





## Introduction

This briefing note is addressed to key policy makers and planners who are responsible for school provision in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. It focuses primarily on those who have, or will have, the task of reopening

schools when the health dangers have passed. It suggests ways in which schooling systems could become more resilient by adopting future-focused and integrated models of provision.



## Why focus on resilience?

Resilience encompasses the ability both to cope with current adversity and to recover quickly from the challenges presented. However, it also entails the ability to recover in ways that seek to learn from the experience, to adapt and to mitigate the impact of future similar challenges.

Countries are beginning to think about re-opening school campuses while at the same time maintaining physical distancing due to COVID-19. This will reduce the number of learners in the physical presence of the teacher at any one time. Teachers are raising concerns about whether this will mean longer working hours to enable them to work with 2-3 smaller groups per class (or 4-10 groups in some contexts) to ensure every learner gets some teacher time: or whether teaching sessions will be shorter, with possible implications for curriculum coverage.

This raises higher-level questions about what models of provision should be followed for re-opening and how

education systems can become more resilient to potential future campus closures, whether due to a second wave of COVID-19, extreme weather conditions, conflict or a host of other reasons.

**Resilience encompasses the ability both to cope with current adversity and to recover quickly from the challenges presented.**

It should be clear that it will not be possible to find a single model for all contexts – the world is too unequal for that. Further, countries are often fiercely protective of their national school curricula and there is need to learn from the diversity of experiences which have disrupted learning. Of course, the COVID-19 induced closures are currently most prominent, but past school closures due to SARS, earthquakes (for example in Haiti and New Zealand), storms (for example in The Bahamas, Mozambique and Tonga) and teacher strikes

reveal that these occurrences are not new, and there are lessons to be learned and considered to minimise future disruptions.

Some of the things learned about supporting learners using distance and online approaches during school closure periods are summarised in Table 1.



Table 1: How answers to core educational questions change during campus closures

Core questions to support learners	Things learned during school closures
Why are children learning?	<p><b>Purpose</b></p> <p>Learners are more likely to engage if they understand <i>why</i> they have been asked to work with certain ideas in certain ways. There is need to focus on what is most important.</p>
Towards which goals are children learning?	<p><b>Outcomes</b></p> <p>It is important to convey well in advance the <b>outcomes</b> that need to be achieved within a certain period, and typically within a week. There is need for support in transitioning from one mode of provision to another in achieving these outcomes.</p>
What are children learning?	<p><b>Cross-cutting skills and competences</b></p> <p>Learning that is often not formally addressed in the curriculum: time management, self-management, informational and digital literacy, the ability to live with others in constrained circumstances, the importance of managing limited Internet bandwidth, etc. become more obviously important.</p>
How is the teacher facilitating children’s learning?	<p><b>Scaffolding and support</b></p> <p>It is important to provide a study timetable and to support independent learning from provided resources by designing before-, during- and after-activities. It is important to plan for the occasional call, SMS, and social media check-in not only to answer questions and to monitor, but equally importantly to retain the human connection, to motivate and to provide emotional support. There is need for more support for vulnerable households and children, including specific accommodations for those with disabilities.</p>
With what are children learning?	<p><b>OER/OA/Devices</b></p> <p>Access to learning resources is critical. In most countries campus closures happened after core prescribed textbooks had already been bought and/or distributed. Almost every country subsequently began to build a repository of OER and a set of links to use open access resources to augment the prescribed curriculum resources. However, it cannot be assumed that all learners or households have access to appropriate digital devices. Hence, in addition, educational radio and television regained prominence, as unequal access to affordable Internet made access to online videos impossible for some.</p>
With whom are children learning?	<p><b>Virtual communities of learning</b></p> <p>Learners can still cooperate and collaborate in their learning if thought is given to judicious and safe ways for them to do so using social media or formal online platforms. Parents/caregivers/siblings need to be inducted into new support roles and offered continued assistance as they assume these roles.</p>

Core questions to support learners	Things learned during school closures
Where are children learning?	<b>Anywhere</b> Learning can happen anywhere, if learners have access to the necessary learning resources and support. Access to reliable and affordable Internet has become key and is increasingly considered a human right in some contexts.
When are children learning?	<b>Anytime</b> Learning can happen at any time. Freed from the physical school-day timetable, learners could focus on one subject at a time, work any time of day or night that suits them, or work any day including weekends and holidays. But they do not need to be working 24 hours a day on a screen nor for extended periods at any one time.
How is children's learning assessed?	<b>Assessment of/for/as learning</b> Assessment is not an end in itself. Many countries postponed high-stakes national exams; some abandoned them altogether while others found alternative ways of administering them. This has prompted a renewed discussion on the purpose and nature of assessment.

**Despite the previous experience, many countries and ministries seemed un- or under-prepared for the closure of school and university campuses necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic.**

The most recent disruption highlighted issues of social justice and once again indicated that those already most vulnerable – girls, children with disabilities and children from poor families – were the ones who suffered the most from school campus closures.

The closure of school campuses saw moves towards greater online provision and the divide between connected learners and teachers and those not connected, already common knowledge, was made starkly clear. More flexible provision of education requires that countries therefore tackle the ongoing digital divide as a national priority. As indicated in Table 2, access to Internet remains very uneven.

Table 2: Internet access by region

Region (Commonwealth countries)	Individuals using the Internet (% of population) 2017	Compare to region defined by UN
Africa	32.49%	SSA (excluding high income): 25.41%
Asia	52.71%	South Asia: 30.10%
Caribbean	60.00%	Caribbean small states: 59.18%
Pacific	42.90%	Pacific island small states: 32.70%

Source: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/IT.NET.USER.ZS> (last updated date: 9 April 2020)

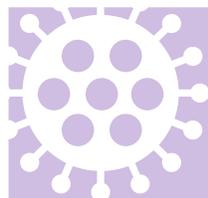
More resilient approaches are needed for the future. As school campuses re-open, new models of provision will be needed.



## Issues for re-opening school campuses

In re-opening schools, it will be necessary for teachers and school managers to learn from experiences during the lockdown period. Clearly some of the measures taken during the campus closures will need to be continued in the transition period from closure to re-opening,

and probably continued after re-opening. Figure 1 illustrates some of the diverse ways in which Ministries of Education responded during the recent COVID-19 pandemic.



### Illustrative responses to the 2020 pandemic

- Maintaining physical distancing and enabling appropriate hygiene.
- Supporting learners who may have been traumatised by the lockdown and are fearful of the re-opening.
- Ascertaining differential curriculum coverage to know where to re-start.
- Preparing alternative formative assessments to be able to determine individual and whole class entry behaviour and re-starting points as appropriate.
- Compressing the curriculum to focus only on key concepts to catch up more quickly.
- Building literacy and digital fluency skills and addressing device and Internet access issues in case of future closures and support to blended learning approaches.
- Including a sign language interpreter in TV broadcasts (backed up to YouTube) for more inclusive support.
- Providing radios for those without access (and enabling streaming for mobiles).
- Providing toll-free telephone enquiry lines.
- Developing guidelines/support services to address home abuse, cyber bullying etc.
- Planning for travel to and from re-opened schools.
- Re-opening low enrolment schools to create more learning spaces.
- Launching back-to-school campaigns to address fears.
- Updating policy in respect of online / blended learning, ICT strategy, and disaster management recovery plans for the education sector.
- Providing hand sanitising facilities and Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) at re-opened campuses as well as fumigating/cleaning regularly.
- Training and supporting staff in new health and safety protocols and new ways of teaching.
- Providing health packages for learners still unable to attend and missing school meals.
- Providing free or subsidised mobile data for learners and teachers.



might return before mainstream scholars, etc. This would make it increasingly possible for parents/caregivers to return to their own respective employments. However, there may be pressure first to re-open high-stakes examination classes, especially in contexts where there are already too few places available in schools of choice.

In some contexts, attendance may initially be voluntary as learners and parents weigh potential benefits and risks. However, some form of **phased** re-opening is contemplated in most countries.

## Platooning model

The typical school day could be split into platoons with one group of learners attending morning classes, another group afternoon classes and a third group evening classes (or shorter sessions during normal school hours only). This is a model of provision that is already common in many developing contexts. It requires careful timetabling so that teachers work with only two of three groups per day. It will also be more successful if teacher-student classroom interaction is focused specifically on problem-solving and discussion rather than on content delivery. So, some of the content and guidelines for independent learning developed for the shut-down period would then continue to be used after school campuses re-open.

## Timed-based cohort model

An interim measure that might be introduced as lockdowns ease, is the use of time-based cohorts. So, for example, Grade 6s attend school on Mondays, Grade 7s on Tuesday, Grade 8s on Wednesday, etc. However, this model will continue to put strain on parents/caregivers who may not be able to negotiate flexible work-from-home arrangements as their workplaces re-open.

## Distributed small group learning model

In this model, all the learners return to school, but each class is broken down into smaller sub-groups who learn in different locations at different times.

So, for example, a class might normally include 45 learners (class sizes in developing contexts are often much larger). For a double-period comprising 1.5 hours, the teacher might spend 30 minutes with each sub-group, with 2 sub-groups engaged in independent resource-based learning while one sub-group is working with the teacher. For younger learners, parents might need to be drafted in to help with small group management. There will also need to be creative use of spaces like school halls, play areas, unused storage spaces, taking account of the necessary safety and security considerations. Sometimes there is need to be creative, for example in Bangladesh, COL has supported “boat schools” to reach children in flooded communities.

There is need to decide what **MUST** be done face-to-face and what **COULD** be done using resource-based approaches.

If blended learning becomes a mainstream practice in schooling provision, it will be necessary to develop policy and guidelines for home schooling support when learners are not attending on campus. A Home-Based Learning Resource Page could usefully be added to the Ministry of Education website, for example<sup>2</sup>.

Even with these models, however, it will not be possible to reach all learners. There is need to open schooling further. In fact, there has been a recent call in the United Kingdom for a national open school to complement the open university there.

There is need to decide what **MUST** be done face-to-face and what **COULD** be done using resource-based approaches.



<sup>2</sup> <https://homebasedlearning.ca/provinces/bc/options/>



## Integrating Open schooling

Managing the COVID-19 pandemic required limitation of travel and observances of physical distancing guidelines. This meant finding alternative ways to ensure school learning could continue without requiring teachers and learners always to be in the same space at the same time. This resulted in a move into distance and online learning provision. It is possible to reach even very remote learners via distance education. It has been used in the past to reach children from the Australian outback to the Canadian prairies, and currently supports millions of learners in Southern Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa.

Developing approaches for more flexible provision of schooling opportunities in this way, can also help us to meet the needs of learners who have been unable to access schooling; or who are in school but are not learning effectively; or who have dropped out of school; or who need a second opportunity to improve their schooling outcomes in order to access employment or further education and training opportunities. Responding effectively to the short-term crisis can therefore help us to develop more flexible and resilient approaches for the long term, as illustrated in Figure 2.

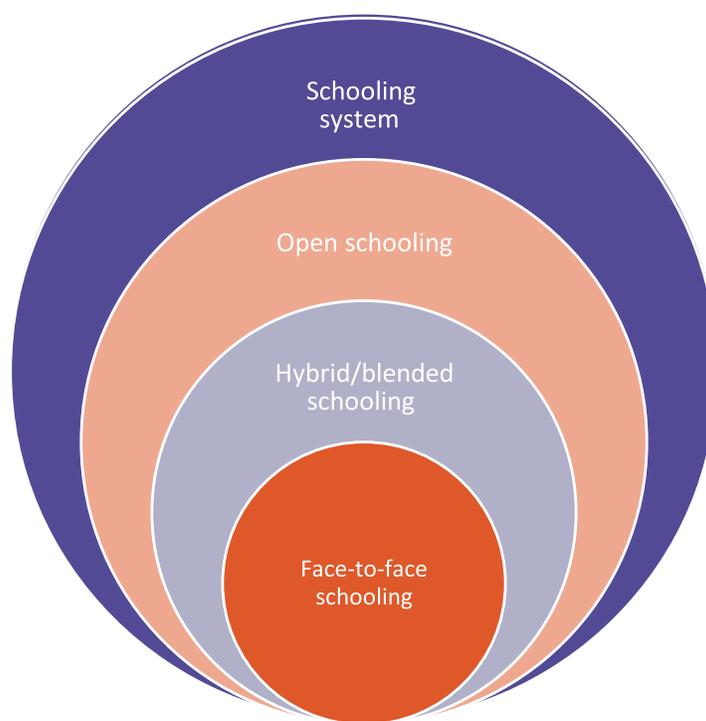


Figure 2: A resilient schooling system

As illustrated in Figure 2, face-to-face schooling remains at the heart of the schooling system and is probably the preferred option for very young learners as well as learners with special educational needs which parents/caregivers are not equipped to address. However, hybrid (some face-to-face, some distance, some online, some broadcasting) and blended (face-to-face and online) could conceivably become the norm for older learners. For learners unable to get to a physical school, or not regularly, an open schooling approach is needed. It is possible that learners could move between models at need, for example learners attending face-to-face

schooling who encounter certain barriers (e.g. falling ill), might continue learning from home through distance learning; learners struggling with some subjects through distance learning might be integrated for a time into more structured blended or face-to-face learning.

Younger children need the socialisation that face-to-face contact provides but older children could probably be expected to work in a more blended manner. There will be need to support parents/caregivers and teachers appropriately.















## COMMONWEALTH of LEARNING (COL)

4710 Kingsway, Suite 2500  
Burnaby, BC V5H 4M2 Canada  
Phone + 1 604 775 8200 / Fax + 1 604 775 8210

 [info@col.org](mailto:info@col.org)

 [www.col.org](http://www.col.org)

 [@col4d](https://twitter.com/col4d)

 [facebook.com/COL4D/](https://facebook.com/COL4D/)

 [instagram.com/commonwealthoflearning/](https://instagram.com/commonwealthoflearning/)

June 2020



The Commonwealth of Learning (COL) is an intergovernmental organisation created by Commonwealth Heads of Government to promote the development and sharing of open learning/distance education knowledge, resources and technologies.



© Commonwealth of Learning, 2020.

*Towards more resilient schooling: possible models for the future* is made available under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 Licence (international): <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0>.