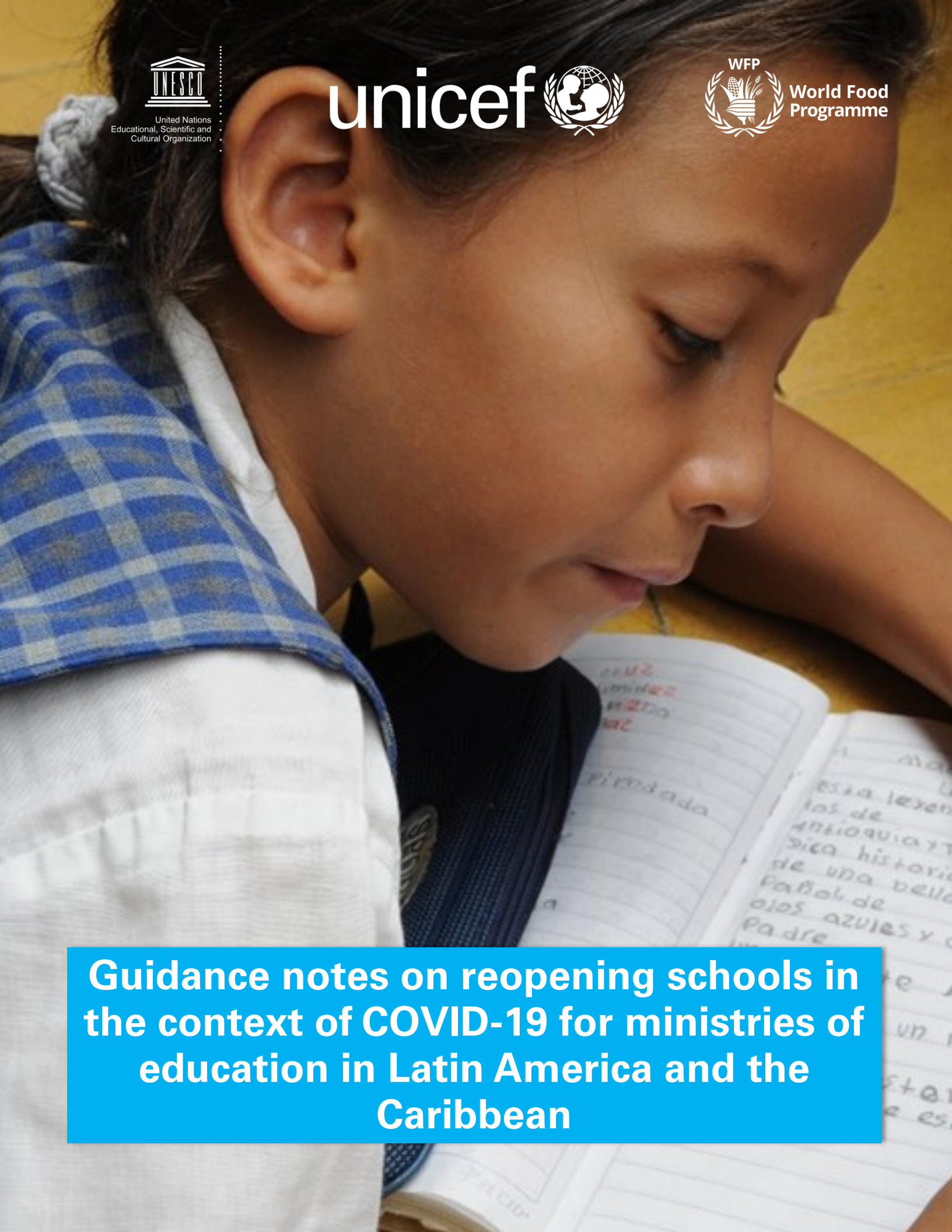

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Guidance notes on reopening schools in the context of COVID-19 for ministries of education in Latin America and the Caribbean

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Panama City, July 2020

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About these guidelines

The purpose of these guidance notes is to provide the authorities of ministries of education at the national and sub-national levels with technical recommendations and inputs for planning, preparing and implementing a safe school reopening. Based on the Framework for Reopening Schools developed by UNESCO, UNICEF, the World Bank, WFP and UNHCR; existing guidance related to the COVID-19 pandemic and lessons learned from past and current crises, as well as positions of the international education community. They provide a regional framework and offer practical courses of action that must be contextualized and adapted to respond to local conditions and meet the learning, health, nutrition and safety needs of children and adolescents. These notes are a living document that will be updated with new information based on experiences and lessons learned in the future.

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INTRODUCTION

In response to COVID-19 in the region, ministries of education in 23 countries and 12 independent states in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) have progressively closed schools at the preschool, primary and elementary levels since March 2020. As a result, an estimated 154 million children and adolescents have been affected in the region (including around 12 million children and adolescents who were out of school before the pandemic)[1].

While LAC governments have worked tirelessly to ensure continuity of learning through various flexible and distance modalities such as online platforms, radio, television, social networks, podcasts, etc. and the distribution of printed self-learning materials, not all children have been reached. Even for those who have, their involvement with different distance education modalities and their learning outcomes remain uncertain. The scope of services such as traditional school feeding have also been limited to respond to the needs of all children and adolescents.

While the duration of school closures is still uncertain, past experience (other epidemics, conflicts and natural disasters) shows that widespread and extended school closures represent a serious risk to the learning, protection and welfare of children and adolescents. This is because:

- The longer children and adolescents stay out of school, the greater the risk of falling behind in their learning, resulting in possible long-term negative impacts on educational performance, reduced schooling and cognitive skills throughout their lives.
- The most marginalized children and adolescents are the most affected; those who were already affected before the crisis; and the children of less educated parents are therefore the least likely to return to school.

Reopening schools is a government decision, which may be made on the basis of epidemiological evidence and analysis of benefits and risks in education, public health and socio-economic factors in the local context. This decision must be guided by the best interests of each child and adolescent.

While countries in the region are at different stages of evolution of the COVID-19 pandemic, facing a combination of common and unique challenges, each has begun to prepare and implement the safe reopening of schools. Consequently, a well-coordinated and articulated approach is essential to address the comprehensive needs of children and adolescents, which requires close collaboration among the education, health, water, sanitation and hygiene, nutrition, child protection and gender equality sectors, with emphasis on the most vulnerable children and adolescents.

In order to support governments in their decision-making and planning processes on when and how to reopen schools, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the World Bank, the World Food Program (WFP) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) have developed the Framework for Reopening Schools[2]. These guidance notes build on that document and provide a regional framework and practical recommendations to be contextualized and adapted at the country level.

Objectives of these guidance notes

These regional guidance notes aim to provide ministries of education and school management in LAC countries with recommendations and technical inputs for the planning, preparation and implementation of safe reopening of schools. They provide an integrated framework and suggest actions that ministries may consider for the development of interventions and action plans at the

[1] United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, Institute of Statistics, 'Welcome to UIS.Stat', <http://data.uis.unesco.org/#>, consulted on June 29, 2020.
[2] United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, et al., *Framework for Reopening Schools,* UNESCO, UNICEF, World Bank Group, WFP and UNHCR, June 2020.

country level and in specific contexts. The guidance suggested in these notes should be contextualized and adapted to respond to local conditions and meet the learning, health and nutrition needs, as well as the safety of each child and adolescent.

What do these guidance notes include?

The notes consider two phases I) before and during the reopening process and II) with schools reopened and cover the following dimensions, according to the Framework for Reopening Schools, 1) school safety operations; 2) learning; 3) welfare; 4) protection; as well as 5) measures to reach the most vulnerable. This is done through the cross-cutting areas of (a) policy, procedures and funding; and (b) planning, coordination, advocacy, communication and monitoring.

They provide practical guidance on:

- Overall planning for safe reopening of schools, including data collection, coordination between ministries and all key stakeholders, communication mechanisms, along with back-to-school campaigns, flexibility of the academic year, examinations and gradual reopening, among others.
- Policies, strategies and procedures supported by adequate funding to prepare and implement the safe reopening of schools and ensure the welfare and protection of children and adolescents, with emphasis on the most vulnerable.
- Strategies and procedures to ensure safe school operations, incorporating water, sanitation, hygiene, and physical distancing, among others.
- Strategies and measures to ensure that all children and adolescents return to school, by assessing their learning levels, educational needs and preparing and implementing corrective and recovery programs, teacher training and strengthening distance education.
- Strategies and measures to facilitate the return and retention of the most vulnerable, the removal of obstacles to access education, including financial barriers and admission policies.
- Strategies and measures for strengthening inclusive distance education and reinforcing education systems to be more resilient to future crises.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

The following guiding principles are recommended when preparing and implementing the safe reopening of schools[3].

The best interests of the child and adolescent. The decision and modalities for reopening schools should be guided by a balance between the risk of outbreaks and the spread of COVID-19 in children and adolescents, teachers and school staff, families and the community, in addition to the benefits on student welfare and learning.

An integrated approach. COVID-19 has a multiple impact on children's rights, influencing education, protection, mental health and psychosocial support, health, nutrition and much more. Therefore, a coordinated and integrated approach is critical[4].

Satisfy the right to education of all children and adolescents. Children and adolescents may face barriers or have different needs in returning to school because of their age, gender, disability, ethnicity, refugee/asylum-seeker status, socio-economic situation, or other factors. Accordingly, efforts made during the reopening of schools must be inclusive and accessible to all, as well as sensitive to the specific needs of different groups. The reopening of schools should also be used as a unique

[3] Global Education Cluster and Child Protection Global Protection Cluster, *Safe Back to School: A practitioner's guide,* INEE, IASC Global Education Cluster and Child Protection Global Protection Cluster, 2020.
[4] Ibid.

opportunity for all children and adolescents to attend, both students returning to the classroom and those previously out of school[5].

Building on existing structures. School communities must capitalize on their many existing capacities throughout the reopening process. These include student councils, parent-teacher associations, teams responsible for food preparation and handling, youth -led groups, protection committees, teachers' unions, and family and community networks, among others[6].

Teachers. Teachers and school staff play a key role in the continuity of education and the reopening of schools. For this reason, strengthening their capacities, social and emotional support services and protection, as well as their recognition, must be key elements in the preparation and foundation of reopening.

Participation of children and youth. Children and adolescents should participate in the processes that affect them and should be considered full stakeholders in decision-making processes, in accordance with their age and maturity. Young people may play a key role in community mobilization and in the dissemination of accurate information[7].

The entire school community. The entire school community, including children and adolescents, parents and caregivers, teachers, school administrative staff, the community and local government, must be involved in all stages of the school reopening process in an inclusive and accessible manner. The involvement of parents and caregivers is particularly key to ensuring that they are confident enough to send their children to school. This requires proactive, two-way communication that consults and considers families' fears and intentions; as well as proactive, transparent information about actions and decisions taken[8].

Rebuilding resilience. The process of reopening schools provides an opportunity to strengthen the education, health and protection sectors and the disaster preparedness and response systems, making them more accessible, inclusive, participatory and protective. By applying the lessons learned from the COVID-19 crisis, governments and school communities as a whole may better prepare for and reduce the chances of future crises related to health, natural hazards and everyday risks, as well as violence and conflict[9].

I. BEFORE AND DURING THE REOPENING PROCESS

These guidance notes build on that document and provide a regional framework and practical recommendations to be contextualized and adapted at the country level. The planning and implementation of the reopening of schools requires the development of a strategy and a road map, accompanied by an operational and budgetary plan. The road map and operational plan should incorporate activities before and during the reopening process, as well as those undertaken with open schools. The main elements of the strategy are presented in the following chapters.

Before and during the reopening process, it is key to plan, establish coordination and communication mechanisms, estimate costs, and prepare the implementation of measures for the safe return to schools based on public health considerations, according to epidemiological parameters (number of new cases per day, total number of cases at the national level) and specific indicators determined by each country. Progress is recommended through the implementation of **policies and procedures** supported by **adequate funding**, as well as **the development of strategies and measures** to ensure

[5] INEE, IASC Global Education Cluster and Child Protection Global Protection Cluster, *Safe return to school.*
[6] Ibid.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Ibid.

that all children and adolescents return to school and resume their learning. This means prioritizing the most vulnerable, those most at risk of not returning to school, as well as preparing school and teaching staff; and most importantly, it means organizing in terms of safe school operations, ensuring the welfare and protection of children and adolescents. The reopening of schools must be supported by social dialogue and the use of effective communication strategies. It also involves **planning the reforms needed to strengthen education systems**, including distance learning practices and mixed education modalities.

1. Planning, coordination, communication and monitoring

1.1. Coordination and collaboration

The safe reopening of schools requires a coordinated multisectoral approach among those responsible for education, health, water, sanitation and hygiene, nutrition and protection, with a focus on equality, gender and inclusion. It requires the articulation and collaboration of government ministries and institutions at national and subnational levels, local governments, and all other stakeholders, including teachers' unions, associations, civil society, private sector, community, parents and students themselves. Effective coordination also involves the proper functioning of communication mechanisms and regular consultations among all stakeholders. Similarly, the United Nations and other international and regional organizations should provide technical assistance to Governments in a well-coordinated manner. The above involves, inter alia, the establishment of:

- Coordination mechanisms between ministries and authorities at national and sub-national levels.
- Intersectoral, intraministerial and multi-stakeholder coordination committees/teams at national and sub-national levels.
- Clear communication mechanisms between government, education and health authorities, municipalities, communities, schools, teachers and families.
- Regular consultations with key stakeholder groups, including teachers' unions, parent associations, civil society, student associations, mayors associations, among others.

1.2. Data

Planning for reopening requires the availability of information and data on schools to ensure safe operations; information on teachers, school staff and students; and access to online distance education. This may include:

- School premises: number of classrooms, outdoor facilities, among others.
- School access to water, sanitation and hygiene (handwashing points).
- Internet access for schools.
- Number of teachers and students in each school and class disaggregated by sex, and number of support staff.
- Provision of school feeding.
- Access to health and nutrition services.
- School transport.
- Assessing teachers' skills in digital environments.
- Number of students who have access to online distance education.
- Number of teachers who have technological equipment and access to connectivity for online teaching.
- Data on the most vulnerable groups and identification of their educational needs, including access to education and other services.

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1.3. Communication and advocacy

The return of children and adolescents to school requires that parents, students, teachers and the community in general have confidence in school safety measures. For this purpose, awareness-raising and communication campaigns need to be planned and implemented to disseminate messages on measures taken to ensure a safe return to school, as well as the benefits of returning to school, and information on hygiene practices and physical distancing in the school environment. This may include:

- Messages adapted to different target groups and ages, in accessible formats that ensure the inclusion of all members of the educational community.
- Specific messages for those groups who are most at risk of dropping out of school, such as girls and female adolescents, due to gender-based social norms.
- Clear information on the measures adopted and protocols established to guarantee the safety and protection of all children and adolescents of different ages.
- Calendar of regular virtual sessions, to provide updated information on the COVID-19 crisis situation. A telephone line for questions and answers is available, as well as forum and chat spaces, among others, to facilitate communication.

1.4. Gradual reopening process

Governments may decide whether they wish to adopt a progressive/gradual approach and determine the procedure to be followed, with clear guidelines on the implementation of established protocols and the training of competent local authorities. If a progressive/gradual approach is adopted, it may be planned by:

- Regions and areas.
- Rural and urban areas.
- Population Density.
- Educational needs.
- Educational levels: preschool, primary, elementary.
- Grades.
- Prioritization of students with difficulties to access distance learning strategies.

In order to facilitate physical distancing actions, the following measures may be considered:

- Alternation (days/weeks), between on-site and distance learning, supported at home.
- Staggered schedules throughout the school day (start/end times, breaks, lunch, among others).
- Multiple or double shifts.
- Reduce the number of students in class and keep the same groups.
- Prioritize school activities to be compatible with social distancing measures.

1.5. Monitoring

Once schools are reopened, students, teachers and school staff will need to be closely monitored for physical and mental health, learning progress, welfare and the promotion of protective and safe spaces for children and adolescents. To this end, consideration should be given to the development of:

- Indicators, mechanisms and tools for monitoring the psychosocial welfare of students, teachers and school staff.
- Follow-up mechanisms and tools to monitor student and staff attendance.
- Mechanisms and tools for monitoring learning progress.
- Mechanisms and tools to monitor infrastructure conditions in buildings, classrooms, sanitary facilities, etc. and the stable and adequate provision of basic water, sanitation and hygiene services, among others.
- Strengthened data and information systems to track the return of students to school, as well as children and adolescents who were previously out of school, to enter the system.

2. Policies, procedures and funding

The safe reopening of schools requires the implementation of a series of policies, procedures and protocols based on adequate organizational and financial capacity to guarantee safe school operations, coverage of all children and adolescents, with emphasis on the most vulnerable, and to ensure their protection and welfare. It also involves making decisions on the need to make the school calendar more flexible, adapt the curriculum, and make promotion and exams more flexible. In addition, consideration should be given to developing policies, plans and strategies to build resilient systems that may withstand any resurgence of the pandemic or other future crises.

2.1. Adequacy and flexibility

Strategies and measures to be considered for the flexibility of the school calendar, curriculum, evaluation, testing and promotion:

- Adapt academic calendars.
- Adjust instruction time and schedules.
- Simplify and condense the curriculum focused on prioritized competencies during the rest of the school year.
- Adjust evaluations to the adapted curriculum.
- Modify national exams.
- More flexible and adaptable requirements for grade progression.

- Give up less important exams.
- Apply universal promotion where possible.

2.2. Funding

Elements to consider for funding plans when reopening schools:

Given the serious socio-economic impact caused by COVID-19 in all countries, public funding of education must be prioritized and protected. Therefore, it is recommended that budgetary allocations be made to guarantee education for the most vulnerable groups. In addition, reopening requires sufficient and well-targeted budgets to be able to implement hygiene, sanitation and physical distancing protocols; as well as to develop the capacity of teachers and educational support staff to meet established education and equity goals. Elements to consider include:

- Protect and prioritize resource allocations for public education within the national budget.
- Ensure retention in school by implementing economic support strategies for the most vulnerable households.
- Identify sources of funding for response and recovery to make immediate investments in school water, sanitation and hygiene.
- Target education budgets to the schools most affected by the crisis or those most in need of basic water, sanitation and hygiene facilities Funding formulas that give preference to the most marginalized may be considered, through grants as well as cash transfers.
- Ensure an equitable approach to different levels of education, considering the importance of ensuring adequate resources for early childhood development and learning.
- Protect the salaries of teachers and other school personnel, ensuring timely and continuous payment, with attention to those on precarious contracts.

The private sector may play an important role in providing education for all. Measures to strengthen this role and regulate the operation of private education include:

- Assess the impact of the pandemic on the private education sector and analyze possible solutions.
- Maintain up-to-date information on private schools.
- Regulate and monitor private schools, including low fee schools, as well as other types of private education providers such as religious schools, to avoid unregulated fee increases.

3. Safe school operations

In preparing for the reopening of schools, it is essential to ensure appropriate conditions that minimize the risk of transmission and spread of the virus. Ensuring protected school operations and the provision of essential services requires assessing the current capacities of the school and providing the necessary guidance and supplies to strengthen continuity of service and promote healthy behaviors. This includes protocols related to water, sanitation and hygiene, physical distancing, health, provision of soap and clean water, and promotion of good hygiene practices. Measures to ensure the safe reopening of schools should be age-specific and include[10]:

3.1. Access

- Diagnose the infrastructure conditions of the schools.
- Establish criteria for safe reopening.
- Develop national guidelines for the reopening of schools in accessible formats and simple language.
- Establish an inter-ministerial commission to ensure safe return to school.

[10] INEE, IASC Global Education Cluster and Child Protection Global Protection Cluster, *Safe return to school.*

- Have up-to-date data from education districts, education authorities and school management.
- Formulate a reopening roadmap along with your operational and budgetary plan.
- Adapt policies to ensure the inclusion of all children and adolescents with particular attention to vulnerable groups, adolescent mothers and pregnant women, children and adolescents with disabilities, among others.

3.2. Water, sanitation and hygiene protocols

- Conduct a quick survey to identify the gap in service delivery and costs of response.
- Establish and implement minimum standards for water, sanitation and hygiene provision in conjunction with the health sector, particularly those responsible for infection control and prevention, to include services needed to implement personal and menstrual hygiene standards, prior to the reopening of schools.
- Create a catalogue of available options for the provision of water, sanitation and hygiene services (including low-cost options and prioritizing hand washing stations).
- Identify resources for the expansion of handwashing stations in schools.
- Develop a joint guide with the health sector on key guidelines for the adaptation of water, sanitation and hygiene facilities, including criteria for accessibility, gender and physical distancing, among others.
- Establish a training strategy for educational authorities on WASH protocols and infection control and prevention to prevent the spread of the virus.
- Identify funding mechanisms to make immediate investments in WASH for schools.

3.3. Health protocols

- Define epidemiological criteria on COVID-19 for reopening and possible re-closure, if necessary.
- Define personal protection protocols, including the use or not of thermometers, masks and/or different protective elements, hand washing and respiratory etiquette recommendations.
- Provide schools with the necessary materials to protect teachers, students and school staff: sanitary mats, thermometers, protective equipment, alcohol, gel, masks, among others.
- Define protocols for handling suspicious cases.

3.4. Physical distancing measures

- Assess the infrastructure conditions in the educational units and ensure the necessary conditioning to comply with the physical distancing protocols.
- Develop a detailed protocol on physical distancing measurements.

3.5. Cleaning, disinfection and hygiene protocols

- Develop jointly with the education, health and water, sanitation and hygiene sectors a detailed protocol on cleaning, disinfection and hygiene measures.
- Train teachers and school staff on cleaning, disinfection and hygiene measures; and ensure that this detailed protocol is available in different formats and languages so that it is accessible to all.
- Identify resources for the purchase of cleaning and disinfection supplies.
- Establish a protocol for waste management.

3.6. School entry and exit protocols

- Define schedules, procedures and recommendations for school entry and exit.
- Develop communication materials to train and inform the educational community about the protocols to follow.

- Train staff of ministries of education, supervisors and education authorities on entry and exit protocols.
- Define protocols for access to school facilities by parents, visitors and providers.

4. Learning

Preparation for reopening requires the development of strategies to ensure that, once children and adolescents have returned to school, they may resume their learning paths at the appropriate grade level. This implies an education approach that contemplates the recovery of possible learning losses during closure and addressing pre-existing gaps. It will also be necessary to offer mixed education that combines distance and on-site modalities, which also implies maintaining and strengthening remote education, while students gradually return to on-site learning.

4.1. Learning paths

Strategies to ensure that children and adolescents resume their learning trajectories at the appropriate grade level may include planning and preparation of:

- Guidelines and teacher training processes for assessing the learning levels of all children and adolescents, including those with disabilities, and identifying possible learning losses or delays.
- Recovery strategies and programs for those who may have been left behind, with an emphasis on marginalized groups and those who do not have access to online learning.
- Non-formal learning activities or supplementary teaching such as tutoring, recovery and extra-curricular classes.
- Long-term or out-of-school accelerated learning programs.
- Formative assessments to guide accelerated learning, recovery programs or national examinations.
- Mechanisms to identify children and adolescents at risk of dropping out of school and possible victims of violence, in order to develop appropriate response strategies.

4.2. Strengthening distance education and mixed learning

As already mentioned, it is important to maintain and reinforce distance learning before, during the reopening process and with open schools. Not only does this ensure continuity of education while schools are closed, it is also a critical component of mixed learning modalities to be used when schools reopen, and is a measure that will allow them to respond more effectively to possible new closures. In addition to these arguments, strengthening distance learning is also a strategy with enormous potential for improving the quality of education and increasing the participation and commitment of parents and caregivers. Measures include:

4.2.1. Evaluation of the performance and efficiency of distance education

- Map the existing distance learning platforms for each age group and identify the most relevant tools for each context[11].
- Diagnose the access level of students to digital platforms, home computers, smart phones and internet connection, disaggregating data by sex and age and with emphasis on the most vulnerable.
- Characterize learners' access to and use of distance learning platforms on television, radio and printed materials.

[11] United Nations Children's Fund, *Education during COVID-19: Contingency, risk reduction, preparedness and response planning framework*, UNICEF, April, 2020, pp. 11-14.

- Diagnose the capacity of teachers to give continuity to distance learning processes (access to internet connection, computers, learning programs, training, among others).
- Assess the need to invest in the purchase of electronic devices such as tablets, computers, installation of solar panels, or distribution of radios to reach the most remote parts of the community.
- Map instruments and protocols for feedback and monitoring of learning, as well as communication between teachers and students.

4.2.2. Content

- Improve the content of distance education and mixed modalities (distance and face-to-face) based on the results of the diagnosis.
- Ensure that content includes social-emotional guidance for students, families and teachers, ensuring a balance between academic and recreational activities.
- Ensure that distance learning is inclusive and adapted to the needs of all children and adolescents, including young children and students with disabilities.

4.2.3. Conectivity and tools

- Increase connectivity and technological equipment of schools and teachers.
- Increase the connectivity of communities and households.
- Increase access to learning equipment (tablets, computers, internet connection, among others) for the most vulnerable students and their families.

- Reinforce all public distance education platforms such as radio and television.
- Develop video packages and educational material for radio or television.
- Develop packages of printed materials to reach students without connectivity.

4.3. Strengthening mixed learning

It is quite possible that most school reopening processes will be done gradually, at first with a mixed approach combining attendance with distance education. To this end, it is recommended to develop a clear vision of the guiding principles of such an approach and to consider the various aspects necessary for its planning and effective implementation.

A first consideration is that the school has adequate physical infrastructure to comply with physical distancing protocols, reducing the number of students per class and designing a shift system that allows for alternation between classroom and distance education (e.g. morning and afternoon shifts, and day or week cycles).

While a simple alternation may be arranged at all levels and for all students, a second aspect to consider is identifying certain grade levels and types of students who require an on-site education. This implies prioritizing 1) primary students, for whom direct interaction with the teacher and with the class is more effective; 2) those belonging to vulnerable populations that do not have access to remote learning and are at risk of dropping out of school; and, finally, 3) those who are in transition to higher levels of education (from primary to elementary, from lower elementary to upper elementary) and those who are preparing for critical exams in their final year of elementary.

Another aspect to consider is that certain learning is acquired more effectively in the social environment of the school, in particular, transferable skills or life skills (critical thinking, problem solving, resilience, communication, self-management and creativity, among others). These skills are critical not only for learning, living and working, but also for coping, especially in contexts of crisis.

This mixed approach to learning must be adapted to all age groups and provide support mechanisms that encourage the involvement of parents and caregivers in their children's education. Once the necessary aspects for implementing mixed modalities are identified, the system and teachers must be adequately prepared, including:

- Adjustment of the curriculum.
- Adaptation of teaching and learning materials.
- Training of teachers and developing a teacher support system.
- Adaptation of distance education platforms to make them more effective.
- Monitor and feedback on the system to make quick adjustments as needed.

In order to support distance education and mixed learning, it is recommended to consider:

- Partnerships with civil society, the private sector and collaborative work with community leaders.
- Agreements with telephone companies to improve connectivity in schools and access to platforms, among others.
- Agreements with distance learning companies, which provide support tools aligned to the curriculum and which may be used as part of a mixed modality.

4.4. Teachers and educational staff

Teachers and school staff play a critical role in the effective return to school and therefore require adequate preparation to assume their responsibilities, as well as training, information and support on health and sanitation protocols to ensure safe school operations. In terms of instruction, they must be prepared to assess learning outcomes; identify gaps; develop and deliver recovery programs for those who may have been left behind; and achieve appropriate performance in distance education and mixed mode teaching. Importantly, teachers also require psychosocial support and

ongoing feedback during their service. Finally, measures need to be taken for their protection by providing them with safe working conditions and fair salaries, among others. Therefore, it is recommended that teacher training be considered in the following areas:

- Ensure safe school operations, including cleaning and disinfection protocols, illness protocols and spacing protocols in classrooms, sanitary facilities, kitchens and school canteens.
- Identify situations of gender, sexual and domestic violence that may have occurred during confinement.
- Assess student learning levels and outcomes, and identify gaps and needs in this area.
- Plan and offer recovery/review courses for students (flexible approach).
- Plan and implement mixed learning approaches.
- Identify age-associated cognitive and behavioral changes to provide appropriate learning support.
- Develop skills necessary for the recovery of basic learning in reading, writing and arithmetic.
- Develop transferable skills (creativity, communication, collaboration, respect for diversity, among others).
- Provide psychosocial support to students in identifying and addressing situations of violence, such as gender-based violence.
- Identify students who are at risk of dropping out, to provide an appropriate response and to follow up closely.

4.5. Training of teachers and school staff in distance education and mixed learning

Strengthen the capacities of teachers and other school personnel to provide quality distance education and ways to support their students through various modalities (online, radio, television, text messaging, among others). This may include:

- Design packages, spreadsheets, home learning projects, etc., for children and adolescents.
- Handle of virtual platforms and distance learning tools.
- Distance education pedagogy and mixed modalities (age-sensitive and gender-sensitive), as well as guidelines for good management of the alternation between distance and on-site education.
- Monitor, feedback and evaluation of distance students.
- Involvement of parents and caregivers.
- Online protection training for students.
- Training on possible signs that a child or adolescent is a victim of some kind of violence.

4.6. Support for teachers

- Review policies related to teacher placement, working conditions, as well as attendance guidelines.
- Facilitate flexible working arrangements for teachers who have to reconcile work with family care.
- Pay teachers' salaries on a continuous and timely basis.
- Provide psychosocial support mechanisms and counselling.

4.7. Support for families, parents and caregivers

- Facilitate contact mechanisms to inform and support parents, families and caregivers.
- Provide training and guidance to families to support their children in distance education and home school settings.

5. Reaching all children and adolescents, prioritizing the most vulnerable

Strategies must be put in place to ensure that all children and adolescents of all ages return to school. It is recommended that special measures be taken for the most vulnerable groups, i.e. children and adolescents with disabilities, indigenous people, afro -descendants, those living in conditions of poverty whether they reside in rural or urban areas, children on the move and children and adolescents from migrant host communities. All of them have been the most affected by school closures and are at greatest risk of not returning to school. In addition to the fact that 25 per cent of young children do not have access to pre-primary education and there is a low perception of the importance of this level of education, there is also a risk that many parents will not provide their children with quality pre-primary education. Therefore, information needs to be collected on groups at risk in order to develop inter-sectoral campaigns and interventions focused on them.

Measures and interventions to ensure that all children and adolescents return to school and facilitate the re-entry of out-of-school children into the system may include:

- Information campaigns on measures taken to guarantee the safety of all children and adolescents of different ages.
- Communication campaigns on the return to school with messages adapted to each of the populations of interest.
- Identification of vulnerable groups most at risk of not returning.
- Strategies and mechanisms to identify and follow up on children and adolescents who were out of school before COVID-19 and to support them in enrolling in or attending other non-formal learning pathways (multi-sectoral approach).
- Policy and strategy reforms, backed by adequate funding, to strengthen the registration of all children and adolescents in different age groups. It is recommended that emphasis be placed on ensuring the inclusion of previously excluded children and addressing marginalization as:
    - **Review of admission and readmission requirements** at all levels of education to eliminate barriers to school entry (preschool children, children and adolescents with disabilities, indigenous children, children on the move, groups that do not have the necessary documentation to enroll or re-enroll in school, and pregnant or parenting children and adolescents).
    - **Adaptation of policies and practices to expand access** for children and adolescents **who do not receive an education.** Strategies may include investments in non-formal and accelerated education alternatives, equivalence programs at all levels that meet the needs of children who will not be able to access formal schooling.
    - **Remove systemic barriers to gender-sensitive education**, as well as addressing gender-based violence, forced marriage and early marriage, early and unwanted pregnancies, child labor and other issues that affect learning and educational continuity.
    - **Elimination of barriers to ensure inclusive education** with provisions to improve accessibility for children and adolescents with disabilities and to adapt teaching materials to their needs, in order to guarantee their continuity in education.
    - **Elimination of economic barriers to education for the most vulnerable groups.**
        - Exemption from tuition and examination fees for pre-school, primary and elementary education.
        - Direct transfers for the reincorporation of students who are teenage mothers and pregnant teenagers.

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- Provision of cash or assistance vouchers for vulnerable families to support their children's return to school.
- Provision of educational materials and back-to-school kits, according to national standards for all students, including assistive devices for children and adolescents with disabilities.

6. Protection and welfare

It is important to retrain the school to be a safe and protective environment for students and other members of the educational community. This preparation should include the design of strategies to enhance physical and emotional welfare and to address potential risks of violence to which they may be exposed. Considering the involvement and participation of all stakeholders to also reach the most vulnerable populations, the recommendation is to:

- Build the capacity of teachers and school staff in the prevention, detection and referral of violence, especially gender-based violence.
- Develop plans and strategies to strengthen the education of children and adolescents on the prevention of COVID-19.
- Promote materials and projects that reinforce the education of children and adolescents on how to follow a healthy diet.
- Take the necessary measures to ensure that children and adolescents have access to clean drinking water in schools.
- Encourage regular physical activity, both at school and at home, to strengthen the emotional and physical welfare of children and adolescents.
- Promote and support mental health and psychosocial support mechanisms for students, teachers and school staff.

- Develop a joint strategy between child protection services and the education sector to monitor children and adolescents outside of school at the community level.
- Take specific measures to mitigate the risks of violence while girls and other marginalized groups are out of school.
- Seek more active community participation and improved referral systems by diversifying key communications and outreach activities with relevant languages and accessible formats that suit populations of interest.
- Develop complementary support through communication channels such as WhatsApp, text messages, chats or others.
- Diversify the key communication and dissemination actions, considering that they are available in local languages and dialects.
- Strengthen and adapt protocols for the identification, care and referral of cases of any type of violence, through the joint work of the child protection and education systems. *See Annex I: Check list.*

II. WITH SCHOOLS REOPENED

7. Policies, protocols, coordination, communication, funding and monitoring

Once schools open their doors, the recommendation is that previously established policies, procedures, strategies and measures be implemented to ensure that all children and adolescents may return to school safely, resume their learning paths and compensate for lost instructional time. As before and during the reopening, when schools are open, emphasis should also be placed on proactive approaches to reintegrating the most vulnerable. It is essential not only that adequate funding has been ensured and that resources are available at the school level, but also that the budget for global national public education is protected.

Close monitoring of safe school operations and the overall health situation is important and necessary. Consequently, consultation, communication and coordination mechanisms and protocols must be in place for rapid articulated action, should the health situation so require. The return and attendance of children and adolescents at school must also be closely monitored. The following protocols and measures should be considered:

7.1. Protocols and measures

- Decision-making protocol for the closure and reopening of schools, if necessary.
- Staff, parents and students trained and prepared for the measures to be considered in case schools have to be closed again.
- Clear guidelines for the implementation of mixed modalities of distance education, if schools close again.

7.2. Consultation, communication, coordination and partnerships

- Reinforced consultation, communication and coordination mechanisms that promote local dialogue and the participation of communities, parents, children and adolescents in educational matters.
- Awareness and education activities on the prevention of COVID-19, using different modalities to keep staff, children, adolescents and parents informed.
- Clear information on the measures adopted and protocols implemented to guarantee the safety and protection of children and adolescents of different ages.
- Regular information sessions and hotline for questions and answers, among others.

7.3. Monitoring

- Follow-up mechanisms and tools to monitor student and staff attendance, including through school management committees and parent-teacher associations.
- Monitoring mechanisms and instruments for monitoring the physical and mental health status of students, teachers and educational staff.
- Mechanisms and tools for monitoring learning progress.
- Early warning mechanisms to identify students at risk of dropping out of school and to provide close and timely follow-up.

8. Safe school operations

Once schools reopen, it is important to ensure that an adequate monitoring and control system is in place to support safe school operations, that education authorities follow national guidelines, and that they are supported in minimizing the risks of infection and spread of the virus[12].

8.1. Access

- Monitor infrastructure conditions of schools and compliance with established protocols.
- Monitor compliance with the various criteria considered for the reopening of schools.
- Strengthen communication and coordination mechanisms in addition to promoting dialogue with education authorities at national, regional and municipal levels.
- Ensure that education authorities, staff, children, parents and caregivers have access to school guidance in accessible formats.
- Frequently update data on school reopening and new cases of VOC-19 in schools.
- Monitor the implementation of the reopening roadmap.
- Review and adapt the reopening strategy, if necessary.
- Closely monitor decision-making on further closures, if necessary.

8.2. Water, sanitation and hygiene protocols

- After reopening, it is recommended that compliance with the minimum criteria related to the provision of water, sanitation and hygiene (including menstrual hygiene) be reviewed, prioritizing the availability of handwashing stations with water and soap.
- Monitor the application of low-cost technology options in water, sanitation and hygiene.
- Implement an ongoing training strategy at national and sub-national levels for education authorities and staff on the new WASH protocols.

[12] INEE, IASC Global Education Cluster and Child Protection Global Protection Cluster, *Safe return to school.*

- Monitor and control the sustainability of new investments in water, sanitation and hygiene in schools.

8.3. Health protocols

- Monitor the application of the epidemiological criteria on COVID-19 for reopening and other possible closures, if necessary.
- Monitor the availability at the school of sanitary mats, thermometers, protective equipment, alcohol, gel, masks, among others.
- Implement the health supply replenishment strategy.
- Monitor compliance with respiratory etiquette protocols.
- Follow up on suspected cases in schools and ensure that health and safety procedures are followed.
- Keep school authorities informed of new developments related to COVID-19 and available national guidance.

8.4. Physical distancing measures

- Ensure that schools comply with physical distancing protocols.
- Review and adapt protocols, if necessary.

8.5. Cleaning, disinfection and hygiene protocols

- Monitor the implementation of cleaning, disinfection and hygiene measures.
- Develop all information on cleaning, disinfection and hygiene available in different formats and languages.
- Provide the necessary budget for the cleaning and disinfection of educational materials.
- Ensure that schools have waste management systems.

8.6. School entry and exit protocols

- Ensure that schools comply with established entry and exit protocols (this may include a handwashing station with soap and water at the entrance to the institution).
- Ensure that education authorities have access to communication and information materials to give the necessary instructions to the education community.
- Continue training for staff of ministries of education, supervisors, education authorities, on entry and exit protocols.
- Ensure compliance with protocols for access to school facilities by parents, visitors and providers.

8.7. Protocols for school feeding and nutrition programs[13]

- Ensure and monitor compliance with biosecurity protocols in the entire school environment where school canteens and/or food preparation facilities are located.
- Ensure and monitor that biosecurity protocols are implemented and respected throughout the school food supply chain, including transport, storage, preparation and consumption.
- Ensure quality and safety standards of food stored, prepared and consumed at school.
- Ensure an adequate nutritional content of the menus offered by school canteens, so that they contribute to a healthy and balanced diet of children and adolescents, supporting as much as possible, the reactivation of the local economy.

[13] PWorld Food Program, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations and United Nations Children's Fund, *Interim Guidance Note - How to Mitigate the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Food and Nutrition of Students,* WFP, FAO and UNICEF, Rome, 2020.

9. Learning

Reopening school implies that governments, in close collaboration with all education stakeholders and other relevant sectors at the national, municipal and school levels, have implemented those strategies and measures previously planned in order to ensure that children and adolescents resume their learning paths at the appropriate level.

While priority should be given to recovering from the immediate loss of learning following school closure to control the spread of COVID-19, the recommendation is a broader, longer-term strategy that also addresses pre-existing learning gaps. Similarly, although recovery measures prioritize the most vulnerable and at risk of dropping out, they should cover all students returning to school.

It is important to emphasize that recovery programs should preferably be institutionalized to transcend the immediate response and consolidate a long-term strategy to mitigate learning and outreach gaps for vulnerable populations.

Ensuring everyone's return:

From the date of the reopening of schools and once schools are open, it is recommended to:

- Launch back-to-school campaigns with messages adapted and targeted to the populations of interest.
- Actively seek out children and adolescents outside of school, with the support of the community and families.
- Deploy early warning systems with tools to identify children, especially girls, who are at risk of abandonment, accompanied by appropriate response strategies.

Specific measures to support children and adolescents in reducing potential learning losses include:

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- **Assessment** of learning levels and identification of recovery needs It is recommended that the assessment address academic needs, but also identify social-emotional support needs.

Institutionalization and large-scale implementation of recovery and levelling programs to mitigate learning loss and prevent further educational inequities after school closures. If learning loss is exacerbated by vulnerability and inequality, or exacerbated by a pre-existing learning gap, specific long-term measures, tailored to the needs of the target group, are recommended. Depending on the severity of the learning loss, the type of recovery action may be selected, for example, short-term recovery courses versus long-term accelerated education programs. These options include:

- Corrective and recovery strategies and programs that seek to replace lost learning, particularly for students from marginalized groups and those without access to online education.
- Supplementary teaching, tutoring, recovery classes and non-formal extra-curricular learning activities.
- Long-term or out-of-school accelerated learning programs.

9.1. Skills/educational levels that should be included in recovery programs

- Foundational skills (reading, writing and math) for elementary students and for those who have not yet acquired these skills.
- Transferable skills (creativity, communication, collaboration, respect for diversity, among others).
- Lower and upper elementary education.
- Accessibility adaptations to the program for children and adolescents with disabilities.

9.2. Assessment and recognition

- Formative assessments to guide accelerated learning and recovery or national test preparation programs.
- Recognition, validation and accreditation of the accelerated, prior learning, cumulative and credit transfer program.

9.3. Teachers

Strengthening teacher training and support services

- Integration of distance education and mixed learning into formal pre- and in-service training.
- In-service teacher training.
- Innovative methods of supporting teachers, such as online professional development and coaching.
- Continuous support to teachers during the implementation of the reopening process and mixed modalities.

9.4. Distance education and mixed learning

As noted in chapter 4.2, it is important to maintain and reinforce distance learning when schools are already open, since (a) it is a key component of mixed learning, (b) it serves to ensure that schools are ready for eventual further closure, and (c) it improves the quality of education at the school.

A continuous strengthening of distance teaching-learning and mixed-model instruction needs to:

- Develop an adequately funded distance education policy as part of educational planning.
- Develop a normative framework for distance education, which may be best prepared jointly with the countries of the region.

- Improve and expand current practices in terms of educational coverage and relevance to marginalized groups, based on the results of performance assessment and the effectiveness of distance learning, in order to reduce the existing digital divide in the region.
- Facilitate greater access to devices and connectivity for schools and homes.
- Implement mixed learning modalities with a flexible approach and close monitoring, to facilitate corrections and adaptations when necessary.
- Provide ongoing support to teachers (including special educators) to improve their performance in relation to mixed and distance learning.
- Create strategies to increase participation in distance learning by more parents and caregivers, especially preschool children.

10. Reaching the most vulnerable

Responding to the needs of the most vulnerable children and adolescents and ensuring their return to and permanence in school requires the application of previously planned and implemented policies, strategies and measures, in addition to providing specific funding for these interventions. These measures include:

10.1. Specific interventions to facilitate admission and retention

- Identification of vulnerable children and adolescents at risk of not returning to school and those out of school.
- Establishment of flexible admission requirements, in particular for vulnerable children and adolescents.
- Elimination of policies that may discriminate against girls and adolescents, such as not allowing the registration of pregnant or early marriage adolescents.
- Adapted and flexible exams.

10.2. Removal of financial barriers to education

- School fees and examination fees.
- Other costs such as school uniforms.
- Provision of cash or voucher assistance to vulnerable households to support children's return to school.
- Direct transfers for the reincorporation of students who are teenage mothers and pregnant teenagers.

10.3. Availability of basic services in schools

- School feeding.
- Safe drinking water.
- Sanitation and hygiene.
- Physical and mental health care and psychosocial support.
- Specialized care for children and adolescents with disabilities.
- Provision of learning materials to all students, including assistive devices for children and adolescents with disabilities.
- Ban on advertising of unhealthy food and drink.

11. Protection and welfare

As part of the return to school, children and adolescents should be encouraged to return to a protective and safe environment that has strategies to promote the welfare of the entire educational community. This implies:

- Establish a referral mechanism to the child protection system and specialized mental health and psychosocial support services for cases of gender-based violence and abuse, among others.

- Available adapted and updated referral mechanisms between the educational institution and the child protection system in the event of possible cases of violence, and to have student-friendly means of reporting.
- Establish a continuous plan of psychosocial support and care for caregivers during the following months for students, teachers and school administrative staff.

12. Opportunity to build resilient education systems

The side effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have further deepened the pre-existing weaknesses and gaps in LAC education systems. Before the crisis in the region, almost 25 percent of children did not have access to preschool education and 12 million children and adolescents were out of school[14]; In addition, many of those in school were not acquiring the basic skills and competencies. The response to the crisis also showed that countries were not prepared for quality and equitable distance education, either in terms of teacher and student preparation or in terms of digital platforms, content, methods and learning materials. It also showed that there is a deep digital divide that left many children and adolescents without access to online learning. There is also concern about the lack of a regulatory framework for distance education.

However, in the context of school reopening, the global educational disruption caused by COVID 19 may be used as a catalyst for the transformation of education systems and schools so that every child and adolescent learns the skills they need to succeed in life, school and work.

This opportunity involves developing long-term strategies that address pre-existing gaps and challenges, making learning accessible to all, and developing resilient systems that are prepared for possible future crises. Accordingly, there is a need to rethink the purpose, content and modes of delivery of education and to make adjustments that in the future strengthen multiple flexible learning pathways (including mixed and distance education modes), introduce innovative pedagogical models, and incorporate crisis-sensitive planning. Based on the lessons learned from this pandemic, it is recommended that policies, plans and strategies be developed to build more relevant and equitable education systems that are resilient and able to withstand any resurgence of the pandemic or other future crises.

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[14] 'Welcome to UIS.Stat', <http://data.uis.unesco.org/#>, consulted on June 29, 2020.

ANNEX

Annex I: Check list.

1. **Checklist for ministries before reopening**

2. **Checklist for ministries as part of reopening process**

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