

**POLICY PAPER**

# **WEIGHING UP THE RISKS:**

SCHOOL CLOSURE AND  
REOPENING UNDER COVID-19  
— WHEN, WHY, AND WHAT IMPACTS?



**THE ALLIANCE**  
FOR CHILD PROTECTION  
IN HUMANITARIAN ACTION



**Inter-agency  
Network for Education  
in Emergencies**

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**About**

The *Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE)* is an open, global network of members working together within a humanitarian and development framework to ensure that all individuals have the right to a quality, safe, relevant, and equitable education. INEE's work is founded on the fundamental right to education.

The *Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action (The Alliance)* is a global network of operational agencies, academic institutions, policymakers, donors, and practitioners. It supports the efforts of humanitarian actors to achieve high-quality and effective child protection interventions in all humanitarian contexts. The Alliance achieves this primarily by facilitating inter-agency technical collaboration, including the production of technical standards and tools, on child protection in all humanitarian contexts.

Both networks are actively working together to promote integration and collaboration across Education in Emergencies (EiE) and Child Protection in Humanitarian Action (CPHA). INEE and The Alliance wish to thank the CPHA-EiE advisory Group for their valuable inputs and comments on this paper and to acknowledge and thank Lyndsay Bird for her work in drafting this paper.

## Summary

- In an effort to prevent the transmission of Covid-19, governments around the world have closed schools.
- School closures are negatively impacting the well-being of children and young people and, in some contexts, might not be effectively reducing transmission.
- The INEE and the Alliance call on policymakers to:
  - Consider the impacts of school closures on the education and protection outcomes of children and youth;
  - Balance these impacts with a considered review of the health impacts; and
  - Make informed, child-centered decisions on when and why to reopen schools.

# 1. THE CHALLENGE

*“Staying at home is not exactly hard, per se, but the whole lockdown itself is stressful and we don’t know what to do with ourselves.”*

*(Conclusion of a group of [thirteen 10- to 19-year-olds in India](#))*

The COVID-19 global pandemic has affected millions of children and youth in almost every country in the world. At the height of the pandemic, nearly 90 percent of students were affected by the closure of schools, universities, and other institutions ([UNESCO, April 2020](#)). While school closures may have been necessary to reduce the transmission rate of COVID-19 in many contexts, the full impact of such closures on the well-being of children and youth has not always been considered in the decision-making process. Various risks to the education, protection, and health of children and youth need to be analyzed to decide whether schools reopen or stay closed. Such data analysis, particularly at a local level, is necessary to make informed decisions on **when** and **why** to reopen schools ([UNICEF](#)).

Many papers, documents, and resources have highlighted how COVID-19 has impacted access to quality education and learning due to widespread school closures ([INEE Resource Collection](#), [GEC](#), [UNESCO, 2020](#)). This evidence suggests that the COVID-19 crisis jeopardizes the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4) and leaves the most marginalized children and youth—especially those in vulnerable situations—even further behind their less vulnerable peers. Before the COVID-19 crisis, 258 million children were already denied their right to quality education; millions more are now at risk of having

this right disrupted and denied (UNESCO, 2019). This pandemic has also increased protection risks, including those related to various forms of violence, abuse, and exploitation, thereby putting the achievement of [SDGs 5.2, 5.3, 8.7 and 16.2](#) further from reach.

With some countries now over the first peak of the pandemic, governments are considering whether to reopen schools and, if so, how. It is evident that access to [safe, quality education](#) is a protective factor against the [violations of children's rights](#) as defined in the [UN Convention on the Rights of the Child](#). Yet, as of June 2020, full and partial school closures remain in place for over 60 percent of students worldwide ([UNESCO, 2020](#)). In almost all countries affected by COVID-19, the decision to close schools—and to keep them closed—has been based solely on public health considerations.

Decision-making around **when** and **why** to reopen schools needs to be more balanced. This includes assessing the negative consequences that closing schools or keeping them closed may have on the overall well-being of children and youth. As Henrietta Fore, the Executive Director of UNICEF, suggested recently in an opinion piece for [CNN](#), “One thing is clear: It is critical to balance the overwhelmingly damaging effects of school closures with the need to control the spread of Covid-19.”

This policy paper is aimed primarily at decision-makers (ministries of education, social welfare, and health and their associated partners) and reviews the impacts of school closures on children and youth's holistic well-being, specifically in terms of education, protection, and health. It proposes that the decision-making process regarding school closure/reopening review a variety of risks, not just health risks. To that end, this paper asks the following fundamental questions:

- a. Are children and youth able to learn effectively when out of school?
- b. Are children and youth better protected in or out of school?
- c. Are most children and youth safer health-wise in or out of school?

This paper's approach is based on the principles of ‘do no harm’ and the ‘best interests of the child’ ([UNCRC, Article 3, 1989](#)), which have been further defined in the [Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action](#) and the [INEE Minimum Standards for Education: Preparedness, Response, Recovery](#). A continuum of decision-making in regard to school reopening is presented in Section 2 and highlights this paper's position in relation to available guidance on **how** schools might safely reopen.

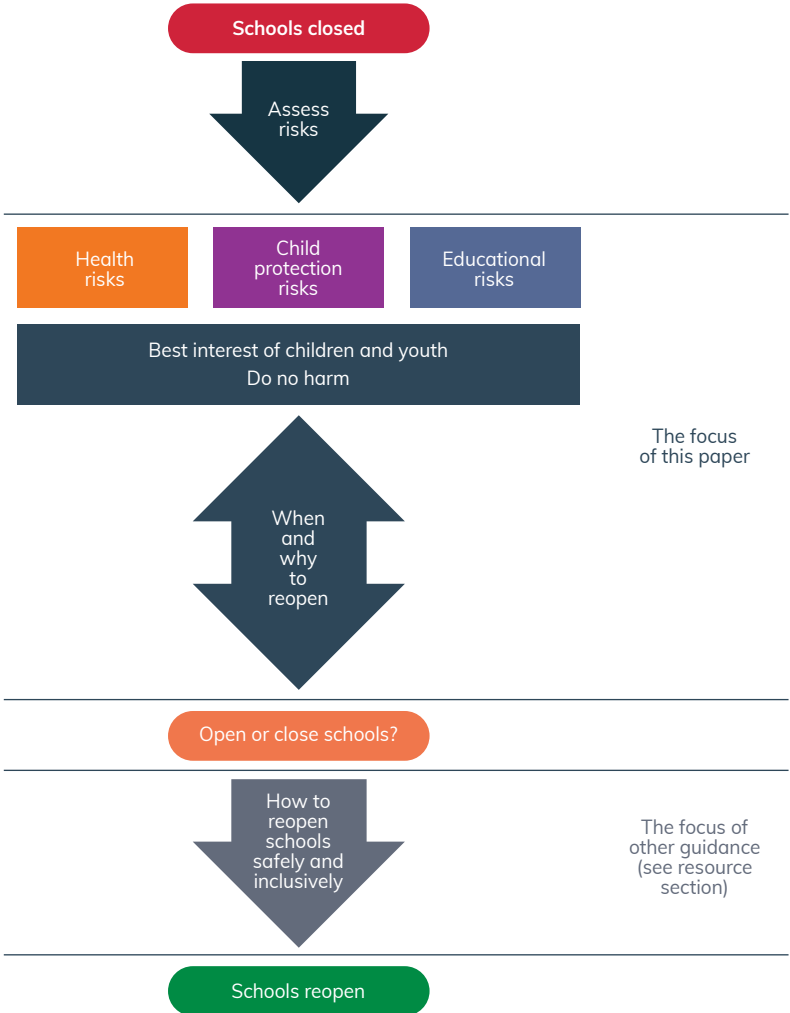
The diagram and considerations provided in [Section 2](#) and the sample questions provided in [Section 3](#) are designed to support a localized and holistic process of discussion and decision-making on **when** and **why** to reopen schools or to close them/keep them closed. These need to be **adapted and added to according to the national and/or local context**.

The sample decision-making tool outlined in [Section 4](#) is only one approach that may assist in reaching a locally based, contextualized decision. The process is a complex one that should carefully consider issues related to education, child protection, and health to assess the risks of re-opening schools or keeping them closed.

If and when a decision is made to reopen schools, relevant [guidance on how](#) to safely reopen schools should be followed.

# 2. KEY CONSIDERATIONS:

Put the safety and wellbeing of children and youth at the center of educational decision-making in a COVID-19 response



This paper is founded upon the assumption that relevant national and local authorities will ensure that schools follow established protocols and guidelines on safe re-opening while COVID-19 remains a risk. This paper does **not** offer guidance on safe reopening of schools but **does** provide links to resources that do, as the two processes are intricately linked.

The focus of this paper is on implementing a decision-making process for school closure/reopening that:

- Considers all three sectors (i.e. education, child protection, and health);
- Weighs up the respective risks to children and youth of being in or out of school; and
- Prioritizes the best interests of the child.

## Education

*"We don't have internet at home, so now I study using my school books."  
(A 12-year-old boy from the Democratic Republic of Congo, UNICEF)*

Over the summer holidays, children "normally lose between 20 percent and 50 percent of the skills they gained over the school year" ([The Economist](#)). School closures due to Covid-19 are expected to last much longer than a typical summer break. Depending upon the quality and availability of alternative educational opportunities (i.e. distance education), pandemic-related school closures could produce even greater negative impacts on the learning outcomes and well-being of children and youth. These impacts will be most severe for children and youth who are already marginalized and/or affected by humanitarian crises ([INEE, 2020](#)).

There is widespread recognition of the psychological and protective nature of safe, quality education, the loss of which can cause severe distress and anxiety ([Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action](#)). These negative impacts will be significantly higher for those living in countries affected by conflict and other protracted crises and for most marginalized groups such as migrants; forcibly displaced individuals; girls and young women; ethnic and other minorities; LGBTQ and other sexual orientation minorities; and children and youth living on the street, with disabilities, and/or in institutions ([ECW](#), [GPE](#), [UN](#), [UNHCR](#)). Therefore, any analysis of the impact of COVID-19 on education outcomes needs to factor in the pandemic's effects on children and youth from these marginalized groups as well as those living in different geographic locations.

The education-related impacts of COVID-19 extends beyond students. School closures have negatively impacted teachers' mental health and access to income/basic needs ([UN](#)). It has also placed extra demands on them to shift to new ways of teaching (i.e. distance education). Parents and/or caregivers are similarly affected. In addition to the general challenges, risks, and restrictions caused by the pandemic, parents and/or caregivers have faced, and continue to face, increased pressure to ensure that academic learning continues at home. This is a task that some families simply cannot accomplish due to limits on time, skills, or resources ([UN](#)). The impact on children and youth of the loss of access to quality education and learning should be weighed up in any holistic assessment of whether schools should reopen or remain closed.

## Child protection

*“Take time to listen to your children—don’t assume that you know what they need!” [Kimaya Mehta explains](#) that what children truly need right now is somebody they can speak to because of the state of their mental health.*

School closures and extended periods of isolation at home may negatively impact the [mental health and well-being of children and youth](#). Children and young people who live in stressful or violent environments, particularly the youngest children, face psychological distress, physical harm, and negative impacts on brain development due to [toxic stress](#). Children may also experience an increased risk of exposure to [child labor](#), all types of violence and exploitation, and (for girls) early marriage and teen pregnancies ([PLAN International](#)). In contrast, [safe, quality education](#) can offer a protective environment for children and youth who are at risk of abuse, exploitation, and neglect. It gives children access to adults who can keep them safe during school hours and to community support networks that help protect them. Child protection and well-being should be central considerations when weighing up decisions on school closures and reopening.

## Health

*“How do you wash your hands regularly when the queue for the water point is long? How do you “stay home, stay safe” when your family will only eat if you go out to earn cash?” ([World Vision](#))*

Although school closures are often viewed as a way of supporting public health, they may not significantly reduce the risks of COVID-19 infection and transmission in contexts such as:

- Low-resource settings;
- High-density temporary housing;
- Refugee/IDP camps;
- Informal settlements; and
- Households without access to basic sanitation ([The Lancet](#)).

Indeed, new evidence from some contexts suggests that there is low risk of Coronavirus transmission in schools ([DFTB 2020](#)). (This will, of course, depend partly on local school and community conditions and safety measures.) Furthermore, lack of access to in-school nutrition and health provision may lead to additional health and developmental risks in certain contexts, particularly for the most marginalized ([United Nations](#), [WFP](#)).

COVID-19 transmission rates, both in and out of school, need to be analyzed so decision-makers can be better informed when determining whether children are more at risk in school or out of school. Such analysis needs to take place at local levels to avoid generalizations at national levels that may lead to harm. Policymakers must also consistently assess the situation for different populations who may be experiencing the pandemic in different ways (always with a focus on equity, do no harm, and the best interests of children and youth). This may, for example, include employing localized school closures to respond to these different needs rather than instituting nation-wide school closures ([UNICEF](#)).

# 3. CONTEXTUALIZING DECISION-MAKING

National [policies and plans](#) need to be contextualized and continually adapted at local levels to ensure the response to COVID-19 is appropriate to 'local conditions and meets each child's learning, health and safety needs' ([UNESCO](#), [UNICEF](#), [World Bank](#), [WFP](#), [UNHCR](#)). By analyzing the risks to—and impacts on—education, child protection, and health from COVID-19, policymakers can be better prepared to adapt international and national guidance to their own contexts. As the [guidance on closing or reopening schools](#) from the WHO states:

*Decision makers should consider the following when deciding on whether to open or close schools:*

- *Current understanding about COVID-19 transmission and severity in children*
- *Local situation and epidemiology of COVID-19 where the school(s) are located*
- *School setting and ability to maintain COVID-19 prevention and control measures*

*Additional factors to consider in deciding how or when to partially close or reopen schools include assessing what harm might occur due to school closure (e.g. risk of non-return to school, widening disparity in educational attainment, limited access to meals, domestic violence aggravated by economic uncertainties etc.), and the need to maintain schools at least partially open for children whose caregivers are 'key workers' for the country.*

The response to COVID-19 goes through various stages that are dynamic and not linear: preparedness, response (including containment and mitigation), transition, and recovery. In each country, public health measures are being implemented in unique ways and are resulting in different impacts on children and young people. This diversity emphasizes the need for detailed local contextual analysis.

To support the process of analyzing the risks and impact of COVID-19 on children and young people's education, protection, and health at national and local levels, the following **guiding questions** can be used. These sample questions are meant to support decision-making for closing or reopening schools and can be combined with decision-making tools such as the one in [Section 4](#). Each section heading links to further technical guidance provided in the resource section in [Annex 1](#).



NOTE: These sample questions must be adapted and added to according to the specific local context.

## **Education risks**

**Overarching question:** What are the impacts of being out of school versus going back to school on educational outcomes?

- > What are the risks to cognitive and socio-emotional learning and development in the short and long term if schools are closed and quality distance education is not available?
- > Have school leaders, teachers, students, and parents/caregivers been engaged in the planning of school closure/reopening?
- > If schools are closed, what distance education opportunities are children and young people receiving? Have children and youth who were already out of school been included in these responses? Have children and youth been asked if distance education is helping them learn?
- > Do teachers and school personnel feel supported and confident to deliver distance education? What services and supports are in place for teachers as they move between online learning and classrooms?
- > Do parents and/or caregivers feel supported and confident to support children and youth in home/online learning? How is this assessed? How are their support needs being met? What support is in place to assist them with the transition back to various models of classroom learning?
- > What provision has been made to support the equitable and inclusive learning of all children and youth, particularly the most marginalized and vulnerable groups? Are there unique risks for the more vulnerable children and youth, such as those with disabilities and special education needs? How are these risks being mitigated?
- > Have the gender/disability/economic inequalities children and youth experienced before the pandemic been exacerbated? How have these inequalities affected education provision? What measures are in place to support the most vulnerable children and youth to access distance education or to safely return to school if and when they reopen?
- > Have parents/teachers and children/youth been asked how they feel about returning to school? Would they like schools to reopen? If so, when and how? Do parents/teachers and children/youth have confidence in the process for reopening schools? Have any anxieties and concerns about a return to school been addressed (i.e. have safe school reopening guidelines been fulfilled)?
- > What are the impacts on education systems? Will capacity and resourcing be affected by school closures? What increased investment is needed to support distance and other alternative education?

## **Child protection risks**

**Overarching question:** What are the impacts of being out of school versus going back to school on child protection outcomes?

- > In the absence of contact with teachers and school staff, what access do children and youth have to other mechanisms to report and/or seek support for violence, abuse, neglect, or exploitation (noting that children and youth are not homogeneous, and analysis needs to be contextualized)?
- > What is the link between school closure and child labor? How might this impact children/youth's return to school?
- > Since schools have been closed, has there been an increase in the incidence of gender-based violence and abuse, including online/virtual sexual exploitation and violence at home and in communities (noting that these are often under-reported in normal circumstances)?
- > Has there been an increase in child marriage during school closures? Are specific measures in place to protect girls and young women?
- > Are support services available to promote teachers' and caregivers' mental health and psycho-social well-being (given the impact that this may have on students' well-being)?
- > Have children and youth been asked to express their views concerning being out of school/returning to school?
- > What has been the impact on children's mental health during school closure?

## **Health risks**

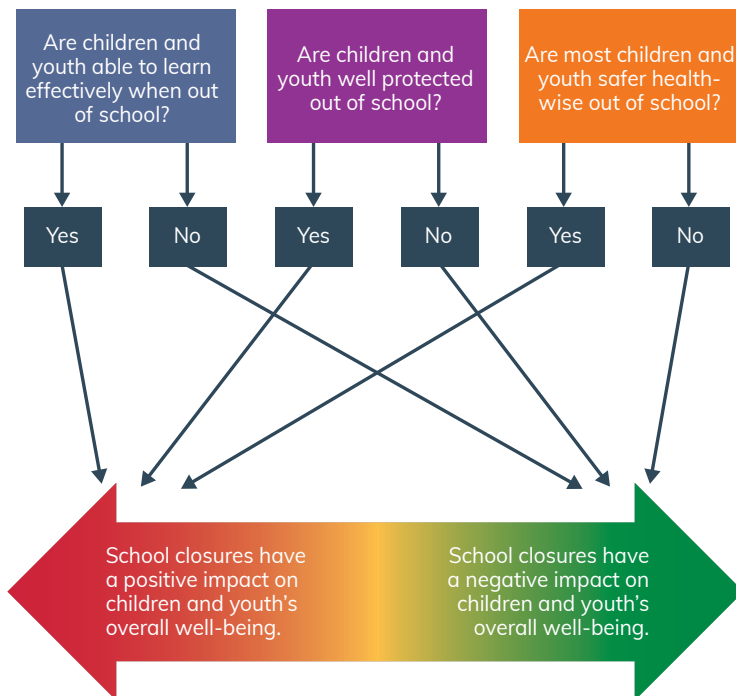
**Overarching question:** What are the impacts of being out of school versus going back to school on the health of children and youth (in terms of COVID-19 infection and other health risks)?

- > Have the health risks of reopening schools been analyzed against the checklists provided by WHO and other guidance on safe school reopening ([see Annex 1](#))?
- > How likely are children and youth to transmit the virus among themselves, their families, and their teachers in a school environment versus in their families and communities?
- > Is it likely that schools have the capacity to comply with WHO and other guidance on safe reopening of schools ([see Annex 1](#))?
- > Is the educational space sufficient to implement adequate safety measures? If not, are there other mechanisms (such as staggering class times) that can be used?
- > If schools are closed, are children and youth receiving the health/nutrition support they were getting before the closures (e.g. school meals, immunizations, etc.)? If not, how can this be addressed?
- > Have school leaders, teachers, students, and parents/caregivers been engaged in the planning of school closure/reopening? How have any health anxieties and concerns related to the risks of closing/reopening schools been assessed and addressed? What plans are in place to mitigate the impact on teachers, students, and families who may be at high risk?

# 4. CONSIDERING WHEN TO OPEN OR CLOSE SCHOOLS: A DECISION-MAKING TOOL

In high-stress, high-risk situations, it is essential that decisions be made using the best information and procedures available. The use of a decision-making tool can help ensure that decisions reflect up-to-date information and contextual considerations. The tool below is only an example. Other useful tools are also available, such as:

- a. Mind mapping;
- b. Pairwise Analysis; and
- c. Fishbone tool for root cause analysis.



### Assess the risks

What are the risks of being out of school versus going back to school on educational outcomes?

What are the risks of being out of school versus going back to school on child protection outcomes?

What are the risks of being out of school versus going back to school on the health of children and youth (in terms of COVID-19 infection and other health risks)?

### Ask the questions

In your context what long-term risks to educational attainment exist due to school closures? Are catch-up/ alternative learning classes planned or in place to mitigate these risks?

What protection risks related to school closures exist in your context? Are there any support services available to address these? What measures are in place to protect children not in school?

Are there currently COVID-19 health risks in your context? Are there facilities already in place to promote good hygiene and sanitation if schools reopen? Is there space for social distancing?

National and local policymakers are facing difficult decisions in light of the COVID-19 crisis. The initial response in many countries has been full or partial school closures to prevent transmission. However, education, protection, and health issues are all critical when deciding whether, when, and how schools should close, remain closed, or re-open (fully or partially). The questions and tools above support a localized process of discussion and decision-making on **when** and **why** to reopen schools that holistically addresses the well-being of children and youth. In many circumstances, full or partial school closures may be the correct decision. In other contexts, however, the 'best interests of the child [and youth]' may require the safe re-opening schools.

# ANNEX 1: RESOURCES

## General COVID-19 Resources

- <https://inee.org/covid-19>
- <https://alliancecpha.org/en/COVID19>
- <https://www.cpaor.net/covid-19>
- <https://www.educationcluster.net/COVID19>
- <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/technical-guidance>

## Guidance on safe school reopening

- [Safe Back to School Practitioners Guide](#), Global Education Cluster and CPOAR
- [Planning for School Reopening and Recovery After COVID-19](#), Centre for Global Development
- [Framework for reopening schools 2020](#), and related [webinar series](#), UNESCO, UNICEF, World Bank, WFP and UNHCR
- [Considerations for schools related public health measure in the context of COVID-19](#), WHO
- [Plan school reopening](#), UNESCO-IIEP
- [A blueprint for back to school](#), American Enterprise Institute
- [Supporting Teachers in back-to-school Efforts: A toolkit for school leaders](#), International Task Force on Teachers for Education 2030, UNESCO, ILO

## Education

- [Technical Note on Education During the COVID-19 Pandemic](#), INEE
- [INEE COVID-19 Resources](#)
- [Supporting continued access to Education during COVID-19](#), UNHCR
- [INEE Minimum Standards](#)
- [COVID-19 and Education in Emergencies](#), ECW
- [UNICEF EDUVIEW](#), UNICEF Data
- [UKFIET Blogs](#)
- <https://www.iscresearch.com/coronavirus-covid-19-update>
- [Closing schools for COVID-19 does lifelong harm and widens inequality](#), The Economist
- [COVID-19 Series: Education](#), Maintains - literature review

## Child Protection

- [Girls and women risk being COVID-19's invisible catastrophe](#), PLAN International
- [Technical Note: Protection of Children During the Coronavirus Pandemic \(v2\)](#), Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action
- [Identifying & Mitigating Gender-based Violence Risks within the COVID-19 Response](#), Global Protection Cluster
- [Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action](#), Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action
- [UN Convention on the Rights of the Child](#), United Nations

## Health

- [The impact of COVID-19 on Children: Policy Brief](#), United Nations
- [Coronavirus disease \(COVID-19\) Advice for the public](#), WHO
- [Policy Brief, COVID-19 and the Need for Mental Health Action](#), United Nations
- [Health, Nutrition and WASH Resources](#), INEE
- [School closure and management practices during coronavirus outbreaks](#), The Lancet
- [Centre on the Developing Child](#), Harvard
- [WFP Support Children left without meals due to COVID-19](#), WFP
- [An evidence summary of Paediatric COVID-19 literature](#), Boast A, Munro A, Goldstein H, Don't Forget the Bubbles, 2020.



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