POLICY PAPER

WEIGHING UP THE RISKS:
SCHOOL CLOSURE AND REOPENING
UNDER COVID-19 — WHEN, WHY, AND
WHAT IMPACTS?

SUMMARY
PURPOSE

• This policy paper presents a framework on when and why to reopen schools or to close them/keep them closed.

• It reviews the impacts of school closures on children and youth’s holistic well-being, and presents a continuum to support decision-making processes on 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.**
THE CHALLENGE

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).

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.

This paper asks the following fundamental questions:

• Are children and youth able to learn effectively when out of school?
• Are children and youth better protected in or out of school?
• Are most children and youth safer health-wise in or out of school?
KEY CONSIDERATIONS

The safety and well-being of children and youth must be put at the center of educational decision-making in a COVID-19 response.
KEY CONSIDERATIONS

Across the three sectors most critical to safe schooling, school closures can:

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Child Protection</th>
<th>Health</th>
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<td>• Negatively impact learning outcomes of children and youth.</td>
<td>• Negatively impact the mental health and well-being of children and youth</td>
<td>• May not significantly reduce the risks of COVID-19 infection and transmission in contexts</td>
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<td>• Negatively impact teachers’ mental health and access to income.</td>
<td>• Heighten the risk of exposure to child labor, all types of violence and exploitation, and (for girls) early marriage and teen pregnancies.</td>
<td>• Lack of access to in-school nutrition and health provision may lead to additional health and developmental risks in certain contexts</td>
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CONTEXTUALIZING DECISION-MAKING

Considerations

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
# Contextualizing Decision-Making

## Guiding Questions

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<td><strong>Overarching question:</strong> What are the impacts of being out of school versus going back to school on educational outcomes?</td>
<td><strong>Overarching question:</strong> What are the impacts of being out of school versus going back to school on child protection outcomes?</td>
<td><strong>Overarching question:</strong> What are the impacts of being out of school versus going back to school on the health of children and youth?</td>
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<td><strong>Sample question:</strong> If schools are closed, what distance education opportunities are children and young people receiving?</td>
<td><strong>Sample question:</strong> What access do children and youth have to other mechanisms to report and/or seek support for violence, abuse, neglect, or exploitation?</td>
<td><strong>Sample question:</strong> Is the educational space sufficient to implement adequate safety measures?</td>
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CONSIDERING WHEN TO OPEN OR CLOSE SCHOOLS

A Decision Making Tool

- Are children and youth able to learn effectively when out of school?
  - Yes
  - No

- Are children and youth well protected out of school?
  - Yes
  - No

- Are most children and youth safer health-wise out of school?
  - Yes
  - No

School closures have a positive impact on children and youth’s overall well-being.

School closures have a negative impact on children and youth’s overall well-being.
CONSIDERING WHEN TO OPEN OR CLOSE SCHOOLS

Key Questions

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?

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?

These questions and tools support a localized process of discussion and decision-making on when and why to reopen schools.
FOR ADDITIONAL GUIDANCE:

- **Read the full policy paper** where you'll find additional resources in the annex – including links to guidance on how to reopen schools safely and inclusively;
- **Visit INEE's COVID-19 page**; and
- **Visit The Alliance COVID-19 Resource Hub**