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Reopening schools: How to get education back on track after COVID-19

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It is a ‘back to school’ season like no other: countries are beginning to reopen their school gates following weeks of enforced closures. Education authorities around the world must urgently [prepare for in-school learning](https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000373275) (https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000373275) to start up again, knowing that schools and students face unprecedented challenges in the wake of the acute phase of the COVID-19 pandemic. ‘Despite the uncertainty about the end of the pandemic, we must start planning the reopening of schools now,’ said Suzanne Grant Lewis, IIEP Director and keynote speaker at UNESCO’s recent [webinar on preparing for and managing the reopening of schools](https://en.unesco.org/events/back-school-preparing-and-managing-reopening-schools-covid-19-education-webinar-6) (https://en.unesco.org/events/back-school-preparing-and-managing-reopening-schools-covid-19-education-webinar-6)



‘It is the responsibility of governments and education providers to anticipate a reopening.’



Three urgent questions

While acknowledging that the outbreak will have a serious [impact on education in the medium and long term](http://www.iiep.unesco.org/en/what-price-will-education-pay-covid-19-13366)

(<http://www.iiep.unesco.org/en/what-price-will-education-pay-covid-19-13366>), Ms Grant Lewis urged countries to focus on the short-term perspective. In her speech, she set out three critical and immediate questions that governments and other stakeholders need to ask.

1. Timing: when can schools reopen?

‘The absolute priority is to safeguard people’s lives and well-being,’ said Ms Grant Lewis. ‘Parents, teachers, and school communities need to have confidence that the school system can protect the [physical and mental health](https://en.unesco.org/news/prioritize-health-and-well-being-now-and-when-schools-reopen)

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of students, teachers, and other education personnel.’ This means asking, for example, whether reopening schools risks spreading the virus, whether schools have the necessary hygiene facilities, how to reduce class sizes to take into account physical distancing measures, and what psychological support the school community needs. The situation is different in, and even within, each country, and measures for reopening will need to be context specific.

Ms Grant Lewis also emphasized the importance of protecting educational gains and the continuity of learning for all. ‘The impacts of school closures are likely to be unequal, and disparities should be addressed, for example by [condensing the curriculum or reorganizing exams](http://www.iiep.unesco.org/en/plan-school-reopening?utm_content=bufferc6f16&utm_medium=social&utm_source=twitter.com&utm_campaign=) (http://www.iiep.unesco.org/en/plan-school-reopening?utm_content=bufferc6f16&utm_medium=social&utm_source=twitter.com&utm_campaign=).’ She pointed out that ministries of education need to make sure that health authorities consider the school calendar when they decide on timings for reopening schools.

2. Conditions: what pre-conditions must be met before schools reopen?

The primary criteria for reopening will relate to physical protection against the coronavirus. Authorities might start by reopening schools that are in areas least affected by the outbreak or that have the most appropriate hygiene facilities. Aside from this, Ms Grant Lewis said, ‘a second practical consideration is the availability of school personnel, especially teachers. Teacher and student numbers in classrooms will likely have to change, and it may be necessary to reorganize the school day.’ She recommended using [school mapping](https://learningportal.iiep.unesco.org/en/glossary/school-mapping) (https://learningportal.iiep.unesco.org/en/glossary/school-mapping) techniques to explore, for example, double-shift schooling.

A third condition is the capacity of local administrations and institutions to make the required changes. ‘Can subnational education actors, including school principals, implement double-shift schooling? Or can they continue distance learning practices for some students while welcoming others back to the classroom?’ asked Ms Grant Lewis. ‘We need to focus on the number of teachers willing to return to work, and on the number of students at risk of dropping out of education.’

3. Processes: how can states organize the reopening of schools on a practical level?

The challenge for states is to determine which strategies and actions to take at the national and school levels. ‘One question to start with,’ advised Ms Grant Lewis, ‘is: who goes back to school first? Some countries might decide on a geographic approach, considering access to distance education as a key factor, with schools in areas with higher poverty levels being the first to reopen.’ Other strategies also exist. In China, school reopenings began with those in less populous areas, and prioritized high school students in their final years of education. Elsewhere, in Denmark and Norway, the youngest pupils have gone back first because they are less able than older students to learn at a distance.

‘When it comes to reopening schools, the “consult, coordinate, and communicate” approach is key,’ said Ms Grant Lewis. ‘It is critical to build trust among all stakeholders. This can be achieved through communication within the school community and back-to-school campaigns targeting those children most at risk of dropping out of education permanently.’

School closures are likely to have worsened educational inequalities, jeopardizing the attainment of [Sustainable Development Goal 4](https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdg4) (https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdg4), and all countries have a duty to ensure that a temporary break in schooling does not become a permanent

one for vulnerable children. Now is the time to plan and prepare for the immediate future of education.

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