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SCHOOL REOPENING IN AFRICA DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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- Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA)
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School Reopening in Africa during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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This report is one of a series produced through the KIX COVID-19 Observatory. The aim is to inform decision-makers, donors and education practitioners with emerging evidence on education policy and practice responses to the pandemic in Africa.

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About the Observatory

The KIX COVID-19 Observatory is supported by the Global Partnership for Education (GPE) Knowledge and Innovation Exchange (KIX), in partnership with the International Development Research Centre. The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent those of GPE, IDRC or its Board of Governors.

The Observatory is monitoring pandemic responses in the education systems of 40 GPE partner countries in Africa and is collecting emerging research evidence on the topic. It focuses on the pandemic's impact on the operation of education systems and the well-being of learners.

The Observatory is implemented by a consortium of [ADEA](#) and [AU/CIEFFA](#). Technical support is provided by [APHRC](#) and the [UNESCO Institute for Statistics](#).

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Photo: GPE/Tabassy Baro, Guinea, June 2015

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Executive Summary

School closures as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic have brought major disruptions to education, putting at risk recent gains in schooling access and quality, especially for girls and members of other vulnerable groups. Citing the risks to children’s mental and physical health and the long-term damage of the protracted loss of learning associated with school closures, UNICEF and the World Health Organization (2020a) have stressed the imperative of safe school reopenings,

Given the challenges of distance education in many countries of sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), reopening schools may offer the only meaningful way to reach many of the most vulnerable learners. Reopenings in Global Partnership for Education (GPE) partner countries picked up in the first quarter of 2021, with 65% of school systems fully open by January 2021, and 87.5% by June 2021. These reopenings have followed prolonged and recurring closures in most countries: 62.5% of GPE partner countries closed schools for over 200 days. Successive waves of the pandemic have forced several countries to reclose schools after full or partial reopenings.

Reopening schools during the pandemic has entailed gender-sensitive and more inclusive approaches to education, to better address the needs of vulnerable groups who are most at risk of not going back to school. Some reopening measures have been expressly targeted to mitigate the adverse effects of COVID-19 on internally displaced persons, for example.

This report synthesizes available policy and practice evidence on school reopening in 40 African partner countries of the Global Partnership for Education. It also addresses how the education needs of vulnerable and marginalized children – especially girls, displaced children, and those living in poverty – are being addressed in reopening strategies. It identifies common challenges facing educators as they try to safely reopen and address the learning needs of all children. The report highlights emerging evidence on reopening in the context COVID-19, and it concludes with six recommendations for GPE partner countries and development actors.

Methods

Using rapid scoping reviews, evidence mapping, and the team’s expert knowledge of school closure and reopening issues in SSA, we tracked education reopening measures and reviewed emerging evidence on this topic. We did so through searches of published literature, reports and data from various online libraries, education databases, and key institutional websites of national, regional and global education stakeholders. The evidence was tracked using a live [spreadsheet](#).

School Reopening Measures during COVID-19

Synthesis results show that school reopening policies and practices in the 40 GPE partner countries in Africa have focused mainly on four key interrelated areas:

- Frameworks for decision-making regarding the reopening;
- Back-to-school campaigns to encourage all learners to return;
- Health-related responses for school reopening; and
- Adaptations to learning after school reopening.

Defining effective decision-making frameworks has been an essential first step for countries in developing or updating their school reopening plans and guidelines. Most GPE partner countries have developed these frameworks in consultation with local education groups that represent key stakeholders. Following extended periods of closure and distance learning, back-to-school campaigns – featuring strategic communications, incentives, and a range of support programs – have been designed to encourage a mass return to in-class learning.

Many have a particular focus on disadvantaged boys and girls at greatest risk of not returning, and teachers at risk of COVID-19 infection.

Developing hygiene protocols for schools, based on health ministry guidelines, is another area of response that has been essential to creating a safe and healthy environment for the entire school community. In some countries, approval of school reopenings has been conditional on evidence that health protocols were being followed.

The loss of learning due to the prolonged nature of school closures – In some cases up to 200 days – has necessitated the adaptation of programs to support catch-up for students left behind, to close the gap in learning and prepare teachers for the use of adaptation strategies. Accelerated learning programs, remedial teaching and the use of education technologies are some of the approaches enabling schools to close the learning gap.

Challenges in School Reopening

Countries have faced numerous challenges as they approach the reopening of their education systems during the COVID-19 pandemic. Key challenges include:

- Fears regarding the safety of children and their teachers;
- Inadequate financing to facilitate compliance with Ministry of Health protocols, and a growing financial burden on parents facing additional fees;
- Infrastructure unsuited to ensuring social distancing and hygiene in schools already overcrowded;
- Pre-existing policies that prevent the smooth reintegration of pregnant school girls and other vulnerable learner groups; and
- a lack of adequate data (including gender-disaggregated data) and tracking of student progress.

Emerging Research on COVID-19 Implications for School Reopening

Recent research on school reopening provides some grounds for optimism, but points to several areas of concern. While research on the links between school reopenings and community transmission of COVID-19 shows that reopenings by and large have little effect on infection rates, other research on school management challenges shows that schools are struggling to cope with strict protocols. Meanwhile, there is emerging evidence that the pandemic may increase school drop-out levels, and that the closure of low-fee private schools due to school closures is displacing students and adding pressure on adjacent public schools. Ongoing research on the cost of hunger in Africa also suggests that COVID-19, together with conflict and the climate crisis, is exacerbating hunger in many parts of the continent, further compounding the challenge of school reopening.

Recommendations

To mitigate the challenges brought on by the pandemic, strengthen education system resilience, and support greater inclusion of vulnerable populations during school reopening, we recommend GPE partner countries and development actors consider the following measures:

1. Contingency planning needs to be strengthened to better respond to future education disruptions and ensure that response plans reflect the most current research evidence and best practices.
2. School reopening strategies and practices in GPE partner countries must take into account the particular needs of the most vulnerable learners, who face extra barriers in returning to school.

School policies and support systems should be flexible enough to welcome the return of pregnant teen girls and young mothers and mitigate against future disruptions of their learning.

3. Sub-national authorities in GPE partner countries should consider fostering collaboration among schools so they can learn from each other's experiences in adapting learning strategies and protocols.
4. GPE partner countries should do what they can to ensure that low-fee private schools, which play a vital role in closing supply gaps in the provision of education – do not go under. Expanding or opening new public schools would also help to meet the escalating demand for schools and help address the issue of overcrowding.
5. Infrastructure support to schools is needed to enable them to adhere to public health protocols and meet distancing requirements as learners return to school.
6. Teachers need a range of additional support to ensure their health and safety and guide them through the many teaching and learning adaptations being put in place. This may include additional professional development opportunities, psychosocial support and prioritizing teachers for vaccination.

1 Introduction

Some 250 million students in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) have been affected by school closures related to COVID-19, according to UNICEF (2020a). As successive waves of the pandemic continue across the continent, albeit with varied impact in different countries, schools have struggled to reopen safely. In some instances, openings have been partial, targeting specific grade levels or high-need groups. Even these partial openings at times have been rolled back as rising infections force new closures.

The loss of learning associated with school closure risks reversing earlier gains made in increasing school attendance in sub-Saharan Africa. Between 2015 and 2019, the number of out-of-school children and youth globally declined by about 1 million every year (UNESCO, 2019). In SSA, 97.5 million primary and secondary school-age children and youth (53% of them female) were out of school in 2018. With the impact of COVID-19, if children at risk – such as pregnant teens and those in low-income households forced to work to support their families – cannot be enticed back to class, these numbers stand to increase exponentially. Millions may never return to the classroom.

UNICEF and the World Health Organization (2020a) have stressed the imperative of safe school reopenings, citing both the immediate dangers to children’s mental and physical health and the long-term damage of such protracted loss of learning. Given the challenges of distance education in GPE partner countries, reopening may offer the only meaningful way to reach many of the most vulnerable learners. Many governments, through their ministries of education, have devised innovative approaches to mitigate the disruption of learning during closures. These include the use of television or radio to broadcast school lessons, and facilitating student and teacher interactions through Internet-based applications. But even with such innovations, many countries were, and still are, not well prepared to provide distance learning solutions to all children, especially those in areas lacking the necessary infrastructure and human capacity to package and deliver the content.

In GPE partner countries, school closures have been associated with unintended teenage pregnancies, early forced marriages, and an increased likelihood of adolescents – especially girls – dropping out of school (Affoum & Recavarren, 2020; Ethiopia Ministry of Education, 2020; Rigby, 2020; WHO, 2020; Wuilbercq, 2020). These and other pre-existing and emerging challenges have compelled governments to reopen schools despite the onset of subsequent waves of COVID-19. In each country, the decision to reopen schools has been based on critical assessment of the situation, including the level of preparedness by educational institutions, the rate of infections, and the availability of funding for needed resources. Most countries prioritized the grades that were at the end of the primary or secondary schooling cycle and about to sit for national examinations.

Against this backdrop, a gradual return to on-site learning has taken shape in most African countries. Parents, teachers, communities and their governments – and partners in the international community – are now called upon to ensure all children are ‘back to school’.

In this synthesis, we first overview the experience of school closures and reopenings in 40 GPE partner countries in Africa. We then document how education systems have approached the reopening of schools, with particular attention to how the needs of vulnerable groups of learners are being addressed. In addition to categorizing the main policy and practice responses that national governments and international partners have prioritized, we identify key challenges they have faced in ensuring a smooth return to school for most children. We also examine what recent research on school reopenings can tell us about how these African countries are responding. Based on our analyses of policy and practice responses, a series of recommendations is provided in the final section.

From the synthesis of policies and practices, four broad response areas are identified and examined. They include:

- The development of decision-making frameworks to guide reopening;
- Back-to-school campaigns;
- Health protocol guidelines for school reopening; and
- Adaptations to learning after school reopening.

This report is one of several outputs of the Knowledge and Innovation Exchange (KIX) COVID-19 Observatory, which aims to provide policymakers in GPE partner countries with actionable evidence to inform their decisions. The Observatory collects, synthesizes and mobilizes evidence about COVID-19 responses in primary and secondary education systems in GPE partner countries, focusing on both the operations of these systems and the well-being of children. Policies and practices related to school reopening in GPE partner countries in Africa are tracked, and continue to be updated, using a live [spreadsheet](#). The Observatory also tracks emerging research on COVID-19 education responses, including on interventions being tested and evaluated.

The authors of this report applied a systematic and exploratory approach to identify, gather, analyze and synthesize information on policies and practices from multiple sources. Through scoping reviews, we sought to understand what past and emerging policies and practices and reopening strategies have been used by various countries to respond to COVID-19 education-related challenges. The report covers the period from about the first quarter of 2020, when schools initially closed, to the end of June 2021, when most GPE partner countries had begun reopening schools.

Sources of information included planning, policy and programming documents of:

- Ministries of education in GPE partner countries;
- Regional and global organizations, including the African Union, KIX regional hubs in Africa, GPE, the International Development Research Centre, UNESCO, UNICEF, UNHCR, the World Bank, and the World Health Organization; and,
- Researchers and scholars such as those based in universities and research institutions.

2 School Closures and Reopenings in GPE Partner Countries

GPE partner countries in Africa have endured successive waves of COVID-19. After a first round of reopenings in 2020, several countries subsequently closed some or all schools for a second or third time, owing to a rapid rise in the number of cases. For instance, Madagascar, which closed schools in the Central Region in July of 2020, reopened them in September 2020 (Adebayo, 2020), only to close them again in April 2021. As of June 2021, they had yet to reopen (UNESCO, 2021a). Comoros' second round of closures occurred in September 2020. Following their reopening on November 30, schools closed again for three weeks in February 2021 (UNESCO, 2021a). Lesotho and Mali both endured a second round of closures in January 2021, due to a rapid rise in infections, and Kenya likewise closed schools for a second time in early 2021 during a third wave of COVID-19 infections that coincided with the school holiday period.

Full reopening of schools did not take place in most GPE countries until the first quarter of 2021. As portrayed in Table 1, about a third of the countries (32.5%) partially reopened their schools within a hundred days of their initial closure due to the COVID-19, while one-fifth (20%) implemented a full reopening after less than 100 days of closure. The majority of countries (62.5%) reopened schools after more than 200 days of closure. Burundi did not close their schools due to COVID-19, while Uganda had not fully reopened schools by the end of June 2021.

Table 1: Number of days schools were closed and corresponding proportion of GPE partner countries by end of June, 2021

| Number of days closed until reopening | Partial reopening | | Full reopening | |
|---------------------------------------|---------------------|-------------|---------------------|-------------|
| | Number of countries | Percentage | Number of countries | Percentage |
| <100 | 13 | 33.3% | 0 | 0% |
| 100-150 | 7 | 17.9% | 2 | 5.1% |
| 151-200 | 6 | 15.4% | 11 | 28.2% |
| >200 | 5 | 12.8% | 25 | 64.1% |
| No partial reopening | 8 | 20.5% | N/A | - |
| Not yet fully reopened | N/A | - | 1 | 2.6% |
| Total | 39 | 100% | 39 | 100% |

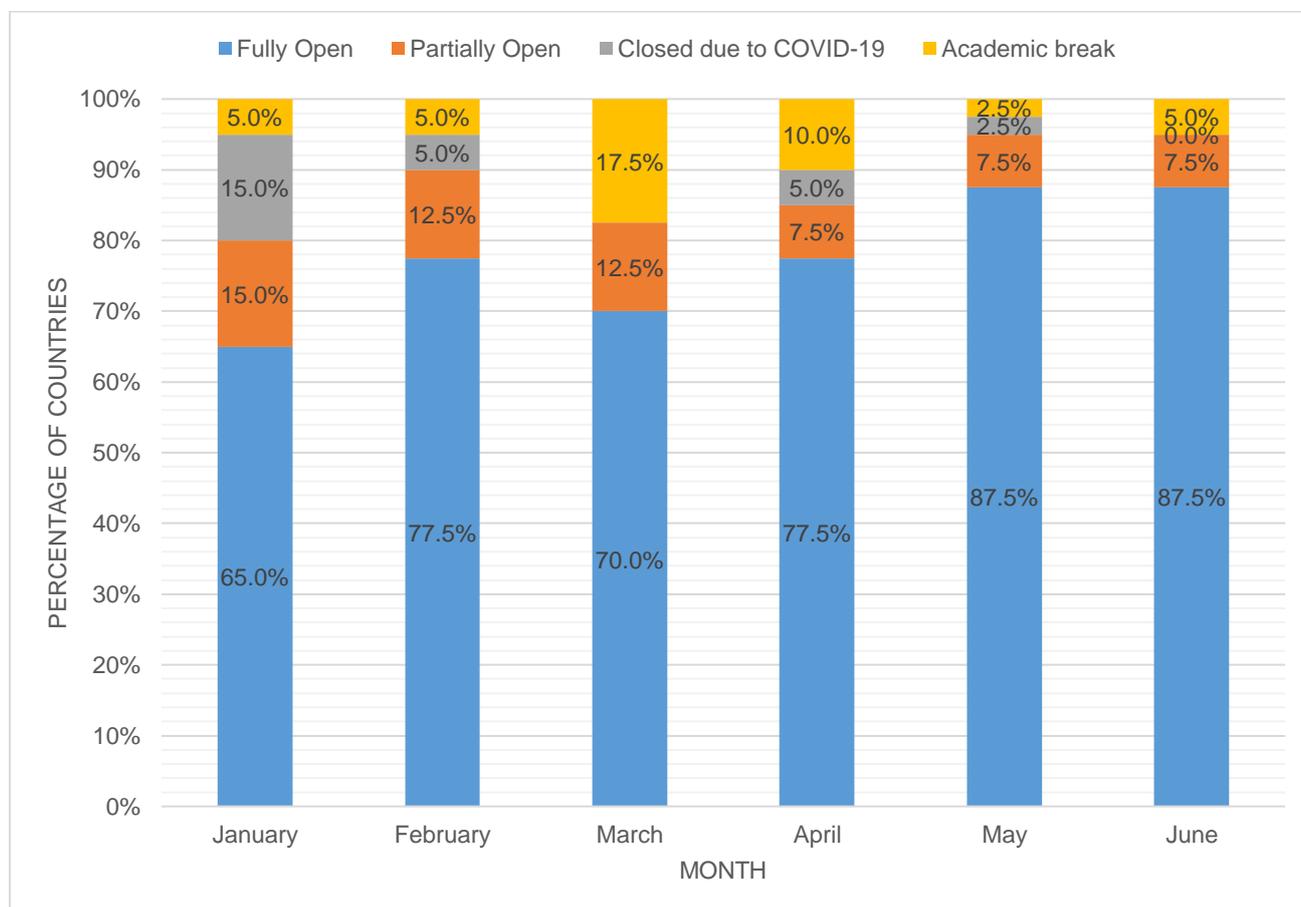
Source of data: UNESCO (2021a)

Notes: The countries in column two are not necessarily the same in column four; See this [spreadsheet](#) on reopening for the list of countries. One out of the 40 GPE countries (Burundi) did not close.

Following the advice of task forces and/or internal consultation between the ministries of education and key stakeholders, the reopening of schools was carried out in a phased manner by the majority of GPE partner countries. The grades that were expected to sit for national exams were prioritized and opened first. Burkina Faso, Guinea, Kenya, Liberia, Madagascar, Sierra Leone, Zambia and Zimbabwe, among others, reopened their schools beginning with the exam candidate classes to enable them to prepare and to assess the education systems' preparedness to fully reopen.

Patterns of the status of reopening varied from month to month in the first and second quarters of 2021. A dynamic map showing the countries' status of closure or reopening can be viewed through [UNESCO](#) or [World Bank](#) monitoring sites and via the [COVID-19 Global Education Recovery Tracker](#).

Figure 1: Status of school reopenings from January to June 2021 among the 40 GPE countries



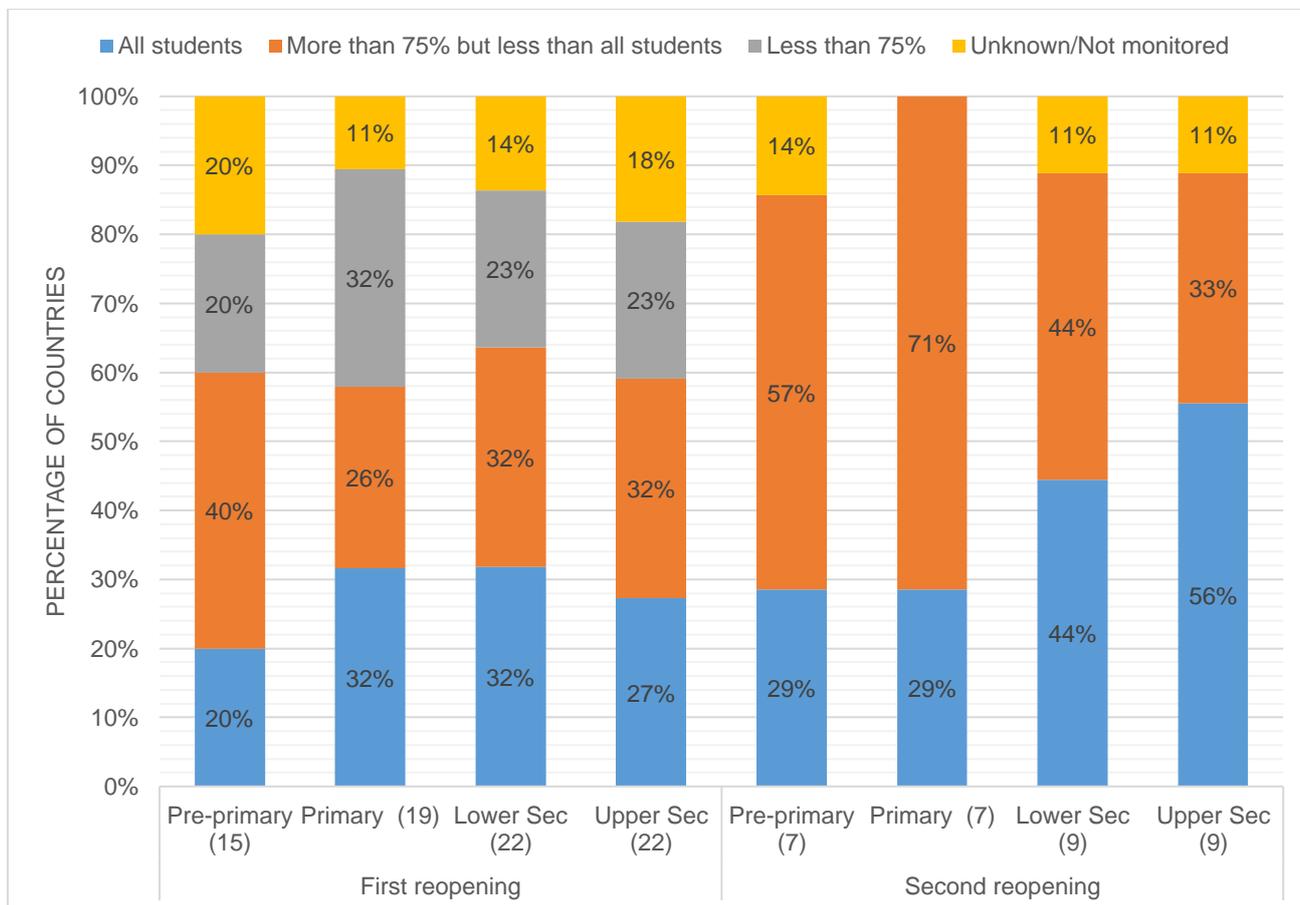
Source of data: UNESCO (2021a). Data for this chart can be accessed through this [tracker](#).

By the end of January 2021, almost two-thirds of GPE partner countries had reopened their schools, another 15% had partially reopened, and 5% were on an academic break. More countries reopened their schools over time such that by the end of June 2021, almost nine in every ten countries had reopened fully as shown in Figure 1.

In general, a decrease in enrollments has been observed during school reopenings. Figure 2 shows the proportion of students who attended on-site classes after school reopenings across GPE countries that participated in the third wave of a UNESCO, UNICEF, World Bank and OECD survey conducted from February to June 2021. During the initial reopening, only 6 out of 19 and 7 out of 22 (32%, respectively) of GPE countries stated that all students in their primary and lower secondary levels reported back to school for in-class instructions. In the first reopening, at least 75% of primary school students attended on-site instructions in 58% of the 19 GPE partner countries, while nearly one third (32%) of countries saw less than 75% of primary level students report for in-class instruction. In lower secondary, 64% of the 22 participating GPE partner countries saw at least 75% of students return to classes. In the upper secondary level, just over a quarter (27%) of 22 countries indicated that all students reported back to school. Reported re-enrollment rates appear to be considerably higher at all levels during second-round reopenings, though it should be noted that only seven to nine GPE partner countries participated in this round of the survey.

In various countries, the return to schools has been adversely affected by conflict or natural disasters. In Somalia, for example, 73% of students did not report back (Hazard & Mpoumou, 2021), while in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), one third of school children did not report back after reopening (Chance for Childhood, 2021). More detail on these challenges is provided under section 3.2.

Figure 2: Estimated share of students who attended in-class instruction after school reopenings



Source of data: UNESCO, UNICEF, the World Bank, OECD (2021)

Notes: The bracketed number in each bar's label refers to the total number of responding GPE partner countries, used to calculate the percentages indicated in that bar. The countries that participated in this survey include: Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cabo Verde, Cameroon, Comoros, The Gambia, Ghana, Kenya, Lesotho, Liberia, Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, Mauritania, Mozambique, Namibia, Niger, Nigeria, DRC, São Tomé and Príncipe, Senegal, Somalia, Togo, Uganda and Chad. Not all countries responded for each level and round of opening.

3 Policy and Practice Responses to Safely Reopen Schools

Policy and practice responses by GPE partner countries for the safe reopening of schools involved four key areas, namely: developing decision-making frameworks and approaches to school reopening; formulating and executing back-to-school campaign strategies; promoting health-related measures for the safe reopening of schools, and adopting learning adaptations suited to various contexts. This section details how partner countries addressed each of these key areas.

3.1. Developing Decision-making Frameworks and Approaches to School Reopening

Decision-making frameworks are critical in times of crisis such as that caused by COVID-19. Defining such frameworks has been an essential step for countries toward developing or updating their plans, guidelines and checklists for safe reopening of learning institutions. These decision-making structures include identifying stakeholders that must be involved to inform a country on the best available options for reopening. Most countries had not experienced a disruption such as COVID-19 before and therefore were subjected to new challenges and experiences. UNESCO advised partner countries to undertake critical analysis of their prevailing circumstances and contexts in developing COVID-19 response guidelines and decision-making frameworks (UNESCO, 2020a, 2020c).

Most GPE countries indicated that they developed their response plans under the auspices of a local education group (LEG).¹ These groups are composed of key stakeholders in the education sector and development partners, led by the respective government through its Ministry of Education. Review of various ministry guidance documents on reopening showed that countries integrated stakeholders in various ways. Some formed a task force or committee comprising various government agencies, ministries, and strategy departments, trade unions and private sector representatives to advise on how reopening should take place (Kenya Ministry of Education, 2020; Sudan Federal Ministry of Education, 2020; The Gambia Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education, 2020). Others held consultations between the line ministry and key stakeholders, such as private sector education providers, teacher unions and parents (Uganda Ministry of Education and Sports, 2021b; Sierra Leone Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education, 2020b; Nigeria Federal Ministry of Education, 2020).

In **Tanzania**, decisions affecting school reopening were made by decree. Some regional organizations also influenced decision-making, as with the joint decision by members of the West African Examination Council to prioritize the needs of grades undergoing national exams.

Through the LEGs, COVID-19 response plans and guidelines for school reopening were collaboratively developed in consultation with ministries of education. In drafting the plans, LEGs provided support by conducting situation analyses. They also supported the development of budgets, key indicators for monitoring and evaluation, and grant applications. Through these decision-making processes, countries decided on approaches to adapting learning during school closures and after reopening (as discussed in section 3.4 of this paper). LEGs also informed the development of guidelines on school reopening. Participating stakeholders took on various tasks and roles during the implementation of the policies and plans.

¹ LEG is a team that constitutes all education partners (stakeholders) in a country led by the government to participate in all stages of education sector planning from situation analysis to evaluation ([GPE](#)).

In **Kenya**, the Basic Education Response Plan and other guidelines for school reopening were developed through a participatory approach that involved field education officials, education partners, line ministries, teachers, the Education in Emergencies Working Group (EiEWG), directors from the ministry and other specialists, among others. Through this group of stakeholders, plans and guidelines were formulated and decisions made regarding reopening. Among the documents developed were the response plan, reopening guidelines, and a training module for staff (Kenya Ministry of Education, 2020).

In **Lesotho**, the government teamed up with stakeholders through the LEG, including development partners such as EiEWG, to develop its COVID-19 response plan (Lesotho, Ministry of Education and Training, 2020).

In **Liberia**, the team involved in the decision-making process included Ministry of Education officials, members of the Education Sector Development Committee, development partners UNICEF and Save the Children, and other stakeholders in the LEG. Consultations with this group occurred at every stage of decision-making. After conducting a situation analysis and agreeing on mitigation measures, the COVID-19 response plan was developed, and an application for funding was made. Implementation arrangements were coordinated by the education ministry, while each key stakeholder was assigned a role to perform. Monitoring and accountability plans were also put into place (Liberia Ministry of Education, 2020a).

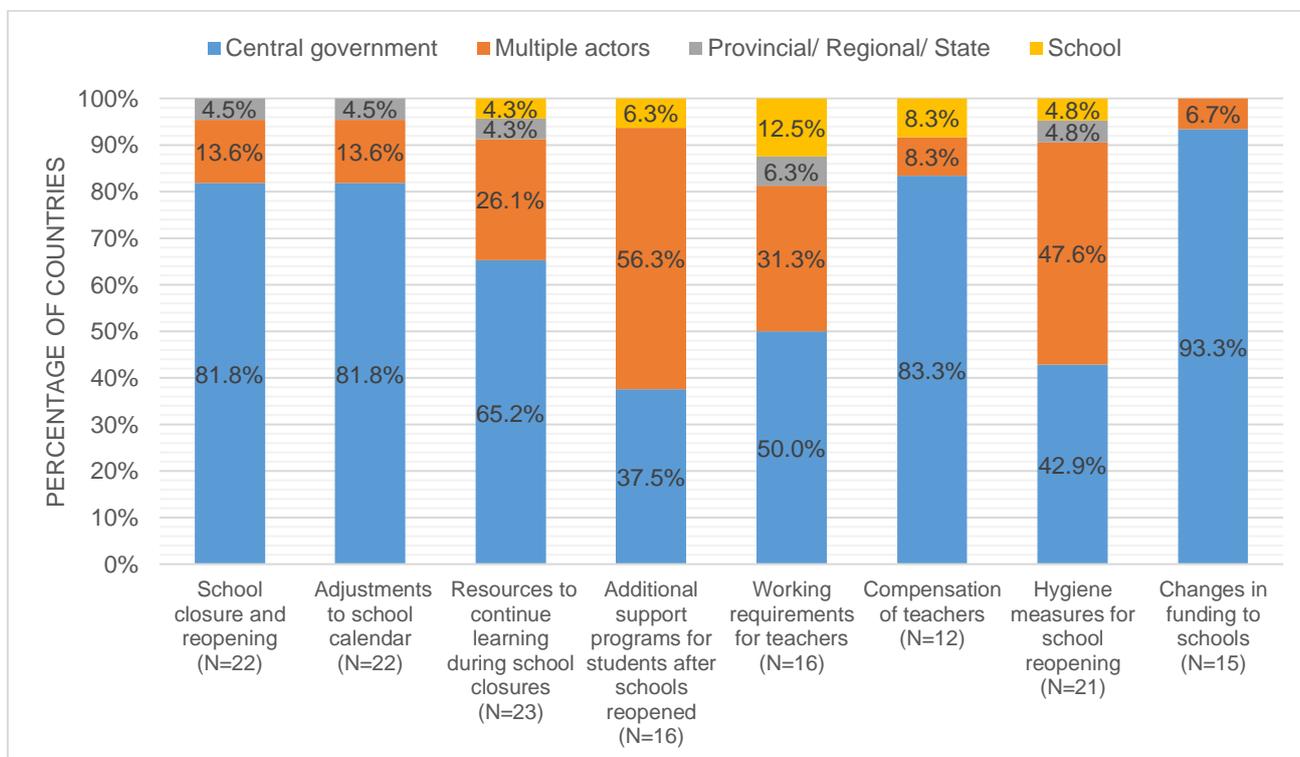
In **Togo**, the COVID-19 response plan was drafted through collaboration between the ministries in charge of education, with support from LEG members. The team involved in planning and decision-making appreciated that updating of the plan could be carried out as they gathered new information about the evolving patterns of the COVID-19 pandemic, and through continuous evaluation of the measures put in place to ensure learning continuity and the road to recovery (Togo Ministry of Education, 2020).

In **Zambia**, the Ministry of General Education worked with stakeholders and partners through the LEG to develop and implement an emergency response and recovery plan for learning continuity. The plan contained two phases: continued learning by students during school closure, and a recovery plan to ensure adequate preparation for safe school reopening when the situation was favourable. The collaboration aimed to bridge the gap in student learning and eventually ensure all necessary safety measures are in place for the reopening of all education institutions, public and private, across the country (Zambia Ministry of General Education, 2020).

Using UNESCO, UNICEF, World Bank and OECD (2021) survey data, we assessed the patterns of decision-making among the GPE countries that participated. The assessment was based on eight policy decision aspects. The central government was the key player in decision-making in relation to changes in school funding in more than 93% of countries; it also took the lead on school closures and reopenings, school calendar adjustments, and compensation of teachers in more than 80% of responding countries.

Most decisions related to additional support programs for students were undertaken by multiple actors (in over half of the countries that participated in the survey), as were decisions on matters concerning hygiene measures for school reopening (in 47.6% of participating countries) as portrayed in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Decision loci for eight educational policy measures



Source of data: UNESCO, UNICEF, World Bank and OECD (2021)

Notes: The bracketed number in each bar's label refers to the total number of responding countries, used to calculate the percentages indicated in that bar: not all countries responded to each of the eight policy decision items. The GPE countries that participated in the survey include: Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cabo Verde, Cameroon, Comoros, The Gambia, Ghana, Kenya, Lesotho, Liberia, Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, Mauritania, Mozambique, Namibia, Niger, Nigeria, DRC, São Tomé and Príncipe, Senegal, Somalia, Togo, Uganda and Chad. Two countries (Burkina Faso and Uganda) that did not respond to these survey questions were excluded in the analysis.

3.2. Back-to-school Campaigns

Back-to-school campaigns include strategic communications, incentives, and a range of support programs and other initiatives dedicated to bringing learners back to school upon reopening. Such campaigns have been needed because, during the prolonged school closures, some learners have lost interest in schooling, while others face more daunting barriers, such as unintended pregnancies, forced marriages, sexual exploitation, engagement in economic activities, mental health and nutrition issues (Affoum & Recavarren, 2020; Albrechtsen & Giannini; Ethiopia Ministry of Education, 2020; Parsitau & Jepkemei, 2020; Rigby, 2020; UNESCO, 2020b; WHO, 2020; Wuilbercq, 2020). Due to the prolonged gap in learning, along with the disruption of household livelihoods in many families, some children at risk may not return to school after reopening.

To mitigate this risk, thirty-five (90%) of the 39 GPE countries that closed their schools due to COVID-19 included back-to-school campaign initiatives in their COVID-19 education response plans, aiming to achieve a return to pre-pandemic enrolment levels for both boys and girls. These plans have included context-relevant incentives and mobilization strategies to reach children from poor households and those in marginalized areas.

Communication strategies have included: involving stakeholders such as ministry officials and local administrators in the campaigns; using mass media and social media; developing girl-friendly messages and jingles; and postering near schools, among others.

The country-level campaigns adopted several strategies, including:

- Use of national government local administrators to monitor and enforce school return by discouraging child labor in household chores (for girls) and cattle herding (for boys), as seen in Lesotho, Kenya, and Rwanda (Lesotho Ministry of Education and Training, 2020; Mutanganshuro, 2021; Rwanda Ministry of Education, 2020a; Tanui, 2020).
- Stringent guidelines to prohibit schools from hiking fees after reopening, as seen in Kenya and in Uganda, where the government, even with partial reopening, provided learning materials to discourage school fee hikes (Kenya Ministry of Education, 2020; Uganda Ministry of Education and Sports, 2021a).
- Encouraging the participation of stakeholders, such as those on the frontline, including civil society organizations that implemented education interventions to promote school return for girls who are pregnant or have given birth, and seen in Ethiopia, Kenya and Rwanda (Ethiopia Ministry of Education, 2020; Nalinya, 2021; Nigeria Federal Ministry of Education, 2020; Rwanda Ministry of Education, 2020b).
- Including the voice of youth, as seen in the United Nations Girls' Education Initiative (UNGEI) which led a series of youth-led intergenerational dialogues to promote equality and a return to school among girls (UNGEI, 2020).
- Child-friendly messaging through local mass media, as seen in Burkina Faso, Ghana, and Nigeria, where girl-friendly messages targeted rural and remote settings (Chuang, Kaye, Coflan, & Haßler, 2020; Nigeria Federal Ministry of Education, 2020; UNESCO, UNHCR, UNICEF, WFP & World Bank, 2020).
- Lifting some restrictive policies and developing more inclusive ones, such as in Sierra Leone, where the Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education adopted a radical inclusion policy that allows pregnant girls back to school – perhaps as a result of lessons from the Ebola crisis (Sierra Leone Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education, 2020a). While this policy change predates COVID-19, it has important implications for girls' school return in the context of COVID-19. With this decision, Sierra Leone joins other countries such as Zimbabwe and Senegal among others that have allowed school re-entry to pregnant girls, conditionally or unconditionally (Evans & Acosta, 2020).
- Promoting school feeding programs, as in Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Kenya, Mali, Mauritania, Somalia and Zambia, to encourage school participation by the most vulnerable children (Bulman et al., 2020; Burkina Faso, Ministry of National Education Literacy and Promotion of National Languages, 2020; Mali, Ministry of National Education, 2020; Kenya, Ministry of Education, 2020; UNESCO, UNHCR et al., 2020; Zambia, Ministry of General Education, 2020). Côte d'Ivoire accompanied meals with cash vouchers targeting the poorest households (UNESCO, UNHCR et al., 2020).

Innovative approaches have been essential to reaching all children, including marginalized populations such as girls at risk of pregnancy and gender-based violence, refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs), children from the poorest households and learners with special needs.

During school closures, girls have faced an increase in sexual harassment, female genital mutilation, unintended pregnancies and early marriages, gender-based violence, and an increased burden of household chores, limiting their study time. In Uganda, it has been estimated that more than 100,000 adolescent girls may not return to school due to teen pregnancies that occurred during COVID-19 school closures (Kaaya, 2021).

During school reopening, dedicated campaigns were focused on girls, highlighting back-to-school messages suited to a variety of contexts. These were in some cases accompanied by learner support materials, scholarships (as in Benin and Nigeria), sanitary pads (as in Kenya), school feeding programs (as in Zambia and Burkina Faso), and policies promoting school re-entry for pregnant girls (as in Sierra Leone and Zambia). A dedicated campaign by AU/CIEFFA, called AfricaEducatesHer, launched on September 11, 2020, to encourage member states and other stakeholders to take an active role in the campaign to ensure girls return to school (AU/CIEFFA, 2020).

Internally displaced and refugee children face added emotional turmoil due to their traumatic experiences of conflict or natural disaster. According to the International Displacement Monitoring Center [data](#) for 2019, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Somalia, Nigeria, Sudan and Ethiopia were the five GPE partner countries with the highest number of IDPs as a result of conflict or violence prior to the pandemic, while Ethiopia, Sudan, South Sudan, DRC and Nigeria hosted the most displaced by natural disaster. In August 2020, just a few months after the onset of COVID-19, Burkina Faso recorded one million more IDPs due to internal conflict (Lompo, 2020). In May 2021, DRC suffered a volcanic eruption which displaced some 415,700 people. The authorities in DRC have since requested that schools in non-affected areas allow displaced children to enroll to allow for continuity of education (International Rescue Committee, 2021; OCHA, 2021a, 2021b).

Support has been offered to IDPs and refugees by GPE partner states and international agencies such as the World Food Programme, and the UN refugee agency (UNHCR), including by providing food rations to families and through school feeding programs. In addition, learner support materials, such as textbooks, printed study guides, reading lists, and digital learning equipment (Danish Refugee Council, 2020; World Bank, 2020a), were provided to communities affected by violence and conflict, aiming to ensure that back-to-school campaigns during reopening include those in refugee camps. Overall, however, we are likely to see more displaced children from affected countries left out of the education system as school reopening continues.

GPE partner countries in Africa have also taken measures to address the economic hardships facing the poorest households during the pandemic and help them follow health guidelines. Burkina Faso, Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, DRC, Ghana, Mali, Mauritania, Namibia, Senegal and Togo subsidized water and electricity bills or provided them for free among poor households, for example, using government funding, donor aid or both (Grantham et al., 2021). Schools in low-resourced neighborhoods benefited from such interventions, enabling them to adhere to the public health protocols during the pandemic. Côte d'Ivoire, The Gambia, Mali, Malawi, Mozambique, Somalia and Zambia included school feeding programs in their strategies to bring children back to school. Cash transfers/vouchers were also offered in Mauritania, Sierra Leone, São Tomé and Príncipe and Togo, while family food rations were provided in Ghana, Mozambique, Sudan and Somalia (UNESCO, UNICEF & World Bank, 2020). Low-income families were also provided learning materials to support children's return to schooling in DRC, São Tomé and Príncipe, and Sudan.

Various GPE partner countries included learners with special needs in their back-to-school campaigns by providing school kits/supplies during reopening (as in Benin), ensuring provisions such as sign language interpretation, radio services and braille materials for the blind (as in Ethiopia and São Tomé and Príncipe), and providing personal protective equipment supplies to learners with disabilities (as in Ethiopia and Ghana).

In **Benin**, the government's back-to-school campaign featured: (i) mobilization activities at the community level; (ii) promoting the availability of water and sanitation facilities in schools to enhance adherence to hygiene protocols; (iii) scholarships for children from poor backgrounds; and (iv) remedial teaching (Gbaye, 2020).

In **Madagascar**, back-to-school campaigns featured reductions in school fees, a public awareness campaign, and provision of school kits containing notebooks, pens, and other classroom materials for students at 35,000 schools (Madagascar Ministry of Education, 2020).

In **Sudan**, where girls are at heightened risk of falling prey to early marriages, an aggressive campaign has targeted the most vulnerable children and those from poor backgrounds. Teachers were required to communicate with parents through phone calls and messaging applications and were provided with free phone bundles/airtime for this purpose. Other dedicated campaign strategies were to reward students who completed most of their assignments upon returning to schools. WFP also provided school meals and take-home rations as incentives for parents to send their children back to school (Dhar & Valenzuela, 2020; Sudan Federal Ministry of Education, 2020; Valdes, 2020).

3.3. Health-related Responses for School Reopening

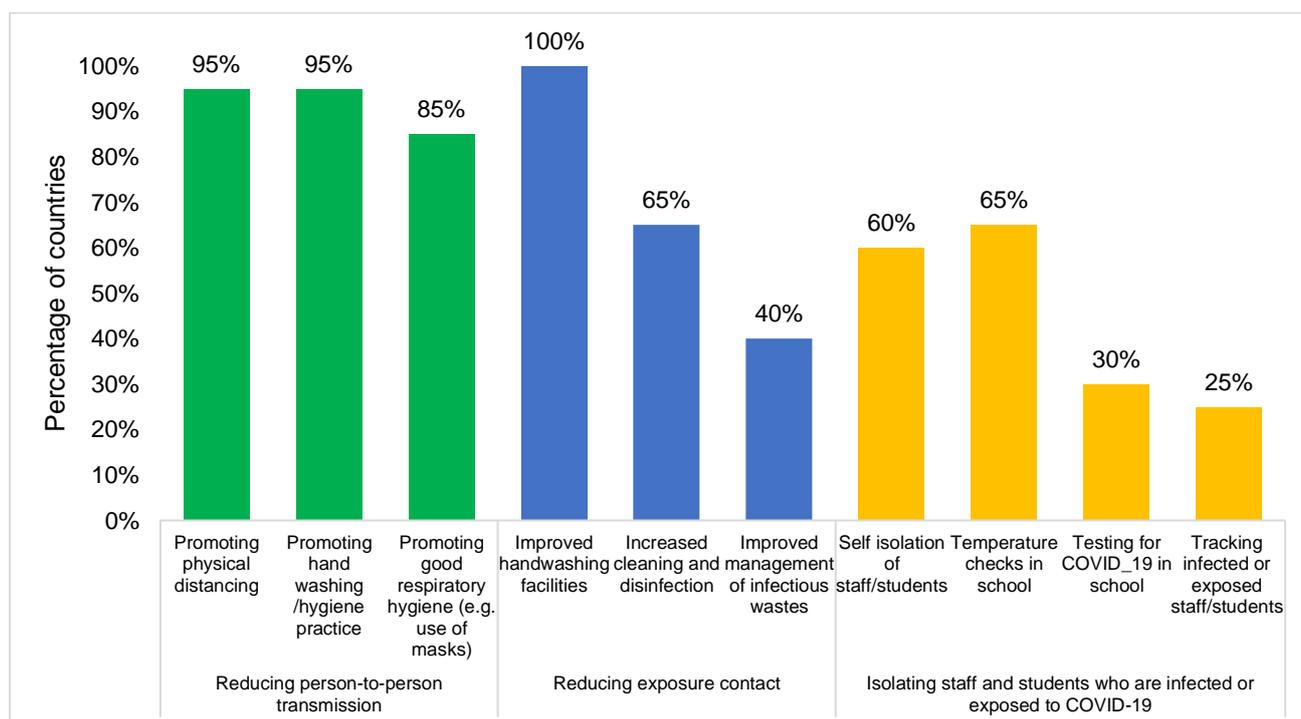
Formulating and implementing health protocols for school reopening, in consultation with stakeholders, was paramount given the prevention value of adherence to the health guidelines issued by the WHO and local health ministries. Across GPE partner countries (Ghana Education Service, 2020; Kenya Ministry of Education, 2020; Liberia Ministry of Education, 2020b; Nigeria Federal Ministry of Education, 2020; Rwanda Ministry of Education, 2020b; Sierra Leone Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education, 2020b), these protocols had much in common, including:

- Public health-related measures such as temperature screening at the points of entry for learners, staff, and visitors;
- WASH facilities such as adequate water access points, hand washing stations, and toilets and measures such as frequent disinfection of shared spaces;
- School management protocols such as discouraging unnecessary or unauthorized visitors to schools, and cancelling assemblies and sports events;
- Expansion or adaptation of physical infrastructure to permit physical distancing, including by building more classrooms, and using other school facilities such as dining halls or open ground to conduct lessons;
- Having a well-defined referral system; and
- Training teachers in how to observe health protocols, provide psychosocial support, and guide students in taking precautions to reduce the risk of infection.

We analyzed data obtained from a survey of ministries of education on national responses to COVID-19, conducted by UNESCO, UNICEF and the World Bank from July to October of 2020. The results are presented in Figure 4. According to the survey data, all 23 GPE member countries who took part in the survey indicated that they had improved hand washing facilities in a bid to reduce COVID-19 exposure through contact, and almost all (95%) indicated that they had promoted physical distancing and instituted measures to promote hand hygiene practices.

Use of masks to promote respiratory hygiene was reported by 85% of the countries, while almost two-thirds (65%) of countries required increased cleaning and disinfection of surfaces and temperature checks in schools. Only a quarter of countries had a mechanism for tracking infected or exposed staff and students, and less than a third reported testing for COVID-19 within schools.

Figure 4: Ministry of Health measures adopted by 20 GPE countries as part of school health and hygiene guidelines



Source of data: UNESCO, UNICEF and World Bank (2020)

Notes: The GPE countries that participated in the survey include: Benin, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, Congo, Côte d'Ivoire, Eritrea, The Gambia, Ghana, Lesotho, Liberia, Malawi, Mauritania, Mozambique, Niger, Nigeria, São Tomé and Príncipe, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sudan, Togo, Zambia and Zimbabwe. Three countries that did not respond to these survey questions were excluded in the analysis.

In **Chad**, addressing inadequate water access was flagged as a priority, to enable adherence to hand washing hygiene protocols. Less than 50% of primary schools and less than 40% of colleges have adequate access to water. Refugee camps likewise suffer from a lack of water, complicating a safe return to schools (Chad Ministry of Education, 2020).

In **Mozambique**, the government had to respond to two disasters in a row – the disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic and the destruction caused by Cyclones Idai and Kenneth in certain regions. A plan to rehabilitate damaged facilities and add new infrastructure such as classrooms and desks will respond to both disasters, enabling a return to classes with more physical distancing (Mozambique Ministry of Education and Human Development, 2020).

In **Rwanda**, physical infrastructure development or expansion that has been underway to reduce the problem of overcrowded classrooms and shorten the distance students must travel to school is also helping schools observe the physical distancing requirements of local health guidelines. Rwanda has constructed a total of 22,505 classrooms (Ashimwe, 2020) as part of their Education Sector Strategic Plan of 2018-2024, which aims to reduce overcrowding and double shifting (International Development Association, 2019).

In **Togo**, to address the issue of water shortages and access, the government planned to connect all schools – from basic to tertiary levels – with water and sanitation facilities. It also prioritizes building school community awareness on the benefits of installing hand washing facilities, using easily available materials (Togo Ministry of Education, 2020).

Vaccination – perhaps the single most effective health measure against COVID-19 infection – has been unattainable for most Africans due the lack of vaccine availability on the continent. Nonetheless, in some GPE countries, including Côte d'Ivoire, The Gambia, Malawi, Rwanda and Uganda, older teachers and other school workers were prioritized for vaccination given their vulnerability as frontline personnel. In Kenya, about one-third (153,000) of primary and secondary school teachers had received a first dose of vaccine by the end of June 2021 (UNESCO, 2021b). All teachers were given priority for vaccination, but teachers older than 58 years of age were nonetheless urged to stay home during school reopening (Kitimo, 2021). In Somalia, half (8,500) of primary and secondary teachers had had a first dose by mid-2021 (UNESCO, 2021a). However, we find more than one-third (37.5%) of countries have not prioritized teachers in their vaccination drive as shown in Table 2. In Benin, the government rolled out COVID-19 mass testing for teachers to reassure parents about school safety (World Bank, 2020b).

Vaccination rates in SSA are among the lowest in the world, as shown in the Our World in Data [live tracker](#). As of July 5, 2021, over half (55%) of GPE African partner countries had less than 2% of their population vaccinated (with a first dose) and 23% of the countries had just 2 to 4% of their populations vaccinated. In most countries, less than less than 1% of the population had been fully vaccinated. For safe reopening, UNICEF (2020b) has underscored that vaccination – along with mental health and psychosocial support, and training on how to conduct face-to-face teaching in the context COVID-19 – will be required to protect teachers and other school staff as they implement various school reopening adaptations devised by governments. It is therefore extremely important that access and availability of vaccines be improved to enhance better coverage.

Table 2: Teacher's COVID-19 vaccination priority status among the 40 GPE countries in Africa

| COVID-19 vaccination priority status | # (%) of countries | Countries |
|--------------------------------------|--------------------|--|
| Priority group 1 | 6 (15.0) | Comoros, Côte d'Ivoire, Kenya, Malawi, Rwanda, Uganda |
| Priority group 2 | 9 (22.5) | Central African Republic, Congo, Ethiopia, Lesotho, Mozambique, Sierra Leone, South Sudan, Sudan, Zimbabwe |
| Priority group 3 or lower | 1 (2.5) | The Gambia |
| Not prioritized | 13 (32.5) | Benin, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Chad, DRC, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Madagascar, Mali, Niger, São Tomé and Príncipe, Senegal, Tanzania |
| Priority group unspecified | 10 (25.0) | Cabo Verde, Cameroon, Djibouti, Ghana, Guinea, Mauritania, Nigeria, Somalia, Togo, Zambia |
| Missing information | 1 (2.5) | Eritrea |

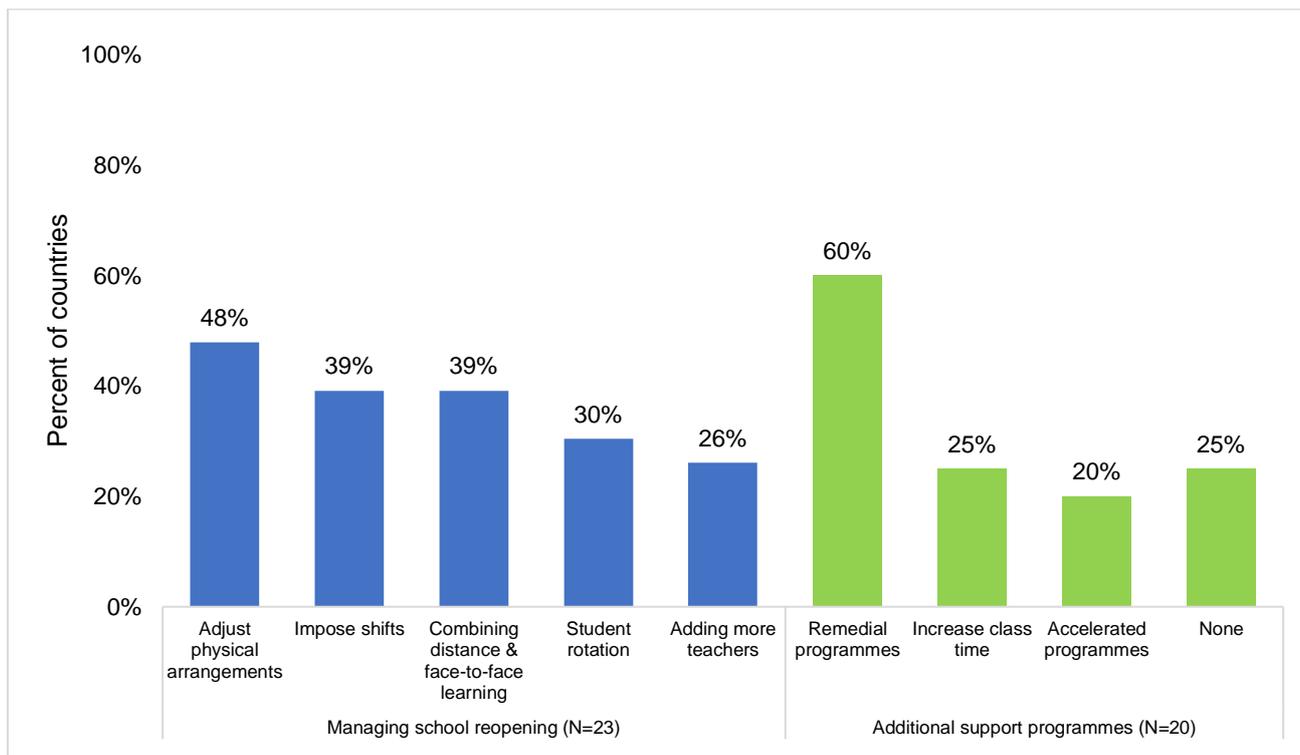
Source of data: [UNESCO](#) (2021b)

Note: As per data available as of June 22, 2021

3.4. Adaptations to Learning

Educators have had to make significant changes to their teaching, learning and assessment strategies during COVID-19, both in operating schools remotely and as they reopen for in-class teaching. In approaching school reopening, these adaptations have encompassed both changes to the physical environment and class size management strategies, and changes in education programming to help students overcome the protracted loss of learning during school closures.

Figure 5: Adaptations to learning during school reopening among 23 GPE countries in Africa



Source of data: UNESCO, UNICEF, and World Bank (2020)

Notes: Three countries (out of 23) where respondents indicated “Don’t Know” in questions regarding ‘Additional support programmes’ were excluded from the analysis. A list of the 23 countries that participated in this survey is provided under Figure 4.

As shown in Figure 5, the main types of adaptation included:

Adjusting physical arrangements

As indicated in Figure 5, almost half (48%) of the 23 African GPE member countries that participated in the UNESCO, UNICEF, and World Bank (2020) survey adapted their classroom set up to accommodate physical distancing and other COVID prevention measures. Adjustments included expanding infrastructure, splitting classrooms or grades, increasing seating, moving learning outdoors, and using other school facilities such as dining halls for learning. Cameroon, Kenya, Malawi, Niger, Lesotho, Rwanda, Somalia and Togo are among the countries that took such measures. However, these arrangements also called for more teachers to handle the additional classes, or teachers taking on additional classes, moving from one to the other (Kalekye, 2021; Rwanda Ministry of Education, 2020b; UNESCO, UNICEF & World Bank, 2020). More than a quarter (26%) of GPE partner countries surveyed added more teaching staff to allow for smaller class sizes and greater physical distancing.

Some schools established or set aside isolation rooms for suspected COVID-19 cases among learners and staff. These rooms served as holding areas, as they waited for health personnel to come and transfer the suspected case. Having such rooms also provided psychological comfort to the school community, against the fear of virus spread in schools as observed in Sierra Leone and Senegal (Senegal, Ministry of Education & Ministry of Employment Vocational Training and Crafts, 2020; Sierra Leone Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education, 2020b).

Adjusting class schedules

Along with changes in classroom set up, countries have also had to adapt classroom schedules by recommending student attendance be staggered in shifts or on alternating days. For instance, in Senegal, the education ministry planned to develop a guide for a staggered school re-entry, spelling out different schedules for various groups of students. In The Gambia, a double-shift system was recommended by stakeholders. In Nigeria, the ministry recommended that schools with high enrolments would stagger their attendance. Scheduling shifts were also applied in Cameroon, Malawi, Mozambique and Somalia (Nigeria Federal Ministry of Education, 2020; Senegal Ministry of Education Ministry of Employment, 2020; The Gambia Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education, 2020; UNESCO, UNICEF & World Bank, 2020).

Reorganizing the school calendar

The first round of school closures occurred when most African countries were in the middle of an academic year, which went uncompleted in 2020. As seen in Table 1, some GPE partner countries lost over 200 school days. Most GPE countries reorganized the school calendar to make up for this lost time. The exception is Burundi, which did not close schools. Some countries condensed the curricula, offering core content on an accelerated timeline, as in Mozambique, while others, including Zambia and Kenya, shortened their normal school calendars and school holidays. It is hoped that undertaking these measures will eventually enable countries to resume their normal school calendar, as Kenya, for instance, aims to do by 2023 (Igadwah, 2020).

Partial reopenings

In some countries, partial reopenings have provided a way of adapting to the new normal, learning how schools could cope with COVID-19 with just a few grades in session before opening fully. Partial reopening allowed schools to apply lessons learned and improve face-to-face interactions with learners while observing health protocols. Prioritizing students scheduled for national exams also allowed schools to fast-track cohorts working toward these assessments. As shown in Figure 1, about 12.5% of GPE partner countries, including Eritrea, Lesotho, Mozambique, South Sudan and Uganda, were still only partially open as of the end of June 2021.

Introducing remedial programs

Remedial programs focus on core skills and aim to close the gap between what the learners already know and what they are expected to know at a given point in time (Rawe, 2020; World Bank, 2021). With the onset of COVID-19, many students struggled to keep pace in their academic work. Remedial programs were the most widespread programs introduced to help these struggling learners catch up. As noted in Figure 5, 60% of GPE partner countries surveyed adopted remedial programming, including Burkina Faso, Eritrea, Mozambique, Niger, São Tomé and Príncipe, Togo and Zambia (Chuang et al., 2020; UNESCO, UNICEF & World Bank, 2020). These programs included adding time – mainly on weekends or during school holiday periods – to make up for lost learning. A quarter of the countries surveyed increased class instruction time, while an equal proportion did not initiate any catch-up initiatives. In Malawi, Sykes (2021) observes that home learning, and adding more time for core subjects were used to help students catch up. One fifth of countries offered accelerated learning programs to enable some groups of children, such as those who might otherwise have graduated or completed other milestones, to quickly recover lost ground.

Accelerated learning

Accelerated learning programs have also been offered to some students facing learning challenges during COVID-19. These programs include flexible and age-considerate catch-up initiatives, that deliver curriculum over a shorter timeframe. Such programs are suitable for over-age children or those who have experienced disruptions of education delivery due to poverty, disaster, or other sources of upheaval (UNESCO, UNICEF, & World Bank, 2020). Four of the 20 GPE countries (The Gambia, Sudan, Togo, and Zambia) that participated in the survey conducted by UNESCO, UNICEF, & World Bank (2020) indicated that they offered this adaptation during school reopenings.

4 Challenges in Implementing School Reopening Policies and Practices

Being a novel experience for governments across the GPE partner countries, the COVID-19 pandemic demanded many timely decisions and actions to adapt existing schooling systems and processes for re-entry. GPE partner countries experienced, and continue to experience, a number of challenges with school reopening, including public fears, inadequate financing, gaps in infrastructure for spacing and hygiene, pre-existing policies that prevent pregnant girls and young mothers from attending school, and a lack of adequate data and tracking of student progress.

One barrier has been overcoming parents' and teachers' understandable fears of infection. These have been noted in Ethiopia, The Gambia and Kenya, among other countries (Khodr, 2020; Jeng, 2020; Nyamweya, 2021). In some GPE countries, teachers expressed their apprehensions about safety through their teacher unions, citing concerns of unpreparedness for reopening. In Zimbabwe, many teachers did not report back immediately after reopening, citing low salaries: they expected additional pay in light of COVID-19 (Fitzpatrick, Korin, & Riggall, 2020).

In terms of finance² for reopening, many GPE countries had inadequate internal funding to facilitate compliance with Ministry of Health protocols, such as providing for water access and social distancing, in addition to lacking funds to meet other emerging expenses such as distance learning (Mozambique Ministry of Education and Human Development, 2020; São Tomé and Príncipe Ministry of Education, 2020). Consequently, many received external funding from GPE and other funders to facilitate school reopening (ADEA, AU/CIEFFA & APHRC, 2021; Djibouti Ministry of Education and Vocational Training, 2020; Lesotho Ministry of Education and Training, 2020). This has gone some way to ease the financial burden, but the needs are greater than available resources. In Liberia, the National Teachers Association of Liberia donated personal protective equipment worth \$2,292 on April 1, 2020 to be utilized by education workers (Education International, 2020).

Funding shortfalls were addressed in some schools by increasing fees to cover the additional expenses of preparing for safe reopening. These fee increments placed a greater burden on parents and slowed the return to school among children from households economically hard hit by COVID-19 impacts, as seen in Ghana and Rwanda (Africanews, 2021; Ashimwe, 2021). In Equatorial Guinea, Kenya, Liberia, Mali, Senegal, and Sierra Leone, the loss of income during school closures led some low-fee private schools (LFPS) to close permanently, after they were unable to pay rent or meet teacher's salaries. These closures have led to job losses among teachers, and parents' consequent search to re-enroll their children in neighboring private schools that are still open. In some cases, the displacement of students has increased pupil-teacher ratios in public schools (Alam & Tiwari, 2021; Niazi & Doorly, 2020).

Preexisting challenges with infrastructure is another widespread challenge, especially in schools that are already overcrowded. Ghana, Nigeria and Rwanda, for example have average class sizes in primary school of 39, 51 and 43, respectively. To meet the need for social distancing, Ghana is moving learning outdoors while Nigeria is splitting classes and Rwanda is adding more classrooms (Ananga & Tamanja, 2017; Rwanda, Ministry of Education, 2019; Statistica, 2018). Inadequate access to running water and water points in schools has impeded compliance with requirements for frequent hand washing, as witnessed in Ethiopia and Lesotho (Ethiopia Ministry of Education, 2020; Lesotho Ministry of Education and Training, 2020). A report by UNICEF and the WHO (2020) estimated that in 2019, only about 44% of children in SSA had access to water in schools. In Guinea-Bissau and Niger, only 12% and 15% of schools respectively had basic hand washing facilities (Bisin & Thompson, 2020).

² More information can be obtained in the report, [Financing Education in Africa during the COVID-19 Pandemic](#) (ADEA, AU/CIEFFA & APHRC, 2021).

School re-entry in some countries is also impeded by existing regressive policies, such as those that prevent pregnant girls and adolescent mothers from attending school. Despite widespread recognition that education is their fundamental right, some GPE partner countries, including Equatorial Guinea, Tanzania and Togo, still have policies that allow dismissing pregnant girls, leading to the end of their studies. Many more countries have policies that are not explicitly clear about girls' school re-entry after giving birth. Zimbabwe made some strides by amending its education act in August 2020: it is now illegal to expel a student due to pregnancy (Ord, 2020).³

The ability of schools to monitor student progress during school closures and after reopening is also constrained, both by a general lack of gender-disaggregated data, and – in more than one-third of GPE partners countries surveyed (UNESCO, UNICEF & World Bank, 2020) – by the lack of tracking. A lack of disaggregated data undermines the ability of education systems to ensure that the most vulnerable children – from pregnant girls to displaced or special needs children – are benefitting from school reopening. Capturing such data through platforms such as education management information systems and vertical/horizontal information flows can strengthen the ability of education leaders to analyze situations and developing appropriate responses and suitable policies (data2x, 2020; GPE, 2020; UNICEF & UIS, 2016).

³ More detail on school re-entry policies for adolescent mothers and pregnant girls in GPE partner countries can be found in Table 1 of the report, [The Well-being of School Children in Africa during the COVID-19 Pandemic](#) (ADEA, AU/CIEFFA and APHRC, 2021).

5 Emerging Research on School Reopening during COVID-19

As many countries continue to reopen their schools either partially or fully, research in this area is gradually emerging, most of it conducted by UN agencies and NGOs. The resulting evidence will help answer some questions that were unclear during the debut of the pandemic, and may inform better approaches to future school system disruptions. This section presents a brief synthesis of evidence so far on school reopening.

Table 3: Focal areas for emerging research on school reopening

| Research focus | Details |
|--|---|
| Effects of COVID-19 on low-fee private schools (LFPS) | Closure of schools, as in Ghana and Kenya; Transfer of children from LFPS to public schools, as in Kenya and Nigeria; Financial hurdles, as in Ghana and Uganda. |
| Effect of school reopening on community transmission | Exploring links between school reopening and any rapid rise in infections in eastern and southern Africa. |
| School management challenges under strict COVID-19 protocols | Aspects of low teacher motivation, challenges in tracking learner dropouts, teachers' induction issues, e.g. in Rwanda; Lack of effective communication systems due to a lack of resources and prior inequalities in some countries, e.g. in Ethiopia. |
| Estimating school dropouts due to COVID-19 | Proportion of students not returning to school after reopening in SSA. |
| Social and economic impacts of child undernutrition in Africa | A continent-wide initiative within the framework of the Revised African Regional Nutrition Strategy (2005-2025). Ongoing since 2010, the study has been completed in 21 member states. |

Effects of COVID-19 on low-fee private schools

Emerging evidence indicates that LFPS experienced economic shocks during the closure of schools due to a lack of revenue, most of which is typically acquired through school fees. The loss of revenue resulted in many low-fee schools being unable to pay staff salaries or ensure education continuity, leading to the closure of many such schools. In Ghana, it is estimated that before COVID-19, only a third of LFPS were profitable. In Kenya, 191 schools closed down affecting thousands of learners, while in Uganda, about 200 private schools were up for sale as of September 2020 (Dignitas, 2020; Niazi & Doorly, 2020; Otieno, 2020; Sustainable Education & Enterprise Development, 2020).

Effect of school reopening on community transmission

Research on the impact of school reopening on COVID-19 transmission suggests there has not been a rapid surge of COVID-19 infections after schools reopened in various parts of the world, including in eastern and southern Africa (UNICEF, 2021). Furthermore, the evidence suggests that the younger the children are, the lower their susceptibility to infection (Bailey, 2021; Harris et al., 2021; Nyamweya, 2021; UNESCO, UNHCR et al., 2020; Yoon et al., 2020).

School management challenges under strict COVID-19 protocols

Findings in this area indicate that it has not been easy to achieve optimal performance in classroom and school management, largely due to low teacher motivation, difficulty in tracking student dropouts, the challenges of inducting newly recruited teachers and running catch up programs for students, and concerns about staff health and safety (VVOB – education for development, 2021). Inequalities driven by marginalization had an impact on communication effectiveness before COVID-19 in certain parts. For instance, in Ethiopia, evidence shows that as many as 40% of school principals in the Somali Region had no access to radios or TVs (Yorke et al., 2020) which were the main sources of distance learning solutions. It indirectly reveals that learners were even further disadvantaged by the education continuity approaches and lack of up-to-date communication about the status of COVID-19. It is hence essential to devise dedicated catch-up strategies and better ways to disseminate correct and relevant information to teachers and learners upon reopening (Yorke et al., 2020).

Estimating potential school dropouts

According to UNICEF, school closures due to COVID-19 disrupted learning for 250 million children in SSA. Even after the reopening, millions will become permanent dropouts (UNICEF, 2020a). Predictive research on the impact of COVID-19 on children suggests that there will be a surge in school dropouts, especially among girls from disadvantaged backgrounds (Rafaeli & Hutchinson, 2020). World Vision estimates that about 1 million girls in SSA will not return to school due to pregnancy and/or early marriages (Baker & Kariuki, 2020). These studies suggest mitigation strategies such as those discussed under the back-to-school campaigns (Baker & Kariuki, 2020; UNICEF, 2020a).

Cost of hunger in Africa

Since 2010, the African Union Commission (AUC), in collaboration with other partners, has been spearheading the Cost of Hunger in Africa, a multi-country study on the economic and social impacts of child undernutrition in Africa. The study has been completed in 21 African countries so far, with results showing an association between child undernutrition and education attainment, mortality and general wellbeing. It has generated a series of recommendations for member countries on optimizing locally supported school feeding programs (AUC et al., 2020). School feeding programs – which can enhance student re-entry upon school reopening – are critical in the fight against hunger. Oxfam International (2021) classifies conflict, COVID-19 economic shocks, and the climate crisis as three lethal Cs escalating the effect of hunger in populations around the world. In SSA, the COVID-19 pandemic has conspired with these other crises to turn the Central African Republic, DRC, Ethiopia, Lesotho, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan and the West African Sahel region into ‘hunger hotspots’, further complicating school reopening (Food and Agriculture Organization, 2020; Oxfam International, 2021).

6 Conclusion and Recommendations

To contain the spread of COVID-19, and flatten the infection curve, GPE partner countries instituted a wide range of measures, including school closures and lockdowns. These have disrupted the school calendar and learning, and had serious unexpected social outcomes such as an increase in pregnancy among school girls, inadequate access to school meals, and psychosocial stress among teachers, children and their caregivers. After long and recurring closures, and the need to adjust to the 'new normal', schools have started reopening, either partially or fully, mostly in the first quarter of 2021. It has been evident that contingency planning was lacking among the countries: the process of developing COVID-19 response plans thus started as schools closed. The need to institute a culture of contingency planning – to respond to education disruptions and keep plans up to date with emerging research – has been a vital lesson from this experience.

To prepare schools for reopening and beyond, the ministries of education in GPE partner countries – in collaboration with local education groups and development partners like UNICEF and GPE, with support from ministries of health – instituted a range of policy and practice measures to ensure children and staff safety. In most GPE partner countries in Africa, measures to prepare for reopening included: the use of decision-making frameworks to plan and guide the return to school; widespread back-to-school campaigns using national and local mass media and a range of incentives; developing and implementing health protocols to guard against possible infections; and adapting learning strategies and settings to safely adjust to the new normal and help students recover from extended periods of lost learning.

Key programming challenges that complicate school reopening plans in GPE partner countries include parents' and teachers' safety concerns about infection and school preparedness; the enduring problem of inadequate financing to support safe and effective reopening; inadequate infrastructure to ensure proper adherence to health protocols; pre-existing policies that are a barrier to girls' return to schooling; and a lack of adequate data and tracking of student progress to ensure their success.

Globally, the COVID-19 pandemic is an unprecedented new experience, and educators are challenged by its implications for reopening. Research on this topic is just starting to emerge. Available evidence reviewed for this study sheds light on COVID-19's impact on low-fee private schools; how school reopening may affect community transmission of the virus; how schools are managing to reopen under strict COVID-19 protocols; the pandemic's potential for increasing school dropout rates; and the role the pandemic may be playing in aggravating the hunger crisis in parts of SSA, further complicating school reopening.

From this synthesis, the following policy **recommendations** emerge:

1. Contingency planning needs to be strengthened to better respond to future education disruptions and ensure that response plans reflect the most current research evidence and best practices. Having such plans prepared ahead of time will enable faster decision-making and a more rapid response to a future pandemic, mitigating its adverse effects on learners. For future preparedness, strategies must enable outreach to all children and stakeholders, ensuring education continuity for all learners.
2. School reopening strategies and practices in GPE partner countries must take into account the particular needs of the most vulnerable learners, who face extra barriers in returning to school. Displaced and refugee children, hard-to-reach children from low-income families and girls must be specifically targeted in back-to-school campaigns, with sufficient funds budgeted to tailor communications, incentives and other activities most likely to increase their levels of reenrollment. They need to be seen as part of the mainstream education system and not left largely to humanitarian agencies.

School policies and support systems should be flexible enough to welcome the return of pregnant teen girls and young mothers and mitigate against future disruptions of their learning. This could include allowing them flexible school schedules to cope with child-care demands, and consistent psychosocial support services to manage any social stigma they may be experiencing. Guidelines could be developed to define how and where they may attend school, how the system will integrate their needs; and how they can access additional resources (through social safety nets) to support themselves and their babies. Improvements in collecting, tracking and analyzing gender-disaggregated data for all categories of vulnerable and special needs learners will be instrumental in strengthening policies and strategies to ensure their educational progress.

3. Since many of COVID-19 response measures are new to education systems and schools, sub-national authorities in GPE partner countries should consider fostering collaboration among schools so they can learn from each other's experiences in adapting learning strategies and protocols. Lessons learned from their COVID-19 responses could be shared through professional development days and other events planned in school calendars as a way of strengthening school system resilience in future crises.
4. Given the critical role played by private sector investment in closing supply gaps in the provision of education, and reaching vulnerable populations under-served by public schools, GPE partner countries should do what they can to ensure such schools do not go under. Expansion or development of new public schools would also help to meet the escalating demand for schools due to population growth and increasing urbanization; this would help address the issue of overcrowding and enable schools to observance physical distancing requirements.
5. Infrastructure support to schools must be provided, especially to those lacking adequate water points to adhere to public health protocols or with insufficient space to accommodate the distancing needs of learners returning to school.
6. Teachers need a range of additional supports to ensure their health and safety and guide them through the many teaching and learning adaptations being put in place – from the introduction of remedial and accelerated learning programs to changes in the academic calendar and classroom management strategies. This support may entail additional professional development opportunities along with psychosocial support and prioritization for vaccination.

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