Supporting teachers in back-to-school efforts
Guidance for policy-makers

This document provides guidance to policy-makers on measures to support teachers and education staff when schools reopen, during and after the COVID-19 crisis

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Key messages

→ As schools reopen, the **safety and health of teachers, learners and education support staff** is of paramount importance. Each school must apply internationally recognized health and safety measures and hygiene protocols to the greatest extent possible, according to their school infrastructure, budget, staffing, resources and supplies.

→ **Social dialogue** with teachers, staff and their representative organizations is essential in developing and implementing safety and health measures and all other school-related pandemic policies.

→ Back-to-school responses to COVID-19 must anticipate the **psychological and social-emotional impact of the pandemic** on all learners, teachers and education support staff, and ensure that resources and support services are accessible and available to any members of the school community.

→ It is vital that **teachers and school support staff receive adequate professional training and preparation** to facilitate the back-to-school effort. This should take into account health and sanitation protocols and guidelines, the requirements for teaching and learning in reconfigured schools and classrooms, the challenges of reduced classroom sizes and instructional time, and the demands on teachers who conduct both face-to-face and remote instruction.

→ Education systems need to ensure **adequate qualified staff are mobilized, scheduling is updated and teachers' rights and working conditions are protected** during back-to-school efforts. Considerations should include: recruiting additional teachers; staggered or part-time schedules; teachers' own family obligations and personal risk factors; and the capacity to ensure minimum hours of instructional time during the school day.

→ Despite pressures on financial resources, **investing in education responses is critical** to address teachers' and schools' changing needs.

Introduction

Across the world, millions of teachers, education support staff[1] and learners are returning to classrooms as schools reopen after closures due to the COVID-19 crisis.

From the beginning of the crisis, teachers have been vital to ensure learning continues through distance learning, where feasible, and that learners' well-being is considered. With the return to schools, teachers, school leaders and education support staff will play key roles in creating safe learning spaces, adjusting curricula and assessment, and supporting marginalized learners.

It is important that the timing for the reopening of schools be guided by the best interest of the whole school population, preparedness of the education system and overall public health considerations. Students' and teachers' return will need to be decided based on an assessment of the measured benefits and risks and informed by cross-sectoral and context-specific evidence for education, public health, social and economic factors.

The situation requires that governments engage in ongoing policy dialogue, to rapidly develop and communicate national plans and protocols to guide the return to school. Central authorities may then decentralize decision-making and implementation so that local authorities can develop responses based on local needs and priorities, including developing individual school plans.

Education authorities face difficult choices in reopening schools. For this reason, these guidelines present a series of recommendations, while recognizing the necessity for countries to identify their own priorities given the national context and make informed decisions through dialogue with all stakeholders.

These guidelines were developed to support policymakers in their decision-making and in developing school opening procedures. Additional information is available online, such as the [Framework for Reopening Schools](#) and the [WHO considerations for school-related public health measures.](#)

I. Social dialogue and communication

Social and policy dialogue between school authorities and the education community is essential to craft effective responses to the COVID-19 pandemic at the national, district and school levels. Dialogue should include teachers and school staff and their representative organizations, parents, local communities and students. It will ensure that all perspectives are heard when planning for school safety and developing teaching practices to mitigate post-pandemic learning loss. Dialogue should also include representatives of vulnerable and marginalized populations to ensure their needs are also considered.

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[1] [Education support staff](#) include a wide range of professional, administrative, technical, and general staff working within the education sector such as teaching assistants, school nurses and psychologists, administrators, cleaners, food workers, and bus drivers.

Education authorities should:

→ **Ensure that teachers, education support staff and their representatives are consulted in decision-making and planning,** including the timing and processes for the safe reopening of schools. Ensure the representation of women in social dialogue structures and joint occupational safety and health committees.

→ **Prioritize open, clear and regular communication and dialogue** between teachers and school leaders, as well as communities, parents and learners. Use traditional broadcast media as well as digital platforms, including social media.

II. Safety and health

As schools reopen, the health of learners and school staff is of paramount importance. Safe and healthy working conditions are fundamental to decent work in schools and critical for maintaining motivation and effectiveness during and after the pandemic. Measures to ensure safety and health at schools for learners and staff should be adapted to local contexts, in line with any ratified international conventions, national laws and national health measures. Education authorities should:

→ **Adhere to general principles of occupational health and safety**, in particular COVID-19 guidelines released by international organizations (World Health Organization), in which teachers and education support staff cooperate with school leaders to ensure their own safety and that of students and other colleagues. Provide information on risks in

the school environment to the teaching workforce, ensure free testing in suspected cases and free periodic testing where feasible, and build systems to report suspected cases.

→ **Apply measures to prevent infection and provide personal protective equipment,** and training on how to use it correctly. Involve teachers in discussions on how to apply international standards in their classrooms and the school as a whole. Develop criteria and inform teachers of regulations for reorganizing classroom learning, including setting upper limits on numbers of students, aligned to physical distancing standards.
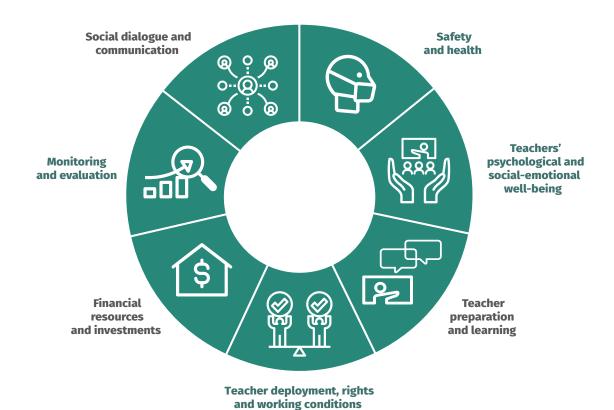
III. Teachers' psychological and social-emotional well-being

The COVID-19 pandemic may result in psychological distress for teachers, students and their families. For teachers, distress can stem from both the related health risks and the increased workload of teaching in new and challenging ways with inadequate training. This can lead to burnout, resulting in high rates of absenteeism, and can even lead some teachers to leave their jobs, undermining efforts to build school resilience. Education responses to COVID-19 should thus ensure teachers and education support staff receive ongoing psychosocial support. This will be critical for teachers who are tasked with providing the same support to students and families. Education authorities should:

→ **Prioritize support for teachers' and students' physical, psychological and social-emotional well-being** over academic obligations and provide teachers with guidelines on expectations for teaching, learning and assessment. Guarantee that teachers, including contract teachers, continue to receive regular salary and benefits to avoid uncertainties. Where possible, streamline administrative paperwork and reduce reporting obligations.

→ **Ensure resources are made available for teachers to receive psychological and social-emotional support** and train school leaders and teachers, in collaboration with teacher training institutes, to recognize signs of distress in both staff and learners and take action.

→ **Protect vulnerable and at-risk groups,** such as teachers and support staff who may be vulnerable, including women, those who are of advanced age and those who have a pre-existing illness. Train school leaders and teachers to identify at-risk students to mitigate dropout and help those out of school to return. Recognize that female teachers have a key role in reaching at-risk girls and train teachers to help students who may be suffering from trauma.

→ **Combat discrimination and stigmatization.** Ensure that appropriate policies and regulations are in place and that school leaders and teachers are supported to prevent exclusion and bullying resulting from COVID-19, including of school staff and learners who are perceived as being infected based on identifying factors such as ethnicity.

IV. Teacher preparation and learning

It is vital to consult teachers and their representative organizations about the return to school, and to give teachers and education support staff adequate training and resources to resume classroom instruction. Such support is particularly important where additional strain may be placed on teachers' available time if they are required to conduct both face-to-face and remote education, if there are staggered approaches in the return to school or if parents opt to keep students at home. Education authorities should:

→ **Involve and support teachers in decisions on adjusting curricula and assessment.** Involve teachers and their representative organizations during national consultations to identify key education goals, reorganize curricula and align assessment based on the revised school calendar.

→ **Recognize teachers' key role** in identifying learning gaps and organizing instructional strategies, including support to disadvantaged learners. Support teachers to reorganize classrooms to allow delivery of individual instruction and assessment corresponding to accelerated learning and remedial responses, while adhering to regulations on physical distancing. Provide teachers with guidelines on how to balance teaching responsibilities between pupils in classrooms, those continuing to learn remotely, and others in blended approaches.

→ **Train teachers for emergency responses, innovation and alternative teaching methods.** Review, along with teacher representative organizations and teacher educators, current teacher policies and development frameworks to update provisions for distance education and education in emergencies to strengthen the resilience of education systems. Co-operate with teacher training institutes to enhance training and tools that reinforce teachers' capacity for pedagogical innovation, including digital literacy, ICT and child-centred teaching skills.

→ **Postpone or adapt teacher performance evaluations** to account for changes in teaching practices. Ensure that evaluations have a formative function that reviews how teachers have implemented innovative approaches to ensure all children have access to continued learning opportunities and a socio-emotionally supportive learning environment.

→ **Establish peer support networks and communities of practice** for teachers and promote collaboration at school, district, national and global levels to share common good practices in the return to school.

V. Deployment, teachers' rights and working conditions

Deciding how and when the return to school should happen is a complex undertaking. Given the necessary health and safety precautions, including physical distancing, school reopening could reveal gaps in human resources and create difficult working schedules and routines. With education systems already under strain, there is a risk that decision-makers could choose this moment to reduce costs, jeopardizing teachers' rights and working conditions. Education authorities should:

→ **Ensure sufficient teaching staff and support personnel.** If teacher gaps are identified, develop rapid recruitment strategies including temporary contract teachers, substitute teachers and teaching aides, in dialogue with teacher representative organizations. Deploy teaching staff based on minimum professional qualifications, an assessment of teaching competencies and personal attributes such as gender, age, culture and language.

→ **Preserve teachers' rights and status** by ensuring that salaries and benefits – including sick leave and medical benefits – are provided according to standards set out in civil service regulations or contractual obligations, including during periods of school closure or individual isolation due to the pandemic.

→ **Develop flexible scheduling plans and policies** such as a staggered return, alternate days or double shifts, to facilitate physical distancing. To motivate teachers, the use of measures such as double shifting, which helps reduce class sizes, should be reflected in teacher remuneration. Ensure a minimum of instructional hours per day.

→ **Support teachers and education support staff with family responsibilities** through flexible working arrangements, especially for women, who will often bear the majority of family duties during the pandemic.

VI. Financial resources and investments

Costs related to teacher's salaries and benefits constitute the largest recurrent cost in education budgets in most countries, especially low-income economies. Available resources may decrease if national income declines as a result of the COVID-19 crisis. Education authorities should:

→ **Assess the impact of the crisis on education budgets and adjust** to ensure a coordinated response that meets revised goals and priorities. Where budgets are lacking, consider reallocation strategies and build synergies with the donor community so that cost-cutting does not affect teacher conditions, teaching or learning outcomes.

→ **Resist practices detrimental to the teaching profession and education quality,** such as increasing teaching hours or recruiting untrained teachers. Encourage private providers to maintain all salary payments to teachers and other support staff.

→ **Invest in teachers and education support staff** including salaries, distance and emergency education and teachers' psycho-social support.

→ **Invest in the necessary school infrastructure** and where possible, renovate, improve or install needed facilities. Provide learners and teachers with required personal hygiene and sanitation equipment, such as antibacterial products, masks and gloves.

VII. Monitoring and evaluation

As schools reopen, it will be critical to monitor and evaluate the situation and adapt as necessary. Ministries of Education, decentralized authorities and school leaders should develop frameworks for measuring and benchmarking progress during the different planned phases. They should take into account teachers' roles in providing quality teaching and fostering a safe learning environment. Education authorities should:

→ **Continually assess health risks and protective factors** to inform further decision-making about the timeline and procedures for the return to school. Monitor teacher and learner absences to track incidence and progression of illness, and assess the need for psychosocial support. Gather disaggregated data on the learning needs of vulnerable groups, including girls, the disabled, the displaced, cultural and linguistic minorities, and learners with pre-existing health conditions.

→ **Develop and implement systems to monitor teachers' situations,** using any education or teacher management information systems, related to deployment, teacher rights and working conditions (including working and teaching hours). Develop proxy indicators for stress associated with changing roles and responsibilities, and concerns related to health and well-being. Monitor training interventions to support teachers in the return to school and concurrent distance education of students learning from home.

A full list of resources as well as a Toolkit for School Leaders is available on-line at www.teachertaskforce.org. See also a full list of International Labour Standards and resources on the Right to Education