Reopening Schools: Facts & insights from country experiences

MAY 23, 2020
We investigated 161 country level school closures and 32 reopenings in order to compare and synthesise key decision-influencing features for system leaders at national and local levels, and to complement existing closure tracking and reopening frameworks.

This summary offers a pragmatic glance at the emerging results of an ongoing investigation that will illuminate the factors and influences that guide decisions. This is targeted especially towards COVID-19 response and reopening task forces, and will be updated regularly. At least three sources were reviewed for each reopened country, and include official databases, ministry websites, country response plans and policies, press reports, and social media announcements.

1. WHEN?
   + What is the relationship between infection rates and school closure?
   + What is the relationship between infection rates and decisions to reopen schools?
   + What changes in infection rates are observed after reopening?

2. PRECONDITIONS?
   + What are the observed must-haves to put in place before reopening?
   + What are the enablers?
   + What are innovations and creative ideas from countries that have already reopened?

3. HOW?
   + What groups are being prioritised for first stages of reopening?
   + How are prioritisation decisions being made?
   + What can we learn from country strategies where schools have been reopened?
GLOBALLY, CLOSURE AND REOPENING ARE NOT FOLLOWING PREDICTABLE PATTERNS

WE COMBINED VIRUS PROGRESSION & SCHOOL CLOSURE DATA FROM 161 COUNTRIES FOR THIS ANALYSIS

FOR ALL COUNTRIES:

+ 73% of countries closed in the same ten-day period from 11th March.
+ Globally, there is no consistent relationship between school closure dates and the reported cases of infection in the population.
+ Since closure, some countries have seen infection levels drop, in many others they have risen.
+ 25 of the 32 countries that have reopened are high income countries; on average 31 days after the peak in infection levels.

What happens after reopening?
Too early to tell...

Note: Excludes countries not issuing national school closure order. Closure period does not consider school holidays.

HALF OF THE WORLD IS PROJECTED TO BE OUT OF SCHOOL MUCH LONGER

WE ANALYSED THE DATA AND FOUND FOUR GROUPINGS THAT HELP TO EXPLAIN THE DIFFERENT NATIONAL STRATEGIES ADOPTED

84 COUNTRIES 4 REOPENED
Lower cases on closure
Trend upwards/level
Largest group of mainly low or lower-middle income countries, least likely to meet requirements to open soon.

28 COUNTRIES 5 REOPENED
Lower cases on closure
Trend downwards
Mixture of income levels, but with low current infection levels. Increasing potential to return to school.

20 COUNTRIES 3 REOPENED
Higher cases on closure
Trend upwards/level
Mainly high income and middle upper income countries. Stuck out of school with stubbornly high infection rates.

30 COUNTRIES 19 REOPENED
Higher cases on closure
Trend downwards
Mainly high-income countries, most likely to be heading back to school already.

Country examples:
- India
- Kenya
- UK
- Singapore
- Thailand
- Niger
- Israel
- Switzerland

Out of School

- 66 days
- 65 days
- 63 days
- 57 days

Infection rate trend after closure?

Virus up or level

Virus down

When did schools close?
THREE “MUST-HAVES” ARE PRECONDITIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL REOPENING

1. COMMUNITY SUPPORT
In partnership with health ministry, communication and collaborative planning with parents, teachers, business, and other civil society actors

+ Usually occurring through multi-stakeholder reopening task forces or extended committees, and supported by media and in some cases broad SMS messaging
+ Majority of countries reported significant objections to reopening from parents or teachers due to safety concerns; in two cases concerns caused postponement
+ Countries that reported least tension with stakeholders tended to have early and deep community engagement, and supported effective and broad communication strategies along the way

2. STAFF AVAILABILITY
Availability of educators and staff for teacher support, transport, cleaning, and administration of safety protocols

+ Large at-risk teacher populations, or insufficient transport to bring teachers and other staff to school were described as reasons for keeping schools closed in four countries even if reopening had been advised at national level
+ Attempts to recruit sufficient temporary staff to meet demands of halved classes and distancing protocols have been met with concern by teacher organizations

3. SAFETY
For staff & learners: distancing, sanitation, protective equipment, infection response

+ Distancing protocols range from 1m – 4m per student; 1.5m most common
+ Reorganizing school day to ensure safety (i.e., implementing half-day shifts to reduce number of people in school spaces)
+ Where running water is not sufficient, sanitiser is positioned at entrances or by large areas
+ Testing is offered by 2 countries for teachers and learners, 1 for teachers only, and 2 for any at-risk in the school community (can result in early jump in cases previously undetected)
+ Temperatures are recorded upon entry in 10% of countries
+ Use of masks and other protective equipment varies; only one-third require masks for teachers and students 12 years+. When required, masks are usually provided by school or subsidised

POLICIES
Policies required to enact new requirements, for example, ongoing distance learning, gender & whole-child responsive adjustments, admission requirements, national exam modifications

OPERATIONAL PLANS
Plans for administering new requirement around safety, school calendar and exam shifts, entrance & exit staging, resurgence response plans, distance learning, teaching, and assessment, and strengthening resilience for future challenges

BUDGET & RESOURCES
Financial and other resources required to enact and maintain reopening under new requirements, including monitoring and assessment of response
MEETING PRECONDITIONS REQUIRES PRIORITISATION

PRE-CONDITIONS MAKE IT VERY CHALLENGING TO REOPEN SCHOOLS AT ALL LEVELS NATIONWIDE, SO COUNTRIES ARE PRIORITISING.

Of the 32 countries assessed, only two lower income countries have opened all school levels simultaneously, they are isolated island states with low and declining infection rates.

Day care and preschools are not uniformly captured as they are often provided privately or not included in basic education plans, likely leaving many young children without strong early learning.

One country prioritised the last pre-primary year to return first, citing the criticality of solid preparation for transitioning to primary successfully.

WHICH CHILDREN ARE PRIORITISED TO RETURN FIRST?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>In countries that mention public health concerns</th>
<th>In countries that mention economic concerns (while still following WHO guidelines)</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>Exam years</td>
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<tr>
<td>Transition years</td>
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<tr>
<td>All secondary</td>
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<tr>
<td>All primary</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pre-primary and primary</td>
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<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>All vulnerable learners</td>
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<td>0</td>
</tr>
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</table>
THERE IS GREAT VALUE IN UNDERSTANDING & SHARING COUNTRY EXPERIENCES

LOWER INCOME COUNTRIES WILL LIKELY FIND IT EVEN HARDER THAN OTHERS TO MEET PRE-CONDITIONS, THEREBY KEEPING MANY STUDENTS OUT OF SCHOOL FOR AN EXTENDED TIME.

What are examples and creative ideas that can help overcome these barriers?

- **Early promotion** of senior teacher trainees and other critical professions (USA) or deputising professionals for other required services (Ireland)
- Deploying at-risk teachers for continued distance learning within comprehensive reopening framework and planning
- Inclusive task forces (Denmark), and community reopening chaperones, building consensus and having shared ownership and accountability of reopening plans and broad communication
- Prioritise equity-advancing policies first - especially for most vulnerable (Greece, France, Sierra Leone), and learning from Education in Emergencies
- Using all available indoor and outdoor spaces to increase school capacity, including repurposing community spaces, stadiums, churches, etc (multiple)
- Support for virtual learner assessment & distance school leadership (Croatia), and planning for catch-up learning
- Longitudinal study of COVID-19 effect on student well-being and whole child approaches (Finland)
- Blended learning: Strengthening distance learning in parallel to preparing physical return of students (Greece, Egypt), and sharing how and not only what was done (Croatia)

**EXAMPLES; NOT EXHAUSTIVE**

Source: UNESCO

Open schools as of May 23, 2020

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WHAT’S NEXT?

This note describes the emerging results of an ongoing investigation that will illuminate the factors and influences that guide decisions. Questions for a next phase include:

• How can country experiences be harnessed to better support those who remain out of school?
• Given that a second (or more) waves are possible, how can systems, teachers and learners be better prepared for future closures?

We’d love to learn what would be helpful. Please contact us below to share your suggestions.

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THANK YOU