LEARNING LOSSES

WHAT TO DO ABOUT THE HEAVY COST OF COVID-19 ON CHILDREN, YOUTH, AND FUTURE PRODUCTIVITY

Even before COVID-19, the world was facing a learning and skills crisis. COVID-19 has deepened this crisis. School closures have led to huge learning losses, and without urgent policy action, today’s students could lose 10 percent of their future average annual earnings. Beyond reduced incomes, learning losses will lead to lower productivity, greater inequality, and increased risks of social unrest for decades to come. These trends can be reversed if countries act quickly, decisively, and with adequate resources, guided by evidence on what works.

The pandemic has exacerbated the deep pre-COVID learning and skills crisis

The global learning crisis long predated COVID-19: in 2019, the learning poverty rate in low- and middle-income countries was already 57 percent. In other words, nearly 6 out of 10 children could not read and understand a basic text by age 10. In Sub-Saharan Africa, the rate was even higher, at 86 percent.

COVID-19 led to an unprecedented disruption of schooling and learning around the world, worsening the crisis. Globally, between February 2020 and February 2022, education systems were fully closed for in-person schooling for 141 days on average. In South Asia and Latin America and the Caribbean, closures lasted 273 and 225 days, respectively. Although almost all countries implemented remote learning, it was typically a poor substitute for in-person learning, partly due to the wide digital divide. COVID-19 also closed preschools and disrupted investments in nutrition and care, which are critical for school readiness.

Children and youth in most countries have suffered major learning losses during the pandemic. Rigorous empirical evidence from various countries, including low-, middle-, and high-income contexts across regions, reveals very steep losses. Each month of school closures led to a full month of lost learning, reflecting the limited effectiveness (on average) of remote learning. In some cases, outcomes were even worse.

In Malawi, after 7 months of closures, students lost 18 months of learning—showing that students not only failed to learn new skills, but also forgot some of what they had already learned. With school closures reaching 1 to 2 years in many countries, this adds up to massive learning losses globally.

Learning losses have been particularly steep for poorer and younger students. This pattern reflects, in part, the greater difficulty of making up for the time with teachers lost by these groups of students. In poorer households, parents have fewer skills and resources, and less time to devote to children’s education. And when students are young, they need more support to learn. These patterns will worsen inequality. In some contexts, learning losses are also higher for other disadvantaged groups (e.g., rural students, students from minority groups). There is no consistent evidence across countries of gender gaps in COVID-driven learning losses. However, girls living in conflict-affected countries are two and a half times more likely to be out of school, and pandemic pressures on households may have increased risk of early marriage for adolescent girls, underlining that policy responses need to take gender into account.
It is estimated that the learning poverty rate in low- and middle-income countries may have risen to 70 percent in 2022. Based on these simulations, all the gains in learning poverty achieved since 2000 have likely been lost. The increases in learning poverty have likely been largest in South Asia and in Latin America and the Caribbean due to the very long school closures in those regions. In Sub-Saharan Africa, the learning losses come on top of shockingly low pre-COVID-19 learning levels, deepening concerns about the future of the region’s children. While there is little evidence so far that COVID-19 has substantially increased student dropout rates, unless learning losses are remediated, millions of students who have fallen behind the curriculum could drop out in the coming years.

Youth have also suffered a loss in human capital in terms of both skills and jobs. In Brazil, India, and South Africa, respectively, 14, 29, and 34 percent fewer young people were employed in mid-2020 due to the pandemic. In many countries, these declines in youth employment were more than twice as large as the declines in adult employment. Moreover, the youth employment declines were typically not offset by increases in educational enrollment, partly because universities and technical institutions also closed for long periods in many countries. Short-term declines in youth employment can have long-lasting consequences, such as more frequent unemployment spells, less on-the-job learning, lower future wages, and increased risk of social unrest.

This shock to human capital could significantly impact future productivity and lifetime incomes of children and youth, as well as countries’ economic prospects. Without decisive policy action, the average child in a low- or middle-income country stands to lose 10 percent of their average annual earnings over their working lives. Overall, this generation of primary and secondary students in low- and middle-income countries risks losing $11 trillion of lifetime earnings (in present value). The impact would be borne disproportionately by poorer households, leading to greater inequality.

Rebuilding human capital requires a greater focus on improving learning and skills

Human capital cannot be rebuilt by simply returning to the pre-COVID-19 approach; a change is needed to prevent the impact of learning losses becoming permanent. Since learning is cumulative, the learning losses of the past two years, if not remediated quickly, will likely compound over time—especially when the losses were in foundational skills, including basic literacy and numeracy. Governments therefore need to act decisively now.

Yet many education systems are bringing students back to advanced curricula that they are not ready for, ignoring the learning losses. A student who was in Grade 2 in 2020—and then experienced 2 years of school closures—is now expected to handle a Grade 4 curriculum in 2022. There is a great risk that students will understand little, become disengaged, and keep falling further and further behind, until they drop out.
The World Bank Group’s support to countries aims to tackle learning losses and accelerate longer-term learning by covering the entire learning cycle. Its approach—supported through an expanding portfolio, and strengthened by the Learning Poverty commitments included in the IDA20 policy commitments—prioritizes the following:

- **First, keep schools open and increase instructional time.** In Kenya and Mexico, for example, governments have expanded the academic calendar by shortening holidays. In fact, 58 percent of 85 low- and middle-income countries surveyed in 2021 were extending their school calendar. It is also critical to restore and expand access to quality early childhood education. Expanding schooling access may require innovative strategies in fragile and conflict-affected contexts (e.g., school in a box).

- **Second, assess students and equip teachers to match instruction to students’ levels of learning.** For rapid learning recovery, countries can scale up ideas proven before COVID-19 to sharply accelerate learning. One such idea, pioneered in India, is Teach at the Right Level, which divides children into instructional groups based on learning needs, rather than age or grade; dedicates more time to teaching basic literacy and numeracy skills; and regularly assesses student learning to guide teaching. Governments in Brazil and Ghana are scaling up similar approaches. Another approach is adaptive learning, which uses devices with specialized software to target lessons to each student’s learning level.

- **Third, streamline the curriculum and focus on foundations.** Overloaded curricula can be a big barrier to learning recovery. Simplifying the curriculum so it focuses on foundational topics would help teachers and students target their efforts more effectively. Some middle-income countries (e.g., South Africa and Chile) are doing this now.

- **Fourth, and very importantly, create a national political commitment for learning recovery, guided by credible measurement of learning.** Political leaders must become aware of the seriousness of the learning crisis and make it a top priority by devoting the necessary human, management, and financial resources to learning recovery. Transparent, up-to-date learning assessments are essential for this. Political commitment will also require coalitions that include families, educators, civil society, the private sector, and other ministries. To galvanize these efforts, the World Bank and international partners are championing a global target of cutting learning poverty in half by 2030, roughly consistent with countries’ own national targets under SDG 4.

Several World Bank projects are leading the way in implementing these best practices for learning recovery around the world. Colombia’s PROMISE (Program for Improving Learning Outcomes and Socioemotional Education) is helping assess students’ learning and socioemotional learning needs. Ghana’s GALOP (Ghana Accountability for Learning Outcomes Project) is helping train 70,000 teachers to target teaching to the level of the child. India’s GOAL (Gujarat Outcomes for Accelerated Learning) is helping implement a large remedial education program for building foundational skills in students from grades 2-10, guided by detailed technology-enabled data on learning of each student. West Bank and Gaza’s SERATAC (Supporting an Education Reform Agenda for Improving Teaching, Assessment and Career Pathways) is supporting an adaptive learning program to promote remediation and targeted learning. Romania’s ROSE (Romanian Secondary Education Project) is restoring vulnerable students’ access to quality learning by providing digital devices to 75 percent of public high schools. Vietnam’s ETEP (Enhancing Teacher Education Program) is helping build system resilience by creating platforms for continuous teacher professional development.

There is also an opportunity for transformation in tertiary education. Many tertiary education institutions, public and private, have embraced digital transformations, student-centered pedagogical approaches, and an increased focus on employability. These efforts should be scaled up. At all levels of education, maintaining learning continuity during future crises and strengthening the resilience of education systems will depend on better infrastructure and training for virtual learning.
Skill-building and employment opportunities for youth also need to be a top priority to prevent long-term scarring. To recover youth employment, governments must partner with the private sector to invest in youth upskilling and support job creation. Such programs can be very effective if well designed and targeted. Examples include in-demand and cutting-edge short courses and micro-credentials delivered via flexible platforms. These programs can be through formal education or training, including apprenticeships and technical/vocational partnerships with firms, or through labor intermediation programs that match young people with jobs so they can learn on the job.

All this requires good policies and complementary financing. Forty percent of low- and lower-middle-income countries reduced their education spending in 2020 after the onset of the pandemic, with an average decline of 13.5 percent. While education spending rebounded slightly in 2021, it fell again in 2022 to below 2019 levels. With many countries hit by multiple crises this year—including food, energy, conflict, and climate crises—education risks being squeezed out again if policymakers focus only on the short-term crisis response. To prevent long-term losses to productivity and income, governments need to quickly put in place the evidence-based approaches for learning recovery described above and support them with adequate financing. This will require: (1) protecting education budgets, and in some cases expanding them; (2) recognizing that there is space for progress through a much more efficient use of resources; this implies focusing on outcomes, improving management at the local and central level, and using the most effective delivery mechanisms (including public-private partnerships); and (3) costing out the financing needed to provide quality basic services to all children and youth.

Endnotes
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3 The State of Global Learning Poverty: 2022 Update, based on UNESCO school closures data.
5 Two Years After: Saving a Generation (World Bank 2022); Patrinos, Vegas, and Carter-Rau 2022.
6 Asim, Gera, and Singhal 2022.
7 Schady, Holla, Sabarwal, Silva, and Yi Chang 2022.
9 Schady, Holla, Sabarwal, Silva, and Yi Chang 2022.
10 Schady, Holla, Sabarwal, Silva, and Yi Chang 2022.
12 Andrabi, Daniels, and Das 2021; Asim, Gera, and Singhal 2022.
14 The approach used by the World Bank is called the RAPID framework, developed together with UNICEF, UNESCO, UK FCDO, USAID, and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and it is based on five evidence-based policy actions: Reach all children, Assess learning, Prioritize the fundamentals, Increase the efficiency of instruction, and Develop psychosocial health and wellbeing. For details, see The State of Global Learning Poverty: 2022 Update.
15 Authors’ calculations, based on UNESCO, UNICEF, World Bank, and OECD 2021.
16 The initial list of international partners supporting this target includes UNESCO, UNICEF, UK FCDO, USAID, and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.