Education International
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Guiding principles on the COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to grow at an alarming rate, resulting in numerous infections and fatalities across the globe. The impact on education has been devastating, with UNESCO reporting that over 1.5 billion students had been affected due to school closures in 165 countries as of 25 March 2020; this is more than 87 percent of all registered students. Over 63 million teachers and large numbers of education support personnel have also been affected by the pandemic.

Given these unprecedented developments, the COVID-19 crisis has become an education crisis. Governments around the world need to develop swift, coherent and proportionate responses to the pandemic to bring it under control and minimise its impact on the health and livelihood of societies, as well as on children, young people and adults' right to quality education. An appropriate response to COVID -19 in the education sector should take into account the rights and best interests of students, teachers and education support personnel and involve education unions in developing the containment and recovery measures.

The following principles and recommendations should guide the responses of education unions, governments and partners to COVID-19.

Basic principles and recommendations

1. Safeguarding the health, safety and well-being of students, teachers and education support personnel must be the number one priority. Specific measures should be introduced to protect all educators who continue to teach and take care of the children of health and other workers in essential services. Such measures should include the provision of water and sanitation, safe and healthy teaching and learning environments and personal protective equipment such as face masks.

2. A whole school/community/government approach is the most effective in limiting the spread of the virus and keeping the public informed. The school/education community must be provided with accurate education, information and guidance on preventive measures. Education unions also play an important role in informing and supporting their membership, who should be updated regularly.

3. Lengthy school closures cause major disruptions to the education of millions of students. Effective measures need to be put into place to minimise the impact of closures on the provision of education. Such measures may include distance education programmes, virtual/online learning, TV, radio and other similar initiatives.

4. Governments should work with educators and their unions to find ways in which the education process can continue during the temporary school closures. Such measures can only be designed with the expertise and experiences of educators. Teachers should also be consulted on the selection of pedagogies, digital tools and platforms used during the school closures.

5. While ICTs and digital technologies can provide a temporary solution to the current crisis, they are not without risks. Many home computers may not have adequate levels of protection. Governments should take all necessary measures to protect students and educators' personal information and data and to prevent or minimise the risks associated with technology, including cyberbullying.

6. Technology can be an important tool to facilitate distance learning in the short term, however, it is essential to understand that it is a temporary solution that can never replace classroom teaching and learning and the invaluable face-to-face interaction between the teacher and student and among students.

7. The most vulnerable students are disproportionally affected by school closures. Many rely on the meals provided at school and may not have access to computers, the Internet and other online tools that would allow them to access distance learning. Many parents may also not be able – for a range of reasons – to facilitate their children's learning in the home environment. School closures put increasing pressure on already struggling families, some of whom may be facing job or income loss as a result of the pandemic and its impact on the economy. Governments must ensure that concrete response and recovery measures are implemented in a rapid manner to ensure that the most vulnerable students are not left behind.

8. Governments should ensure provision of professional development, learning, and support to all teachers without the skills to provide distance education and/or to use virtual, mass media and other digital tools to support their students' learning during school closures. Particular attention should be given to teachers in rural, remote and other marginalised areas. In line with EI's Protocol on ICTs, the professional views of teachers on the use of digital platforms and programmes must be at the forefront of approaches to distance learning.

9. The salaries, terms and conditions of teachers and education support personnel at all levels, including those of educators on fixed or short-term contracts, should be protected at all times, during and after the COVID-19 crisis. Educators must be remunerated as usual during closure periods. Education authorities should also ensure regular and timely information and updates to all employees in the sector, aiming to minimise uncertainty and related stress and anxiety.

10. In countries where private education providers operate alongside public schools, measures must be taken so that the response is comprehensive and unified across the entire education system. Appropriate safeguards must be put into place to protect education systems from privatisation and commercialisation.

11. Extended school closures often lead to an increase in the drop-out rate, as some students do not return to class once education institutions reopen. Governments must develop strategies to address this and other possible consequences of the widespread closures, in close collaboration with education unions. Governments must also develop strategies to address the consequences of closing teacher training and other higher education institutions, bearing in mind the already existing high teacher shortages. No student should be prejudiced as a result of not having taken the necessary examinations due to closures.

12. The trauma associated with COVID-19 can be devastating to students and educators, some of whom might have lost a loved one or colleague. Governments should, therefore, ensure the provision of psycho-social support, including counselling services to all affected students, teachers and education support personnel in order to ensure their well-being, including mental health.