia and Turkey, while teachers were required to prepare online content. Traditional TV or radio broadcasting is also being utilized to ensure learning, especially for vulnerable children. Many countries combine different methods of remote learning – in most cases, TV and the Internet. According to the World Bank's digital adoption index (DAI People), as of 2016, 64% of people in ECA were connected to the Internet. This translates to 53% of people in Bank client countries in ECA, which is much higher than the world average. However, there is considerable variation across clients, from 20% in Tajikistan to 75% in Lithuania.

• **Improve access to online education for students at risk of dropping out with digital devices to stay safe and engaged.** To be able to learn online effectively from home, students ideally need: (i) an internet-connected device, such as a laptop or tablet, (ii) accessories (keyboard, microphone, headphones, and mouse), (iii) an appropriate setting for learning, including a desk and chair, and (iv) materials such as stationery. Providing digital devices—the costliest of the above items—can help to ensure that at-risk students stay engaged with school and can access online educational resources from the safety of their homes.

• **Adapt national examinations to maintain systems for assessment and advancement of students to provide a smooth transition between cycles.** Many countries have chosen to cancel or postpone national examinations for 2020 to ensure a smooth transition for all students, especially those at risk (see World Bank Blogs). The transition between levels will also require strengthening learning support in the next school year, provision of summer school, or other types of remedial support. The transition can be facilitated based on average final grades or student portfolios.

• **Provide summer school programs to compensate students for their learning loss during COVID-19.** Schools might require students to participate in summer schools before passing to the next grade. Summer programs and courses, organized in schools or on university campuses, can be provided for students at all levels, from preschool to tertiary. The schools can provide summer programs in an integrative way, combining academic learning as remedial lessons, tutoring, coaching, and other necessary interventions. They can also be used to assess learning lags and help orient schools on where further individualized remedial support may be needed. These courses can be structured in modules for up to 50 students per

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course, with funds for student allowances and related course-delivery expenses. The preschoolers can catch up in fast-track programs over summer to get ready for primary school. The programs should also be focused on at-risk populations: low income, Roma, refugees (or those living remotely from high-quality education opportunities), and children with disabilities or special education needs.

• **Provide food delivery (or food stamps/vouchers) and critical supplies, especially to low-income families.** Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, 13 million school children from 13 middle-income ECA countries are missing out on the school meals (see the World Food Program). For low-income families, the value of a meal in school is equivalent to about 10 percent of their monthly income. The loss of school meals means a loss of income for those families. Millions of students from these countries depend on school meals and this service should be continued. A stimulus package including bagged lunches and critical goods could be organized for pick up or replaced with food stamps/vouchers that may be essential for some families and the wellbeing of their children.

OBJECTIVE 2.
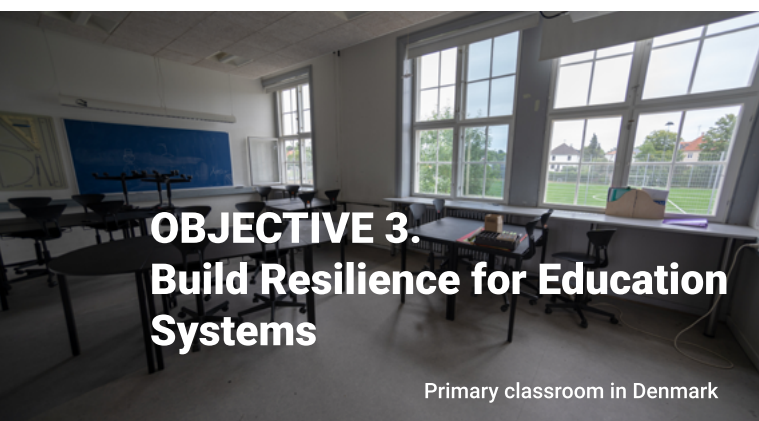# Provide Adequate Financing

Classroom in Russia - Yakutia

While the COVID-19 crisis continues to unfold, governments will need to make tough decisions related to balancing their budgets. The loss to global growth because of the virus is estimated at 3 percent (see the IMF Blog). Thus, one of the emerging tasks will be protecting the education sector. During this time, it is important to stay engaged with government financial institutions and advocate for sustaining investments in human capital and skills development so that people are ready to work after the crisis is over. To this end, potential measures include the following:

• **Adequately fund the education system.** ECA countries should maintain education budgets to prevent further increases in inequality. In addition to the expenditures allocated for teachers and recurrent costs, funds should be set aside for investments in innovation, school safety, quality education infrastructure, as well as other activities that could be financed by school grants (see below). Falling per capita income needs to be balanced with per-student funding, and the formula should favor the most disadvantaged students – Roma and other minorities, children with disabilities and/or diverse/special educational needs, poor students, and those in rural or marginalized communities. The formula should include an incentive structure to promote and reward enrolment and retain vulnerable students as well as improvements in student learning.

• **Provide block grants to schools.** Providing lump-sum, unconditional, or earmarked block grants to schools allows the resources to be used for the most pressing needs. This must be coupled with accountability conditions. The block grants should be provided to lagging schools that have overall low average learning outcomes and are placed in disadvantaged areas as well. The internal efficiency and effectiveness of the grants can be measured annually through indicators such as dropout, graduation, passing rates, or improved student learning outcomes. Following acceptance and implementation of the grants, recipients should ensure equal access for eligible participants, transparency, coverage, citizen engagement and accountability.

• **Measure efficiency in the education system and increase the quality of management data.** The provision of adequate financing should be complemented with more accountability for results at the school level and further monitoring and evaluation. During the pandemic, up-to-date knowledge of the situation is becoming critical for management decisions. Therefore, the existing Education Management Information Systems (EMIS) should be strengthened to capture the possible outbreaks in schools, track vulnerable students, distribute emergency funding, etc. In the medium to long term, measuring and tracking employment and wage returns is essential for society and governments to validate further investment in education.

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OBJECTIVE 3.
Build Resilience for Education Systems

Primary classroom in Denmark

As immediate response measures are put in place, ECA countries should consider the repercussions of COVID-19 on learning and human capital loss. With more data becoming available (see the Imperial College response), it is evident that the new reality of the post coronavirus world will require strengthened remote learning capabilities during the lockdown of schools, but also beyond such periods. Remote learning could become a common modality for many learners. Therefore, the pace of education measures should not slow down and start compensate for the learning loss during online education. This further justifies the need to maintain adequate funding for the sector since the economic crisis brought on by COVID-19 may force

governments to cut public spending. Recognizing the need to plan for resilience over the medium-term, potential mitigation measures include the following:

• **Ramp up the capabilities of remote learning at scale and digitalize education.** This action could include analysis of the whole digital infrastructure – evaluation of its assets and its management. Supply-side interventions will include the development of content and the provision of associated teacher training through public interventions as well as public-private partnerships. Schools should be prepared to easily switch between face-to-face and remote learning, as needed. TV and radio broadcasting may be implemented at the national level again, though for some countries these practices are completely forgotten. Remote learning should be inclusive of children with special education needs. The most vulnerable children (e.g., a girl from a poor minority family with a disability will be among the most vulnerable) need to have viable options for education during lockdowns. This may include individual device programs, smartphone learning programs, and training on usage of educational tools. Countries may use the table below as a guide for improving their systems based on the recommended modalities of delivery (see the WB Guidance Note on Remote Learning).

Level of education/modality	Radio / Television	Online Streaming	Online Interactive	Multimodal
EARLY CHILDHOOD. The predominant remote learning tools for young children are television and radio, including edutainment programs. In contexts with high connectivity, television programs and instructional videos can be streamed online.	**+**			
PRIMARY. The predominant remote learning tools for primary-age children are television, radio, and online videos. Teachers tend to communicate with their students through SMS/social media. Learning Management Systems can also be used for communication, collaboration, and videoconference facilitated «check ins.» More activities are online for upper primary.	**+**	**+**		**+**
SECONDARY. The predominant remote learning mode for secondary students is online. In some countries, radio and television are used to supplement online learning and may play a more dominant role, depending on the country's digital infrastructure and connectivity.	**+**		**+**	**+**
HIGHER EDUCATION. The predominant remote learning mode for tertiary students is almost entirely online. Typically, this is facilitated through a Learning Management Systems and synchronous video conferencing systems.			**+**	

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While online interactive modality is the most difficult for countries to implement, this modality is required for effective delivery across primary, secondary, and higher education. It is important to build capabilities to increase the efficiency of country systems. Countries will have to embark on a massive and rapid program for developing teaching and learning resources for remote learning. This can be done in partnership with the private sector. The major task of developing content will need the following: (i) identification of specialists for resources/content production, (ii) definition of incentives for resources/content production, (iii) establishment of a quality assurance mechanism, and (iv) large-scale and quick production of those materials.

• **Make sure that the integrated early childhood education and care (ECEC) services are not interrupted, especially for minority and vulnerable children (e.g., Roma, refugees, children with disabilities and/or diverse/special educational needs) and their families.** Such programs could include summer kindergartens for children transitioning to primary school, book libraries at home, toy and games libraries, delivery of parenting education, and online activities for children (TV and Radio should be the preference, see the table above). Toy libraries may function as a space for learning through play and as a toy lending point for children to use them at home, too. Reading programs can be interactive, providing small home libraries, giving caregivers the chance to read to their children at home. Specific support is required for frontline workers and first responders. Many countries in ECA have implemented such support using a formal provision in reduced groups and other precautionary measures (Russia, Finland, UK).

• **Provide psychological counseling to students and teachers on the disruption of their day to day routine, the tragic loss of relatives, or financial insecurities.** Available research suggests that people who are exposed to extreme traumatic events like disasters are at risk of suffering from psychological problems such as depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and other unspecified types of stress . Children taking part in remote learning might be exposed to the tragic loss of their relatives or parents losing their jobs. In these cases, they may need support from professional psychologists that might be based in schools or other community-based centers. Students with mental health issues will experience the most negative effects of the COVID-19 crisis (see the Lancet Child & Adolescent Health article). Mental support and anxiety resistance are an essential part of the services that the education system should provide to students. Domestic violence prevention in the time of quarantine could be another intervention of psychological support. Counseling and other incentives could also be provided to keep teachers in the profession if they experience a disconnection from education due to COVID-19.
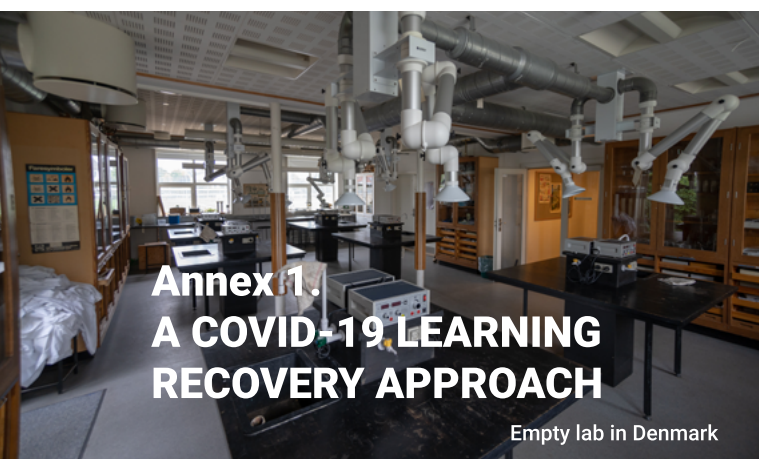
• **Provide specially targeted programs to support students that have dropped out when schools are back to operation.** Previous crises proved that the magnitude of dropouts after the return to the new normal might be significant. Thus, the implementation of the early warning mechanisms, and the development of an integrated national approach for dropouts may significantly help tackle the issue. The identification and tracking of children out-of-school because of COVID-19 pandemic shall be combined with individualized support to them and their families to help them return to schools. For youth that can't go back to mainstream schools, the "second chance" type of programs may be an alternative to compensate.

• **As much as possible, provide ongoing support on remote learning and IT equipment use for teachers.** The evidence across the world shows high levels of frustration among teachers because of an abrupt shift to remote learning. Around 50 percent of teachers experience anxiety and stress in relation to online education (see 1 and 2). Provision of IT, media equipment, learning platforms, video communication tools to be used in remote learning should be accompanied by additional training/coaching. The training should take place at the installation and testing of the equipment or through short online courses.

• **Facilitate cross-border knowledge exchange.** In some regions of the world, countries appear to have more advanced remote learning systems in terms of substance and quality. Therefore, it might be a good idea to facilitate the cross-border collaboration to ensure that the resources are available for those countries that have less resources. While language issues can be addressed/adapted, the main point of collaboration might be an exchange between teachers and the usage learning items (small building blocks for educational content). Such an exchange is emerging in Central Asia with the expected donor roles of Russia and Kazakhstan that have robust remote learning systems and overlapping languages with many Central Asian countries.

Education requires special attention in COVID-19 pandemic because children and their families need

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protection, including from risks of growing inequality. This requires, on the one hand, a coherent methodological framework for prevention, intervention, and compensation measures and, on the other hand, an institutional architecture of professionals able to provide quality education services to all children. It will require both – the government's commitment to address the COVID-19 crisis in education and strengthened collaboration between stakeholders. The team believes that ECA education systems are enabled to build stronger institutions and secure financing for education programs.

Annex 1.
A COVID-19 LEARNING RECOVERY APPROACH

Empty lab in Denmark

When the COVID-19 pandemic is over, countries will need an approach to address the learning gap created or exacerbated during the shutdown. Although most countries are putting in place some sort of remote learning program, it is unlikely to benefit the most disadvantaged students. Despite the mitigation measures that countries have been adopting, slower learning progress is expected to happen during the closure of schools and disadvantaged students (including the poorest and most vulnerable, those with special educational needs and disabilities) may be those to suffer most.

Extended school closures, lack of effective or comprehensive mitigation measures, summer learning loss and health impacts, along with the coming recession, will lead to dislocations in school systems worldwide. Severe learning loss will likely require students to repeat the school year. At risk students will also be disadvantaged. This could lead to increased levels of

Programs aimed to reduce age-grade distortion build on strategies for learning recovery.

dropouts.

In contexts with high rates of dropouts and repetition, it is common to find large numbers of students who are attending grades that do not correspond to their ages (overaged students). Age-grade distortion is a phenomenon that disproportionately affects students from less wealthy households and minorities. It is one of the most relevant predictors of dropouts and often leads to low paying jobs.

• Countries will need a **COVID-19 learning recovery approach** to address learning gaps and loss. One such approach is proposed here. It builds on the rationale of accelerated learning programs to reduce age-grade distortion. It consists of three stages: (i) assess, (ii) plan and (iii) implement. Each stage will inform the subsequent and the whole process should be repeated until the learning gap is closed or considered acceptable to the education system (see Figure 1). Each stage includes specific actions to be taken by central level authorities with support from schools. This approach relies on data to be collected on a regular basis and a feedback loop for course correction. It is centered on the individual student. Teachers should play a key role in each stage.

If intermittent closures of schools take place because of rebounds in the transmission of the COVID-19, as recently assessed through a mathematical model used by researchers at Harvard university, countries can make use of this approach multiple times and build on lessons from previous rounds to improve the model.
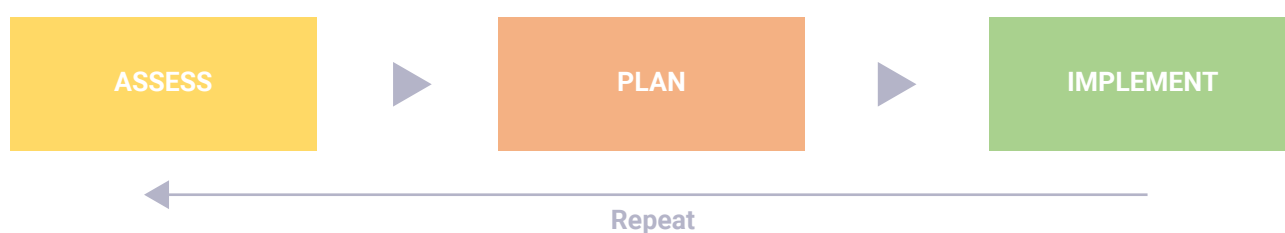
| ASSESS | ▶ | PLAN | ▶ | IMPLEMENT |

Repeat

Figure 2. Program Stages

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STAGE 1 - ASSESS

1. Identification of teachers who can participate in the accelerated learning program.
   - Look at teachers' profiles, experience with targeted learning practices, ability to provide psycho-social support to students, and capacity to work in alternative work schedules and environments.

2. Identification of students in need of support either through a test/assessment or information provided by teachers.
   - Use early warning signals such as absenteeism, delays in turning in assignments, as well as lack of motivation or distraction in classrooms.
   - Pay attention to students with special educational needs and disabilities.
   - Pay attention to female students.
   - Pay attention to the poorest and most vulnerable students.
   - Inform both school managers and parents about the identified students in need.

3. Assessment of the learning gap produced or exacerbated during the shutdown of schools.
   - Conduct assessments of a sample of students of different grades in early literacy and numeracy, as well as key subjects like mathematics and language at secondary education level.

STAGE 2 - PLAN

Devise a plan for accelerated learning based on the assessment of Stage 1.

1. If necessary, ask for permission to enroll the student group in the accelerated learning program.

2. Create a database with key information on the students in need. School managers and teachers should know who they are and what their learning gaps are.

3. Define the results to be achieved by the end of the program and consider multiple scenarios with optimistic and pessimistic outcomes.

4. Identify timeline and venue for delivering the program.
   - Consider the opposite shift in contexts of no full-time school/education. Consider the weekends, holidays and seasonal breaks as well. The additional daily (e.g. two hours) or weekly (e.g. eight hours) time for the implementation of the program should be determined in consultation with teachers, school administrators and local authorities.
   - Make sure that classrooms or other school spaces are adequate and prepared for the program.
   - Define the maximum duration of the program according to the results of the assessment already done. As a remedial program, it should not last long.

5. Establish a task team for the implementation of the program.
   - Consider having one coordinator / leader / focal point in each region of the country, and one in each school where the program will be implemented. The school coordinator will be responsible for ensuring that the program is implemented by teachers as planned and will provide feedback to the regional coordinator for course correction on a weekly basis.
   - At the central level, there should be a core team comprised of specialists in learning, pedagogy, assessments, data analysis and project management.
   - The specialists in learning should be able to visit each school covered by the program once every 15 days. The total number of learning specialists should be determined accordingly.

6. Develop or procure the learning materials to be used during the program.

7. Devise a plan to train teachers and coordinators in the program. Training should be provided on a rolling basis and build on the feedback provided by school-level coordinators. One large training activity should be provided before the launch of the program and shorter trainings should take place once per month.

8. Develop the materials to train teachers and coordinators.

9. Consider providing students in need with additional meals or a small stipend throughout the implementation of the program.

STAGE 3 - IMPLEMENT

1. Inform students, their parents, teachers and school administrators, as well as regional and local authorities about the program timeline and expected results.

2. Distribute the learning materials to all schools covered by the program in due time for the launch.

3. Conduct the trainings as planned in Stage 2.

4. Put in place the following feedback loop:
   - Collect data on student attendance and information on training activities and teacher feedback through each school coordinator and regional coordinator once a week.

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- Analyze this data and information and correct the course as needed.

5. Assess student progress with the learning recovery in the subjects covered by the program.

6. Make teachers accountable for deciding upon the permanence of students in the program and their graduation.

7. Inform central, regional and local authorities as well as school administrators of the progress with the implementation of the program once every 15 days.

The COVID-19 pandemic calls for immediate actions of governments across the globe to address the learning gap and loss from extended school closures. Education systems will experience increased rates of dropout, repetition and age-grade distortion. Existing evidence shows the impacts of these issues on students, their progression throughout school and success in life. The above-mentioned learning recovery approach represents a concrete package to mitigate the COVID-19 learning gap and loss.

The COVID-19 pandemic calls for immediate actions to mitigate the learning gap and loss.

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[vi] In 2018, the World Bank launched the Human Capital Index (HCI), which measures the amount of human capital that a child born today can expect to have by age 18, given the risks of poor education and poor health that prevail in the country.

[vii] DAI (People): The People cluster is the simple average of two normalized indicators from the Gallup World Poll: mobile access at home and internet access at home.

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xi Patrinos, Harry, and Psacharopoulos, George. (1996). Socioeconomic and ethnic determinants of age-grade distortion in Bolivian and Guatemalan primary schools.

xii Almeida, Rita and Packard, Truman. (2018). Skills and Jobs in Brazil.

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xv **On the impacts on schooling in rural Malawi, see**
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