

Educational conditions for a successful exit strategy from school closures

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Introduction

Many countries are now designing exit strategies from the confinement caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, including reopening schools after a period of closures. Gradually reopening schools is an essential component of an effective exit strategy.

- For economic reasons: allowing the economy to recover and employment to restore
- For social equity reasons: mitigating the risk of further intensifying inequality in educational opportunities
- For educational reasons: providing learning opportunities, restoring learning trajectories and trying to compensate for the educational damage already done.

However, strategies to reopen schools have to be designed carefully. It's easier to close schools than to create the conditions for a successful exit strategy, with due respect to safety for teachers and students.

Some countries are now taking important decisions, from which other countries can learn:

- Denmark is gradually reopening primary schools from 13 April onwards and is maintaining social distancing by splitting classes.
- Norway is set to reopen child care centres from 20 April onwards and will then proceed to gradually reopen schools from 27 April.
- Germany will start to reopen schools from 4 May onwards, and will give priority to those classes which lead to important transitions (end of *Grundschule* for example).
- France will gradually reopen schools from 11 May onwards.

Health and epidemiological aspects

Some of the modalities will depend on the epidemiological modelling. The impact of schools reopening on contagion and spread of the virus will have to be carefully monitored and evaluated. There are several alternatives:

- Starting with primary school (6-12) first, evaluating the impact and then reopening secondary schools – epidemiological risks are considered to be low
- Opening primary and secondary schools (6-18y) – epidemiological risk are medium to high
- Opening higher education institutions – epidemiological risk are considered to be high
- Pre-primary schools is a special case because of the difficulty to ensure social distancing among very young children and between children and staff.

Obviously, schools need to take all necessary measures to ensure personal hygiene and social distancing between kids. Schools should appoint a health and sanitary manager. Cleaning and disinfecting infrastructure, furniture, equipment, etc. after each lesson or activity will be mandatory. Special attention should be given to airing classrooms. Schools can consider to organise classes outside in the open air. Social distancing between students and between students and teachers has to be respected by all means.

Ideally, teachers should be tested before the school reopens. Each day, the health and sanitary manager should take the temperature of teachers when they enter the premises. Wearing face masks by teachers should be encouraged, but not made mandatory.

When students enter the premises, their temperature should be taken and infected students should be isolated immediately and taken care of by specialised medical staff.

School autonomy

In many countries, schools enjoy a lot of autonomy. Schools also differ very much in their student population, the community they are serving, the educational programmes they offer, etc. So, it makes a lot of sense to leave a lot of decision-making power to individual schools. Schools need to prepare themselves, have to positively engage teachers and have to build trust in the community that they are handling the situation well. Thus, schools should only reopen when the necessary conditions are in place and school teams feel to be sufficiently empowered to cope with the situation.

This implies that not all schools will reopen at the same time. Respect for the autonomy of schools in these circumstances is extremely important. Failing to do so – for example because governments, ministers, ministries cannot resist the temptation to prescribing everything in detail in a uniform manner – will lead to confusion, feelings of being disrespected, disempowerment and loss of trust.

Decision-making power has to be granted to schools with regard to the exact modalities of organising classes and lessons, but some different models could be presented to schools with an analysis of their advantages and disadvantages, such as:

- Splitting classes in order to reduce the number of students for each class
- Giving priority to struggling students with lack of supportive infrastructure at home to come to school, while other students can continue to learn through e-learning and home-schooling.
- Giving priority to students in critically important stages of their schooling trajectory
- Giving priority to classes with a lot of practical training
- Etc.

Flexible approaches

Students should not be legally obliged to attend school full-time. Ideally, for each student the school should develop the most appropriate and beneficial teaching and learning environment. The legal enforcement of compulsory education should be temporarily suspended, but each student should be tracked and monitored. The specific arrangement between schools, students and families should be formalized in a 'learning contract'. But students/families who wish to attend schools full-time, should always be in the possibility to do so, even when not all of the time can be devoted to lessons.

For struggling students or all students who want to take benefit, compensatory lessons should be organised. These lessons can be organised on days that schools are normally closed, even in the evenings or the weekends. These lessons could also take the form of summer classes, combined with sports and recreational activities. An extension of the school year into the Summer could also be considered, or the start of the school year can be advanced with one or two weeks.

Governments should take the pressure off the curriculum and should allow schools to adapt the curriculum to the needs of students by prioritising the truly important subject matter.

Mixed-mode teaching and learning modes

When lessons have been suspended, many schools did a wonderful job in ensuring the continuity of the learning process by switching to various combinations of e-learning, home schooling and online tutoring. The lessons learnt from this real-life experience should not be forgotten, but should be systematically collected and evaluated. Schools should not automatically switch back again to the 'old normal' of face-to-face teaching, but should investigate ways through which innovative teaching and learning environments can be integrated in schooling in a smart way. Personalised approaches should be developed, in order to serve individual students in the best possible way.

Formative and summative assessment

Schools and teachers need to take stock of the learning progression of each individual student. They need to assess what students have learned during the time schools were closed, purely as a formative assessment. For each individual student, a recovery learning trajectory needs to be defined to catch up with the time lost.

End-of-year examinations should be limited to the really important subjects and to those components of the curriculum that need to be assessed in order to make meaningful decisions on the student's progress in the educational trajectory. The traditional three or four weeks of examinations/deliberations in June need to be condensed into maximum two weeks.

Schools and teachers should be empowered to assess the individual student's learning progression and to take the necessary decisions to reduce harm to their schooling trajectory.

Training and professional development of teachers

Teachers will need short, intensive training and professional development to cope with the virus, to identify risks and to implement the appropriate measures. This training could be provided in the form of e-learning modules which teachers can process individually.

Relations with parents and families

Schools and teachers will need to intensify their relationships with parents and families. Many parents have suffered in keeping up the learning of their children, and are in need of support and guidance. Parents have to approve the individual 'learning contract' designed for their child.

Preparing the next school year

For the school year 2020-21, a contingency plan should be developed both at the level of the Government and the level of the individual school, aimed at ensuring optimal learning opportunities for all students, in case school closures or disruptions in the school year would take place. Temporary school closures seem to be very likely in the 2020-21 school year. Schools need to be better prepared for similar circumstances in the future.