

Policy Brief

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A Call for Action: Mitigating Long-Term Impacts of COVID-19 on Education in Africa



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The issue

During the COVID-19-related school closures, governments, including the Global Partnership for Education (GPE) partner countries in Africa, established several interventions, such as distance-learning solutions, accelerated learning, as well as catch-up programs to mitigate the short-term consequences of COVID-19. This is evidenced in the work of the KIX Observatory on COVID-19 Responses in Africa's Educational Systems,¹ among other sources. However, **little is known about the longer-term implications of the pandemic on education, especially from the perspective of local education stakeholders. Yet, in the long term, the impacts of school closures on educational systems are likely to be felt in the future, as reported by education stakeholders in Africa.** To examine potential long-term impacts of COVID-19 on educational systems, the KIX Observatory analyzed stakeholder perspectives from seven countries in Africa: Burkina Faso, Kenya, Malawi, Mali, Mozambique, Niger, and Nigeria. The stakeholders comprised 45 senior Ministry of Education officials related to programs and planning at headquarters and regional levels, as well as 28 non-state actors that work closely with ministries of education, in the seven countries.

The aim of this policy brief is to call upon governments in Africa to take practical actions to mitigate the long-term impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on educational systems. The brief presents high-level findings followed by practical policy and practice messages; it ends with a conclusion.

What we learned from the Observatory conducted in the seven countries

A survey of key stakeholders across the seven countries revealed that the long-term impacts of COVID-19 on education in Africa will affect individuals and systems. For learners, this will happen through learning loss, school dropout, and psychological well-being. For teachers, the impact will continue to manifest itself in terms of teacher attrition due to loss of employment and the resulting poverty for them and their families. With respect to school systems, teaching and learning processes will be affected by the institutionalization of information and communication technologies (ICTs), the integration of water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) practices, as well as coping with school resource constraints.

¹ <https://www.adeanet.org/en/kix-observatory>. An initiative by the Global Partnership for Education (GPE) under the International Development Research Centre (IDRC). It is managed by the Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA) in consortium with the African Union's International Centre for Girls' and Women's Education in Africa (AU/CIEFFA) with technical support from the African Population and Health Research Center (APHRC) and UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS).

A call to action

This policy brief draws the attention of governments in Africa to eight key areas that will need mitigation strategies as well as research evidence: learning loss, school dropout, learners' mental health, teacher attrition teacher mental well-being, institutionalization of ICTs, integration of WASH, and school resource constraints. These actions are grouped under three categories: learners, teachers, and school system adaptations.

1. Learners

The crash programs, including abridged curricula and arbitrary class promotions, which were established to achieve syllabus coverage, progression, and completion, **are unlikely to mitigate learning loss**, as a stakeholder from Kenya explained: *"we are trying to rush learners through the syllabus, so their acquisition of competences ... is compromised."* This has the potential risk of having gaps in foundational literacy, numeracy, and skills for a competent workforce.

Key message for policy makers

Conduct a comprehensive learning loss assessment to inform education planning in order to develop strategies, including introducing programs for remedial learning, catch-up, small-group tutoring, and/or individualized self-learning (such as computer-supported instruction). Support teachers to adapt teaching to the learning levels of students (rather than age or grade level). These strategies are likely to remediate lost learning and alleviate future competence gaps.

In addition, the unprecedented magnitude in teen pregnancy, lack of tuition for poor children, and economic downturns will negatively impact the achievement of gender equality and empowerment for women and girls as well as the schooling of vulnerable learners.

Key message for policy makers

Support the school re-entry of all out-of-school children and youth through developing and/or strengthening school re-entry policies, programs and/or strategies, such as school feeding and tuition waivers, including informal training programs to support skilling. Special focus should be given to learners with special needs, those in hostile areas and/or in internally displaced people (IDP) camps, as well as those from families with low social-economic status.

Further more, the mental health of learners was adversely compromised by tensions in homes, financial constraints, sexual and gender-based violence, substance abuse, loneliness, prolonged screen time, insecurity, and COVID-19–related deaths. This disproportionately affected the most vulnerable, such as learners with special needs and those in IDP camps. It exposed the urgency for tackling the mental health of learners, raising questions about school capacity.

Key message for policy makers

Generate evidence to support understanding of mental health issues, such as causes, risks, and treatment, to inform investments in mental health programming for students, including expanding the local cadre of health, social, and community workers, with a focus on extending advocacy, prevention, and information on the mental health of learners. This should include institutionalizing guidance and counselling in schools by recruiting qualified personnel and bolstering teacher training programs to support mental health in schools.

2. Teachers

There was a shortage of teachers upon the reopening of schools after COVID-19, largely attributed to inadequate teacher support, especially in low-cost private schools. The devastating effect on teachers at a personal and professional level has implications for student well-being, academic achievement, and the aspirations of future educators.

Key message for policy makers

Generate data on teachers and maintain a teacher management information system to ensure that policy makers, planners, and practitioners are better equipped to make evidence-driven decisions regarding teachers' support, in response to future crises that affect teachers.

3. School system adaptations

The pervasive integration of ICT, through its uptake for teaching and administration, promises advancements in pedagogy and educational administration. However, it also has implications for exacerbating pre-existing inequalities, given the inequitable access to ICT.

Key message for policy makers

Enhance infrastructure expansion, including improving access to digital technology as a public good, targeting households and schools. This will improve learning continuity during emergencies, mitigate learning loss, and alleviate the growing digital divide for Internet access. Expansion of education technology should go hand in hand with measures to enhance access to affordable Internet services and digital devices. It also implies capacity building and/or strengthening among key stakeholders, especially students and teachers, through the integration of ICT into both teaching and teacher education programs to equip teachers with the requisite ICT literacy to support teaching and learning.

In addition, WASH came up from the stakeholders' perspectives as one of the long-term positive impacts of COVID-19. Indeed, the WHO/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Program for WASH and the COVID-19 pandemic emphasizes WASH—which includes safe drinking water, facilities for hand washing, and toilets—as critical, especially for millions of schoolchildren. However, low-cost schools continue to struggle, given the inadequate funds available to develop WASH infrastructure, as the interview with a stakeholder from Nigeria illuminated: *"It was very expensive, most especially [for] the private schools ... to buy buckets, to ensure that soap was everywhere, to pay for fumigation ... not all schools could afford that."*

Key message for policy makers

Infrastructural development should entail investment in facilities associated with WASH, such as toilets, hand washing, and safe drinking water amenities, as well as quarantine in case of emergencies. School spaces should be aerated and devoid of overcrowding.

Further, the long-term consequences of poor school revenue inflows in the aftermath of the COVID-19 related school closures, especially for low-cost private schools, have implications for both infrastructural development and staffing. This is likely to disproportionately affect the quality of education in the most hard-hit private schools, with the possibility of the schools shutting down or having teacher attrition.

Key message for policy makers

Facilitate emergency preparedness through developing policies at macro (government/ministry), meso (regions) and micro (school) levels for managing crises/emergencies such as COVID-19. This should include both protocols and emergency budgetary allocations to cushion both schools and teachers, especially in private educational institutions, which were disproportionately affected during COVID-19. On the whole, policy actors and program implementers should target responses that maximize resource use for the policies and programs to have a long-lasting impact.

Conclusion

The right to quality and inclusive education, as well as gender equality and empowerment of all women and girls, is articulated in global, continental, and regional policy frameworks, including the African Union's Agenda 2063, the Continental Education Strategy for Africa 2016–2025, and the Sustainable Development Goals, among others. Yet, the envisioned long-term impacts of COVID-19 on education, as projected through impacts on learners, teachers, and school systems, are likely to

disrupt progress made towards commitments and strides in attaining inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning as well as gender equality and empowerment for all women and girls. These impacts, as corroborated by the local education stakeholders, are likely to be felt in the future, with implications leading to the imperative for evidence-based research to mitigate possible adverse effects on education within Africa.