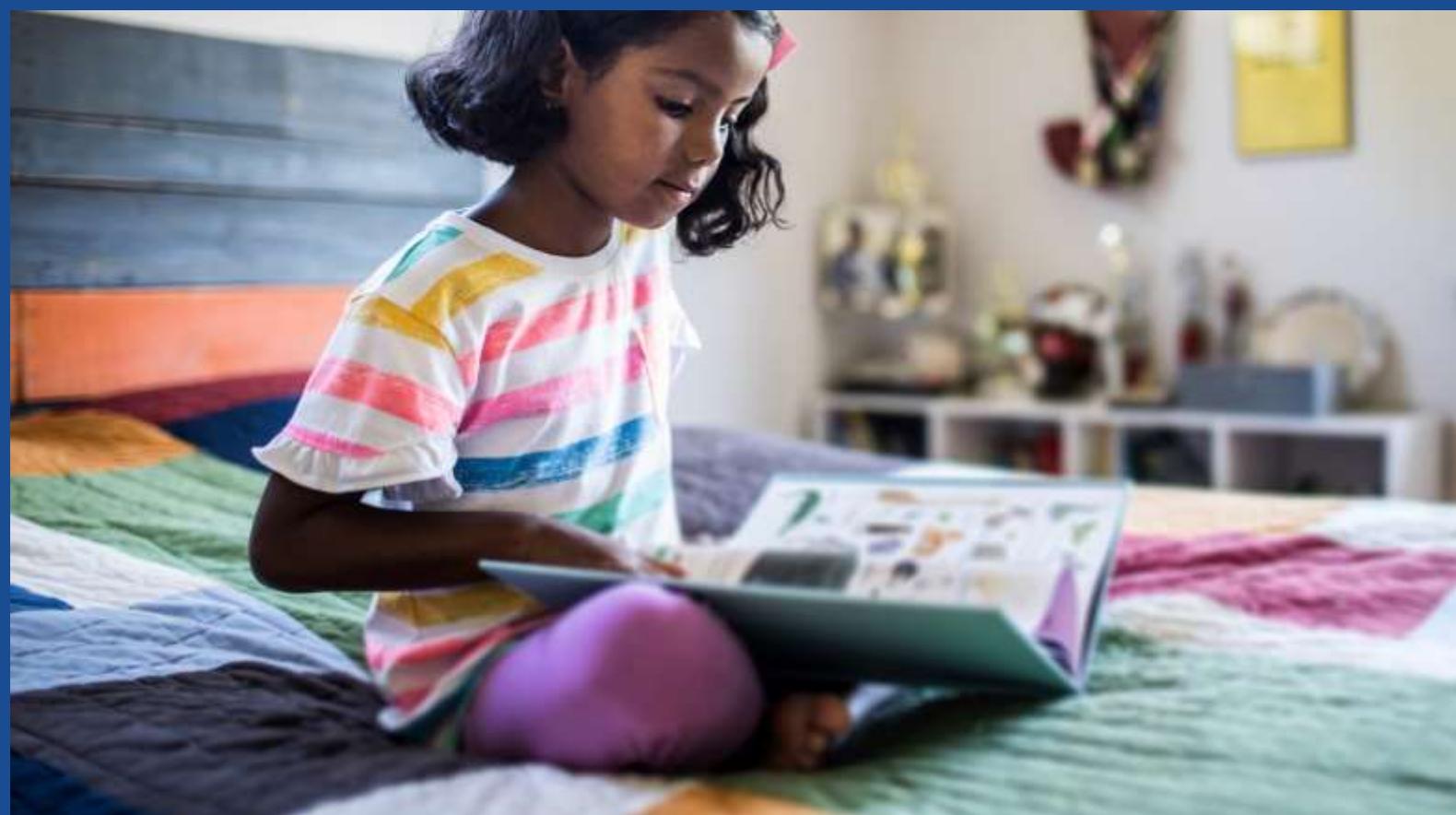


COVID-19 and Schools: What We Can Learn from Six Months of Closures and Reopening



October 1, 2020



KEY FINDINGS

This summary offers a pragmatic glance at the emerging results of an ongoing investigation to highlight the factors that guide decisions to reopen schools, and to keep them open.

Data from 191 countries was collected over a seven-month period from February 10th to September 29th to analyse and compare decision-influencing features for primary and secondary education leaders at national and local levels.

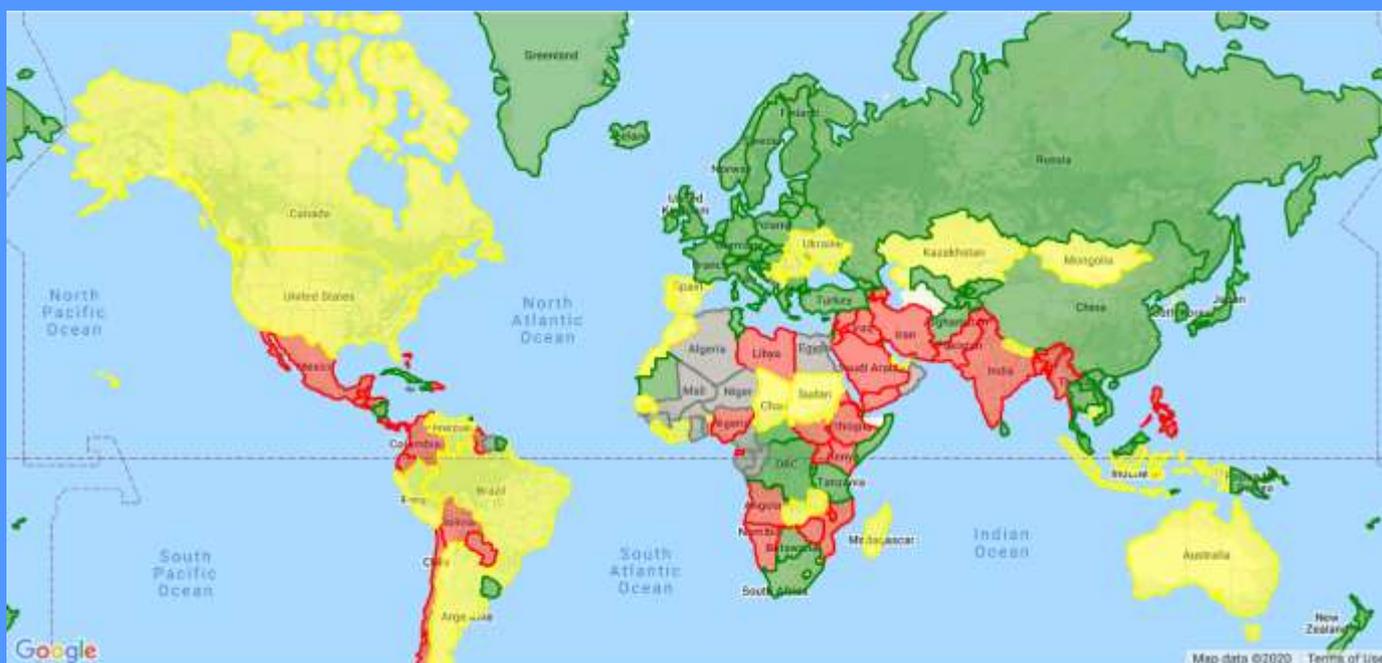
Main points include:

- No consistent pattern emerges between school status and COVID-19 infection rates.
- Most countries in a second COVID-19 wave have opened schools again.
- How to stay open is now the priority for many countries, with new approaches implemented to deal with COVID-19 in the classroom.
- Nearly all countries keeping doors closed to students are still in their first wave of the pandemic and tend to be lower-income countries.

Significant differences in policy responses are observed based on where countries are in the COVID-19 infection cycle. Countries in a second or third wave of infection appear to act differently compared to those still in a first wave.

These findings have been uncovered using Insights for Education's COVID-19 [Back to School Tracker](#), developed to support leaders across governments and society. All resources and sources for this work can be accessed on [education.org](https://www.insightsforeducation.org).

School Status across the World



Schools Fully Open
 Schools Partially Open
 Schools Closed
 Vacation

Credits: Google Maps / Source: UNESCO per school status

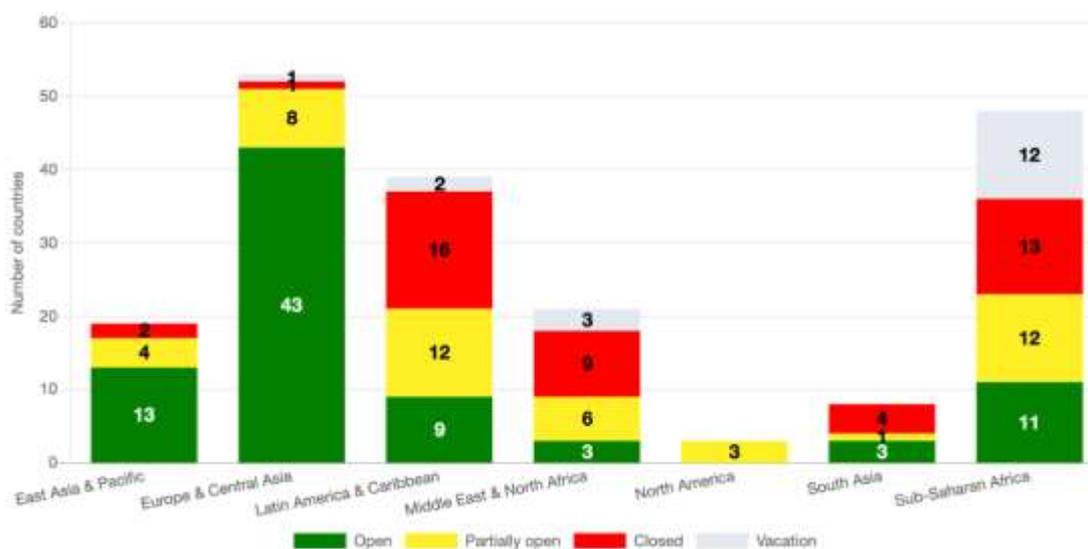
PURPOSE: LEARNING FROM THE GLOBAL TEST OF HEADING BACK TO SCHOOL WITH COVID-19 AFTER ACADEMIC BREAKS

The WHO announced COVID-19 outbreak as a pandemic on 11 March 2020. By 31st March, 96% of the 191 countries for which data was available had closed their school systems, fully or partially. Six months later, 125 countries have reopened their school systems, at least partially, many with higher case levels than when they initially closed. Meanwhile, [news headlines](#) accompanied by images of appropriately-distanced classrooms create an impression that school reopening is a challenge being gradually and steadily conquered. However, the significant numbers of learners who have not yet returned to school – and who are unlikely to do so before the end of this year – are the focus of less attention. According to Insights for Education’s [estimates](#), **nearly half of the world’s 1.6 billion primary and secondary students (711 million) will not return to school in 2020**. The vast majority (84%) of children who will not return to school this year come from lower-income countries, resulting in a projected total of 300 billion disrupted school days this year. Finally, countries entering further COVID-19 waves may consider closing schools down again, putting many more learners at risk for additional disrupted learning.

Countries’ experiences of reopening schools in second waves of the pandemic holds valuable lessons across the globe

Countries face starkly different realities when it comes to COVID-19 cases and confront varying feasibilities of reopening schools safely. Studying countries’ experiences can help get children back to school more quickly and safely, increase the likelihood of staying in school, and better support distance learning where schools are not yet opened. Analysing the data in a consistent manner, over a sufficient timeframe and with a non-partisan lens is critical to deter and correct false assumptions which can lead, even unintentionally, to skewed decision-making.

School Status By Region



This latest synthesis is targeted especially towards COVID-19 response and reopening task force members across governments and civil society. These findings can be of use globally for those still in a first wave who have not yet opened, or those who will face questions about what to do with schools in midst of subsequent waves. Specific examples are provided to help policy makers compare strategies and indicate differing prioritisation of approaches.

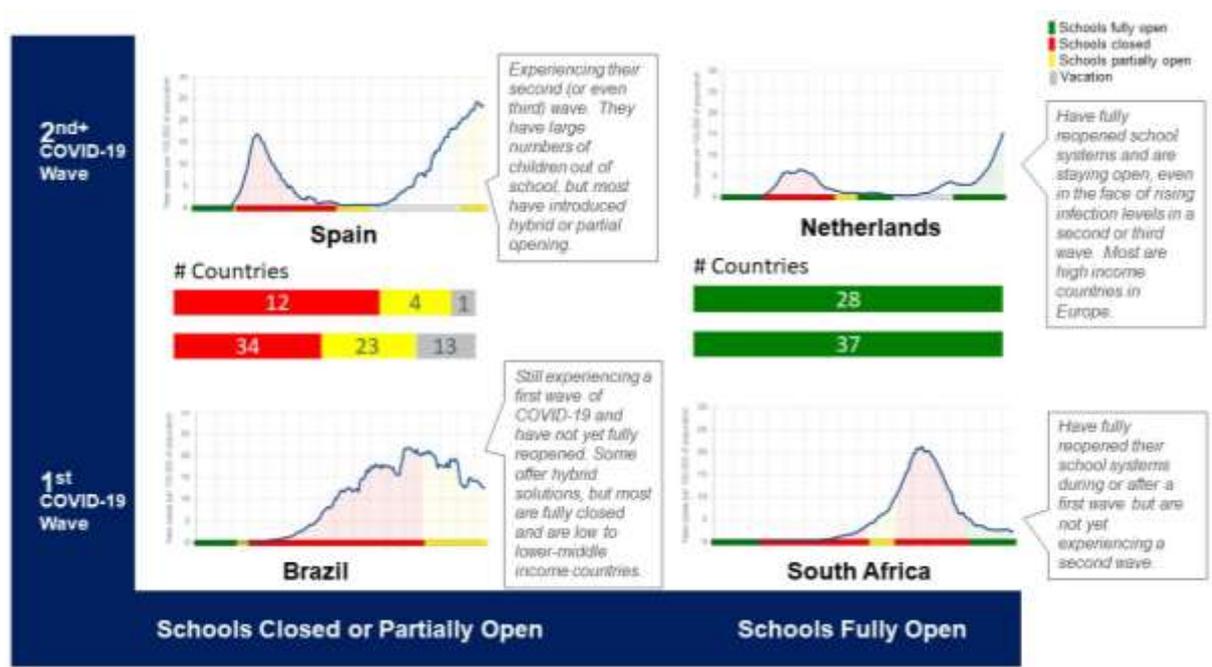
METHODS

Insights for Education has been [tracking](#) the experiences of 191 countries, looking at school reopening patterns and characteristics (such as distancing, hygiene, safety measures, pedagogical and policy responses), and seven-day moving average of COVID-19 new daily cases, since February 10th 2020. Tracking has been based on a combination of quantitative data (UNESCO, Our World in Data, World Bank), and rigorous daily review of ministry reports, country response plans and policies, press and social media.

While most of the world's 191 countries closed schools quickly in March as the gravity of the pandemic took hold, trends and behaviours in school reopening widely varied. One pattern has been full reopening of all levels and full classes, full time. [UNESCO](#) categorises these school systems as '**open**'. An alternative approach has been to rotate students, between in-person schooling for part of the week and remote instruction in other days. This is known as a hybrid system and UNESCO categorises these school systems as '**partially open**'. In some countries and regions, remote learning has entirely replaced the classroom or students are simply out of school. In this case, UNESCO classifies these school systems as '**closed**'.

Insights for Education's analysis yielded a 2 x 2 grid¹, combining the UNESCO definition of school status with observations about the significance of infection waves². Within this matrix, 152 countries (those in the original dataset of 191 countries with a population greater than 1 million) are categorised into four groups to develop a deeper understanding of patterns in policy responses and consequences.

COVID-19 Waves and School Status



¹ Sources: School status per UNESCO definition, COVID-19 Cases (per 100,00 population, 7-day rolling average) per Our World in Data, Country data per World Bank.

² Infection wave patterns are calculated by comparing the 28-day and 7-day averages for daily new COVID-19 cases to determine where they align for a minimum period of 14 days. This typically points to a sustained change in the wave pattern and helps to eliminate shorter-term 'blips' which are much more common but less important in the analysis.

FACT CHECK #1

Myth: School closures lower infections, and openings lead to rising cases.

Finding: There is no consistent pattern between school status and infection levels. The reality is much more complex.

No consistency can be observed between school status and infection levels, and multiple coinciding factors should be considered, e.g., state of economic openness, testing, tracing, and health system capacity.

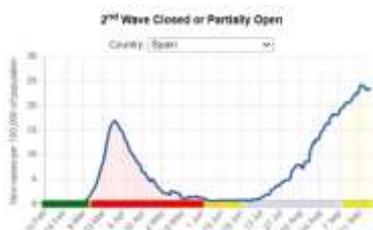
While no causal relationship should be inferred globally in any case, there has not been any consistent relationship between school closure dates and the reported cases of infection in the population. Since closure, some countries saw infection levels drop, in many others they have risen – patterns that are likely due to multiple factors, and no connections with school status can be clearly drawn.

In 52 countries, cases have increased during academic breaks. Six countries (Spain, Israel, Bahrain, France, Trinidad and Tobago, Bosnia and Herzegovina) showed significant caseload increases, with 15 others showing modest increases, and 31, a small rise. In others, infection rates were generally stable (e.g. UK). Infection patterns were monitored for those countries having academic breaks concluding by September 15th 2020, in order to allow for a minimum of ten days' of monitoring after return to school.

Varying Patterns of Cases Trends Over Academic Break and Subsequent Reopening

SPAIN

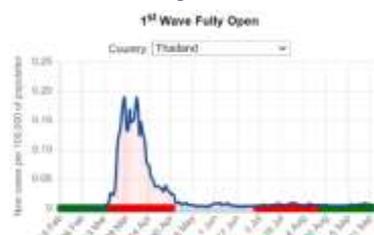
Cases rise during break and continue rising



An example of a steady lowering of infection rates during full, then partial school closure. Rates rose during vacation and continued to rise when schools opened after break.

THAILAND

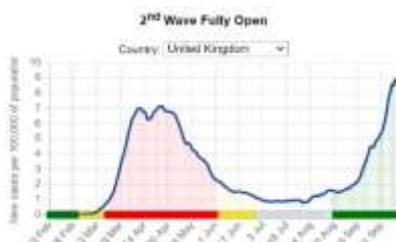
Cases stable through break and reopening



A stable rate of infection through vacation and post vacation school reopening, with relatively low cases in comparison to other countries.

UNITED KINGDOM

Cases low during break, but rise after reopening



The UK shows a relatively stable caseload over the academic break with the beginning of a rising trend in cases starting before the return of school.

CROATIA

Cases rise during break, then drop after reopening



A flattening of infection on school reopening after the first infection wave, followed by a significant rise in case levels within the vacation period. After school reopening, infection levels have fallen.

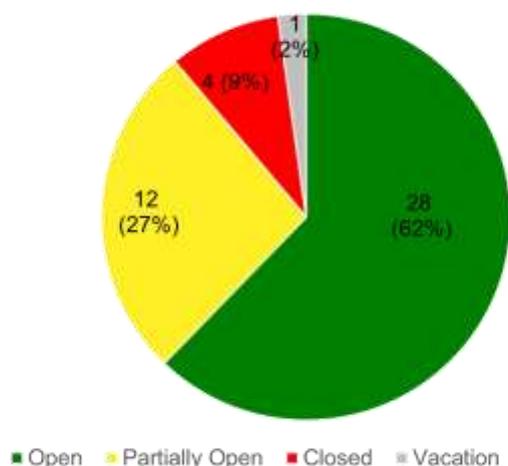
FACT CHECK #2

Myth: Countries experiencing second waves of infection have kept schools closed.

Finding: Nearly all countries (89%) in a second COVID-19 wave are opened to students.

Only 9% of countries in second COVID-19 waves (4 of 45) are keeping schools closed; 89% of countries (40 of 45) have reopened their school systems; 2% are on vacation.

School Status for Countries in 2nd+ Wave (n=45)



Those with school doors open again can be broadly divided into those countries that have fully opened (28) and those who have partially opened (12). Only four countries remain fully closed: Costa Rica, Iran, Jordan and Lebanon. Algeria, will return to schools in October following a planned break.

Notably, Jordan recently closed schools for a two-week period due to a nationwide lockdown amidst rising infection rates. Lebanon is currently planning on resuming in-person teaching from mid-October. Most schools in Israel also closed again in mid-September for three weeks due to rising rates.

Low and lower middle-income countries account for only 11% (5 of 45) of countries with open and partially open schools in a second wave. Countries in the high and upper-middle income brackets account for 89% of fully and partially open schools.

JAPAN – Keeping schools open throughout two waves



Japan has passed through two COVID-19 infection waves with the second wave peak being notably higher than the first. Clear policies and procedures were developed regarding school closure and reopening. During the first infection peak, a hybrid education model integrating distance learning was adopted. As infection rates dropped, Japan moved to in-person learning. This initial reopening happened in stages, with primary and lower secondary students returning first, followed by all levels returning by the end of June. During this period, infection rates initially remained low, but rose significantly as the opening continued and through the first part of the school vacation. Localised closures and flexible responses were

observed.

Second school reopening occurred when infection rates were falling and took the form of person-to-person schooling. Japan has defined plans for distance learning if this approach is again required due to school closure. Future closures do have guidelines depending on thresholds but are now on a school-by-school basis rather than on a country level. A high level of stakeholder accountability and family involvement has been observed and credited for building trust between schools and communities. For example, school principals are guided to issue stay-at-home orders not only when students and teachers are symptomatic, but also if family members are suffering from a fever or symptoms and considering the regional infection rate and level of community transmission. Japan has committed additional resources to schools for PPE (\$130M), improvement of hygienic environment at schools (\$100M), hiring of new staff (\$8M), and massive investments in IT equipment and capacity relating to distance learning and teacher training (\$2.2bn).

PORTUGAL – Limiting opening through two waves



Portugal is in the middle of its second wave and is an example of a country adopting a hybrid modality of in-person and remote learning, with schools remaining only partially open following the first infection wave, and continuing hybrid learning well after the academic break. For example, 11th and 12th grade students will have face-to-face classes only for the subjects for which they intend to take exams to access higher education, while the rest will remain taught through distance learning.

Security protocols require all pre-primary workers have screening tests, though this does not appear to be the case for primary and secondary teachers. Masks are

required for teacher and older students. School closure protocols appear to be on a case-by-case basis and are the responsibility of the local health authority. After epidemiological investigation, the local health authority will decide, according to a risk assessment, which control measures should be implemented. Closure of the entire school occurs only in situations of high infection risk at the school site or within the local community. Portugal, like other high-income countries, is adopting academic support programs, teacher professional development and socio-emotional supporting policies to mitigate the negative impacts on student learning arising from COVID-19.

FACT CHECK #3

Myth: Countries where cases rise above first-wave levels are at risk of closing again.

Finding: Despite higher second-wave infection levels, countries seem determined to keep schools open.

Overwhelmingly, countries that have fully opened schools are much more likely to stay open. This is despite having higher infection levels in second waves than when they first closed schools during the initial wave of the pandemic. Careful observation reveals emerging trends around the measures that countries are taking to remain open:

Evolving nuanced closure policies, rather than blanket emergency responses

- Initial infections before summer breaks saw extensive country-wide school closures mandated by governments, but as schools have reopened in recent weeks, different protocols have been observed across countries of multiple income levels and regions. If children and staff are found to be infected, closure policies tend to vary in severity and scope, ranging from a case by case basis (Italy), to defined thresholds (France). In terms of limiting the disruption of school infection cases, within some well-resourced countries, the trend is to close, rapidly test all of those with direct contacts – and allow for the school to reopen in 1-3 days.

Adapting health and safety guidelines to infection levels and to community awareness

- **Testing:** While currently the prioritisation of testing for teachers and students is not common across systems, there are strong signs that countries are increasingly seeing an opportunity in fast tracking or rapidly mobilising testing for schools with positive cases, in order to reduce the number of days schools are closed (e.g. Japan, Germany, Luxembourg, some US school districts, Sierra Leone for exam students, Liberia, Lithuania). One exceptional example can be seen at a high school in Germany, where all students are tested in school twice a week. Results are received the next day by email.
- **PPE and Distancing:** The stipulations around masks has also become stronger – with most countries returning to school and staying open requiring teachers to wear masks (estimated at upwards of 60%). In most cases, students in upper primary and secondary are also required to wear masks. Variation is noted – with some countries only requiring them in corridors or high transit areas, and others requiring them in the classroom. In most countries with open schools, rigorous and transparent procedures have been established for when students or staff become unwell during the school day, with isolation rooms established on-site and immediate consultation with health authorities. In parallel, as masks grow in use, classroom distancing and use of shifts and rotations decreases, particularly in Europe.
- **Transparency:** While not uniformly reported, establishing trust among the educator and learner/parent community and providing co-developed guidelines, particularly in the case of an increase in local cases, emerges as fundamental to the successful reopening of schools. Some countries have clear, concise closure and reopening policies when cases are detected in students or staff (Japan & Germany). Japan goes as far as publishing data on number of closure days per school. This level of transparency is reassuring to parents, teachers and students and could be a helpful model in terms of sharing such data as a mechanism for transparency and building confidence. In some countries, voiced concerns from the community (UK, South Africa) or relatively short reopening preparation time (Israel) have hindered effective reopening.

FRANCE – Continuing to open even as second wave rises higher than first



France has experienced two infection waves and two phases of reopening since the first cases of COVID-19 were detected. Schools were initially closed in Mid-March followed by a partial reopening Mid-May, and fully open in early June. The modality of the first reopening was a staged return, with socially vulnerable, pre-primary and primary students allowed back first, followed by secondary students in mid-June. Vacation was announced to commence on July 1st.

For two months from the first reopening until well into vacation time, new daily cases remained relatively low or stable at below 2/100,000. Since late July, a second peak began to form with new cases rapidly rising, to a present value of above 14/100,000, more than twice as much as the caseload at the initial March peak. Despite this rise being evident in August, a decision to reopen all schools in person was being implemented. Preventative measures, such as requiring all children over 11 to wear face masks, is mandatory and extra-curricular activities have been scaled back. The French government has defined several conditions in which teachers can decide to work remotely (including 65+ years, in third trimester of pregnancy).

Recently, a softening of health protocols has been enacted in pre-school and primary schools to limit school closures. It is no longer mandatory for parents to provide medical certificates for minor seasonal symptoms. A new threshold of three positive children within a same classroom has been established to define a risk of "contact case". It means that if a child is tested positive, its class can remain open as other children are no longer considered as "contact cases". The protocol for identifying contact cases, their possible isolation, the possible closure of classes, or even schools, will however be applied when there are at least three confirmed cases in the same class. Closure is the responsibility of the regional health agency, and school principal/management.

FACT CHECK #4

Myth: Schools in most countries are now open.

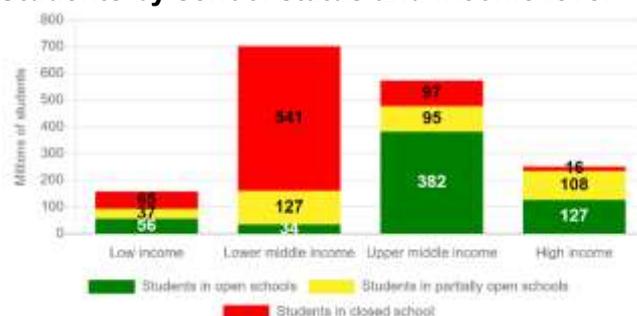
Finding: Many countries are still closed, or only partially open, most from lower income and still undergoing an extended first wave of infection.

Fifty-one countries have not yet opened doors to primary and secondary school students. Of these 51 countries with schools still closed or who will soon return from academic break to closed systems, 39 are in their first COVID-19 wave. Nine of 51 countries plan to reopen later this year. Eleven do not plan to reopen in 2020, including Kenya, where students will repeat the school year; and India, which has reopened with distance learning only as of September 21st. The remaining 33 have not committed publicly to resuming in-person classes.

Most students remaining out of school are from lower-income countries

Nearly half the world's 1.6 billion primary and secondary students will not return to school in 2020, according to latest ministry and press reports. These 711 million learners will propel the total number of days spent out of school in 2020 to a projected 300 billion by the end of the year. The vast majority (84%) of children who will not return to school this year come from lower-middle and low income countries, where distance learning technologies are not reaching all children, sharply reinforcing and accelerating inequality.

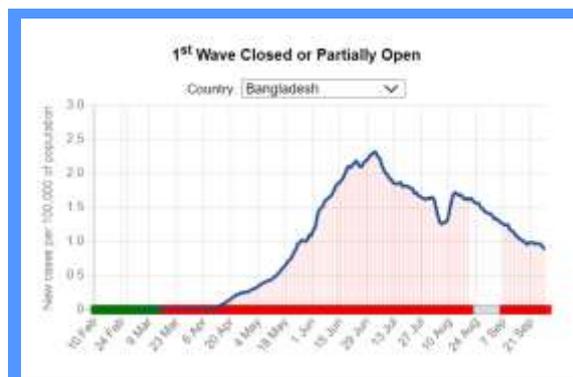
Students by school status and income level



Schools from countries still experiencing a first wave have been closed for an average of 128 days (and rising because many are still closed). The majority of these countries schools lack basic water facilities and have high student/teacher ratios (29/1). Consequently, this group is likely to face greater challenges to make adequate arrangements for safe school reopening.

Despite many countries not yet having reopened schools, policies and procedures are still being actively crafted to stem the loss of learning from the impact of COVID-19. Remedial and academic support programs are the most highly prioritised by countries in advance of reopening. This is closely followed by policies to support the physical, social, emotional and mental health of students as well as teacher professional development, which is closely connected with distance learning support. This will be important for countries who choose to remain closed to consider in advance of full reopening.

BANGLADESH – Schools still closed despite low and dropping infection rates



Bangladesh has developed and adopted policies to address equity issues and highlighted the need for investment in academic support.

The government ordered local education authorities to admit to primary schools' students from kindergartens that may be forced to shut down due to financial troubles amid the ongoing pandemic. In a bid to prevent student dropouts, the Ministry of Primary and Mass Education altered policy to admit students to government primary schools at any point throughout the year without a previously required transfer certificate. Education boards were asked to promote students to the 9th grade by using alternative evaluation methods at their respective schools.

CONCLUSIONS AND LOOKING AHEAD

Implicit and explicit assumptions about the links between COVID-19 cases and school opening or closure abound, and yet, in the absence of concrete and cumulative information, it's hard to challenge such assumptions. Rigorous, careful monitoring of experiences from all countries – those who have opened once or even twice, and those that remain closed – offer a deeply valuable and growing fact base in which to anchor future decisions as the world's schools learn to live alongside COVID-19 and possibly future pandemics, too.

Learners from high- and upper middle-income countries account for nearly half of all enrolments globally, yet will account for only 16 per cent of lost school days. In sharp contrast, the other half of global learners, from lower-income countries, will have accrued a 'learning deficit' of 84 per cent of the **300 billion projected days of in-person learning lost** due to COVID-19 in 2020. While this synthesis provides a deep look after the first six months of school closures and subsequent reopening, more time and more work are needed to fully provide comprehensive analyses of country choices and consequences. In the meantime, the most critical lesson emerging from this review is to invest in learning how to continue learning alongside COVID-19. This means revisiting response plans, shifting from emergency measures to chronic vigilance, adapting flexibility for hybrid learning – especially in the poorest of communities – and continually upgrading our collective knowledge based on global experiences.

Areas critical for future exploration include provisions and protections for ensuring the most marginalised return to and stay in school or benefit from distance learning, accelerated and catch-up learning, teacher and student absentee rates, strengthening of resilience and preparedness for potential future closures, evolution of testing and student promotion policies. Deeper analyses of the approaches and variations are forthcoming.

Photo Credit: MoMo Productions/Getty Images

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About Insights for Education

Insights for Education is a non-profit, independent foundation established in 2019 to help global and national education decision makers solve their toughest challenges in strengthening educational equity and learning outcomes for the world's most marginalised learners. It does this by synthesising and translating relevant evidence and experiences, making relevant knowledge and evidence transparent, accessible and decision-ready for education leaders everywhere. The foundation is registered in Switzerland and establishing a presence through partners in Africa, the Middle East, Asia, the USA, Australia and Europe.

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