

The United National Economic, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)

UNESCO is a specialized agency of the United Nations aimed at promoting international collaboration through educational, scientific, and cultural reforms. UNESCO supports worldwide literacy and promotes quality education as a fundamental human right. UNESCO may accomplish this mission by setting educational standards, mobilizing support for action, monitoring progress through the Global Education Monitoring Report, funding projects (through very limited direct investments, more commonly endorsing projects to be picked up by other funding sources), providing technical guidance to design policies, and convening international forums to discuss global challenges.

Preventing a Lost Generation: Managing the Impact of COVID-19 on Global Education

“Education is a fundamental human right. It has long held a special place in the hearts and minds of people across the world, and for good reason. Throughout history, it has been a source of personal dignity and empowerment and a driving force for the advancement of social, economic, political, and cultural development. Yet today, beset by inequalities and struggling to adjust to the needs of the 21st century, education is in crisis. The impacts of this crisis play out over time and often go unseen. But they are profound and will be felt for decades to come.”

- UN Secretary-General António Guterres

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic brought the world to a halt, dramatically reshaping our daily lives. Among the institutions most deeply affected by the pandemic were our education systems. UNESCO now estimates that one billion children missed out on at least one full year of in-person schooling, marking the worst shock to global education on record (World Bank Group, UNESCO, UNICEF, 2021). Prior to the pandemic, 57 percent of children in low- and middle-income countries could not read or comprehend a basic text by age 10 — a situation deemed a global learning crisis in 2019. But post-pandemic, the World Bank predicts this "learning poverty" figure could climb to 70 percent (World Bank Group, June 2023).

To keep children in education, many schools turned to remote and hybrid education. This shift, while innovative, has presented its own set of challenges, deepening an already striking imbalance in student achievement. While richer countries quickly moved to online learning, many others struggled due to lack of resources and technology. For context, during Tanzania’s school closures, only 6 percent of homes had children tune in to lessons on the radio, only 5 percent watched lessons on TV, and fewer than 1 percent could study online (McKinsey & Company, 2022). In many low- and middle-income countries, learners and teachers often lacked any form of outside-the-classroom lessons. Though almost every country

attempted to provide remote learning, its effectiveness paled in comparison to traditional classroom instruction, leading to significant learning loss.

Learning loss refers to any reduction in a student's knowledge or skills over time, especially when education is disrupted. Learning loss can occur during periods like summer vacation or other prolonged school closures or disruptions caused by natural disasters, strikes, or pandemics like COVID-19.

Even in countries like the United States, learning loss is pervasive. Over the pandemic, 2/3rds of high schoolers reportedly struggled with coursework due to home disruptions and mental health concerns (Silwa et al. 2023). The National Assessment of Educational Progress scores for both math and reading fell sharply in 2022 and 2023 compared to 2019, a downturn that erased 40 percent of the test score gains made since the 1990s (NAEP 2022). Meanwhile, parents in the US have started to undervalue in-person education, causing the K-12 chronic absenteeism rate (the percent of students that miss 10 percent or more of the academic year) to jump from 16 percent in 2019 to 33 percent in 2022. As a result, just under 16M students are still missing out on essential learning experiences (Nelson 2023).

Left to their own devices, students are not just going to “catch up.” Even relatively short disruptions to learning can have long-term consequences. Economists estimate that without remedial education, COVID-era learning deficits in grade 3 will result in up to 2.8 years of lost learning by grade 10 (Angrist et al. 2022). Without significant intervention and investment, this generation of students could lose an estimated \$21 trillion in future earnings due to lost schooling—roughly 17 percent of global GDP in 2023 (Global Education Monitoring Report Team 2023).

Too many regions of the world are reverting to a “business as usual” approach. Only 1 in 5 countries had a detailed and comprehensive strategy to recover and accelerate learning after schools reopened, and less than a third of countries have implemented known cost-effective policy measures that would increase educational attainment (World Bank Group 2023). Without a plan to recover and accelerate learning, these learning losses will continue to accumulate worldwide.

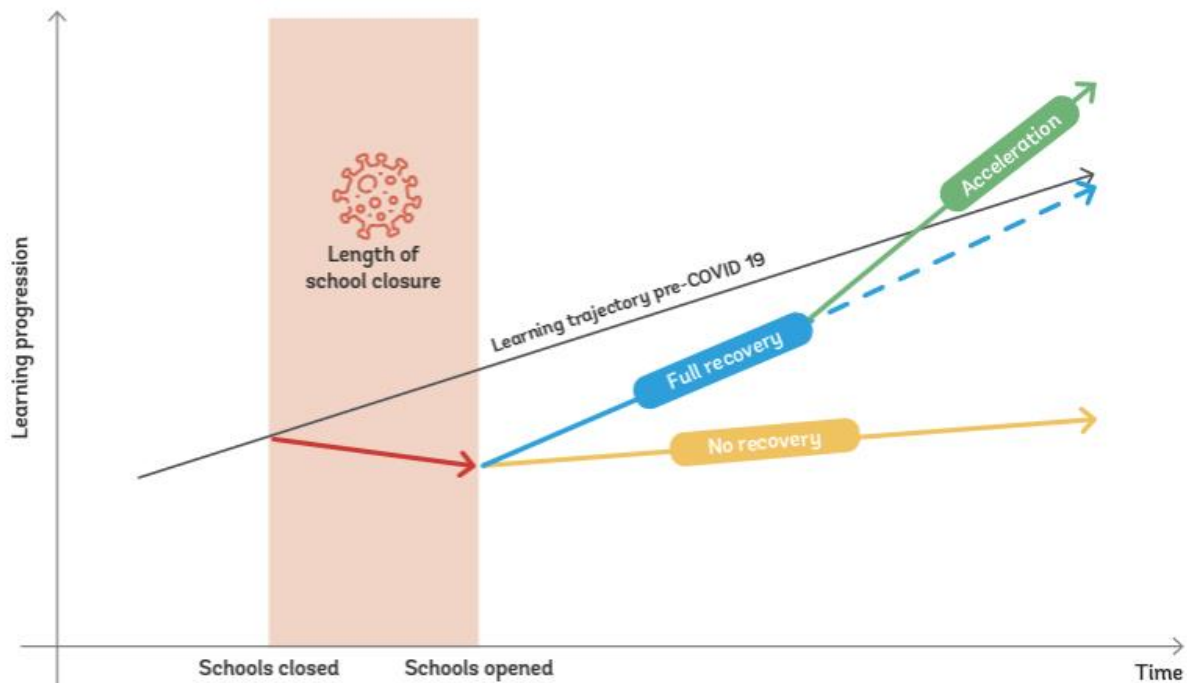
Problem Identification

Global education today faces two daunting challenges that severely undermine the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). First, students are returning to school displaying performance considerably below anticipated benchmarks for their age and grade. Even in the world’s richest economies, students are not on track to a full learning loss recovery by high school graduation. Second, there is a growing population of students that may never return to school. Economic strain brought on by the pandemic has

driven many families to resort to child labor as a means of immediate financial relief. This second issue is especially relevant for girls, with the pandemic putting girls at an increased risk of dropping out of school, child marriage, early pregnancy, and child labor (World Bank et al. 2022).

Under the guidance of UNESCO, this committee is tasked with a mission of paramount significance: to prevent the emergence of a "lost generation" of students, forever marred by the educational aftershocks of the pandemic.

Image 1: Future learning is at risk without action. This image shows hypothetical learning trajectories for students post-COVID. The yellow line indicates the “business as usual” outcome. The blue line shows a UN-supported learning “recovery” path, and the green shows a “learning acceleration” path (for many, pre-pandemic levels are not a sufficient goal).



Source: UNICEF, UNESCO, World Bank 2021. [The State of the Global Education Crisis: A Path to Recovery](#).

UNESCO’s Education Sector: A Brief History

UNESCO’s history is steeped in the practice of rebuilding education systems from the ground up. The organization was founded after World War II with the goal of rebuilding schools, libraries, and museums that had been destroyed in Europe over the course of the war. Since then, UNESCO’s Education Sector has evolved to address education-related issues in all 194 of its member states. Today, the main mission of

UNESCO's Education Sector is to lead the international community in achieving Sustainable Development Goal 4.

The UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development set out 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), with SDG 4 dedicated to ensuring inclusive and equitable education for everyone. To track its progress, SDG 4 established ten targets, including providing comprehensive primary and secondary education; ensuring access to quality early childhood development; promoting gender equality in education; fostering education for global citizenship; and increasing the number of qualified teachers, among others. Disruptions from the pandemic have led the international community to fall behind on every single one of these targets. Low- and lower-middle-income countries currently face a nearly \$100 billion annual financing gap to reach their SDG education targets by 2030 (Global Education Monitoring Report Team 2023).

Current Initiatives to Address Learning Loss

In response to pandemic-related learning disruptions, the UN has introduced the RAPID Framework for Learning Recovery and Acceleration: **R**each all children; **A**ssess learning; **P**rioritize fundamentals; **I**ncrease the efficiency of instruction; and **D**evelop psychosocial health and wellbeing. RAPID was designed to provide countries with a comprehensive range of policy options that align with its five central goals, including how to get children enrolled in school and retained in school and regularly assessing learning levels to identify and address gaps in knowledge with catch up programs..

Importantly, the RAPID Framework hinges upon data-driven policy recommendations. Overcoming learning loss will require a contextually adapted recovery program, using a slew of evidence-based strategies that embrace experimentation (monitoring, assessing, and iterating policies as they succeed and fail). Some examples of evidence-based policies are detailed below.

Table 1. Evidence-Based Learning Recovery Programs

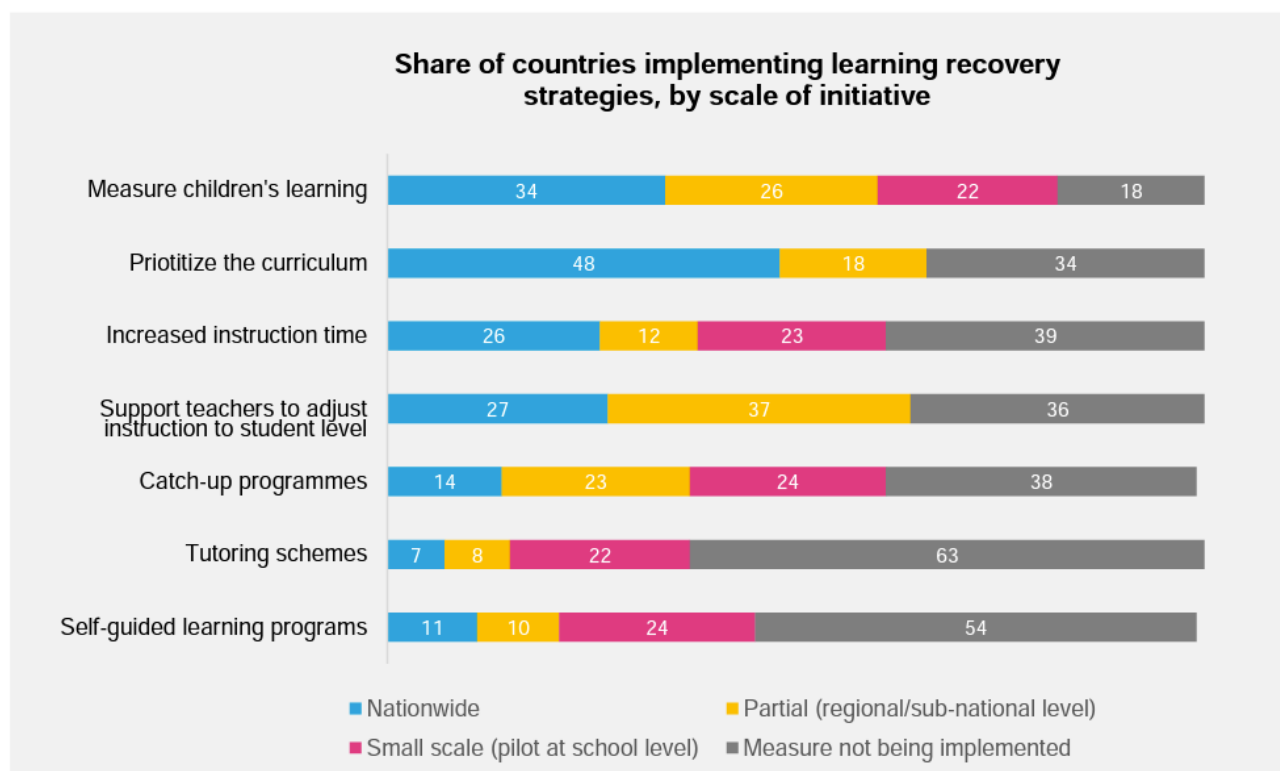
Country	Problem	Policy
India	Students not coming back to school	In 2021, India launched door-to-door surveys to identify out-of-school children ages 6-18. Surveyors helped families develop re-enrollment plans and identified common barriers to education. States in India then provided targeted supports like housing assistance and family counseling. One state re-enrolled 80 percent of the 19,000 out-of-school children identified by surveys.
Argentina	Lack of reliable student learning data impedes recovery efforts	Argentina launched a new nation-wide classroom assessment—the Census on Oral Reading Fluency—that measures how well and quickly students can read a short passage. This enabled educators to identify critically low levels of reading ability, and targeted interventions have

		reduced the percentage of children in this category from 23 percent to 14 percent in just one year.
Indonesia	Current curricula not matching the needs of students with learning loss	The Merdeka Belajar (Emancipated Learning) movement cut curricula in grades 1-3 by 30-50 percent per subject. Approximately 1/3 rd of schools adopted this simplified approach. A year later, grade 1-3 students in these schools excelled in literacy and numeracy, gaining an extra 4 months of learning. The government is now implementing this Emancipated Curriculum across primary and secondary levels to address pre-pandemic learning setbacks and boost recovery.
Jordan	Significant differences in ability level within the same class of students (heterogenous classroom)	Within Jordan's enhanced learning program, the curriculum instructs educators to conduct short comprehension assessments every 20 minutes. As a practical measure, students display their responses on small whiteboards, allowing teachers to gauge if the class is prepared to progress.
North Macedonia	Students with depression and anxiety lacking "perseverance of effort" to succeed in education	A national experiment measured the impact of an intervention that cultivated resilience and grit through a series of lessons delivered weekly for an hour. Students participating in this program reported improvement in self-regulation and were more likely to engage in sustained study efforts. Among disadvantaged students, these lessons resulted in higher GPAs.

Source: Sanchez et al. 2023

Addressing learning loss is more than just a short-term fix. Strategies need to tackle immediate issues and, at the same time, take on the deeper, long-standing problems in education systems. This implies the need for big, bold reforms. At the same time, many regions of the world will be facing significant financial challenges in the coming years. So, while the need is pressing, policymakers must carefully balance these ambitious goals with what is financially feasible. In Sierra Leone, in the wake of the 2014 Ebola outbreak, the government introduced The Free Quality School Education policy, which includes free admission and tuition to all children in school and provides money for books. This allowed 800,000 additional children to enroll in education, but it also meant education spending increased from 15 percent of the total government budget to 22 percent of the total government budget (World Bank et al. 2022).

Image 2. Large, nation-wide efforts minimal through 2022. The image below shows the share of countries implementing different learning recovery strategies, and at what level the strategies are being deployed.



Source: World Bank analysis of UNICEF Pulse Survey data, illustrated in *Where Are We on Education Recovery?* UNICEF, UNESCO and World Bank 2022.

As the Sierra Leone example illustrates, addressing learning loss often demands considerable resource allocation. Yet, the sheer scale and ubiquity of the problem across different regions underlines the importance of not just isolated efforts, but also collaborative global strategies. As we pivot to the forthcoming UNESCO meeting's agenda, it is vital that we delve into topics that will enable nations to harmonize their efforts, innovate, and craft scalable, sustainable solutions to reverse the ramifications of learning loss and reinvigorate global education.

Topics This Meeting of UNESCO Should Address

1. *Global Educational Standards Post-Pandemic*: Review and update educational standards to reflect the post-pandemic realities, addressing areas such as online education quality, teacher training for virtual classrooms, and technological access disparities.

2. *Monitoring and Reporting:* Establish a global mechanism to track and report the extent of learning loss across different regions, ensuring transparency and a data-driven approach to interventions.
3. *Equity in Education:* Delve deep into the issues of educational inequalities exacerbated by the pandemic. How can UNESCO ensure that all students, regardless of socio-economic status, have equal opportunities to recover lost learning?
4. *Support for Teachers and Educators:* Discuss frameworks for upskilling teachers to handle the new challenges post-pandemic, such as blended learning models, trauma-informed teaching, and assessment of learning loss.
5. *Mental Health and Well-being:* Recognize and address the psychological impacts of the pandemic on students, educators, and families, potentially through resilience-building programs, counseling, and mental health campaigns.
6. *Innovative Learning Recovery Programs:* Explore programs like catch-up classes, tutoring systems, and extended academic calendars to accelerate learning recovery.
7. *International Funding and Aid:* Discuss financial mechanisms to support nations severely hit by the pandemic, especially in bolstering their educational infrastructure, technology access, and teacher training.
8. *Promoting Digital Literacy and Infrastructure:* Given the significant shift to online learning, how can UNESCO foster greater digital literacy worldwide and ensure schools and students have the necessary technological resources?

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