

Response to COVID-19: Preparing for School Re-Opening

The Case of China

East Asia and Pacific Education Briefing Note

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Latest Development

While COVID-19 most immediately affected public health, spillover effects can already be observed in education, stemming largely from extended school closures. The coronavirus outbreak coincided with winter school recess in China and caused a delay in school reopening for the Spring 2020 semester where the original opening date was around mid-Februaryⁱ.

In recent weeks, as the newly reported cases of coronavirus transmission in China declined significantly, provincial education authorities gradually announced school re-opening dates and plans. On March 9, Qinghai became the first province to reopen schools in the countryⁱⁱ. As of April 21, all provinces in mainland China have announced planned dates for school reopening, as reported in the Annex tableⁱⁱⁱ.

Vetting process

The decision to reopen school is decentralized to the provincial level with general guidance from the national Ministry of Education (MOE). In the national guidelines issued on February 28, 2020, the MOE requested adequate *vetting* against public health risk and proper action plans to ensure *readiness* at school level. The more specific plans for school reopening are articulated at provincial level. Based on the experience of the provinces that have made such plans, two levels of vetting processes have been adopted:

- **Location based vetting:** a key consideration for provinces to reopen schools is the total time that has elapsed since the first day of zero local transmission or locally confirmed cases in the province -- typically 28 days, twice the 14-day self-isolation period recommended by health authorities after risky exposure, although some provinces had slightly longer vetting period, such as Qinghai province^{iv}.
- **Individual based vetting:** Individual based vetting is also a common approach where information is collected from students and teachers regarding their travel history and health condition and it can be determined whether a high-risk individual will need to require a longer time away from school.

Action plans to ensure readiness

The provinces that have planned to reopen schools typically have i) clarified roles and responsibilities at county and school levels, ii) established and reinforced public health protocols before and after schools are back in session, and iii) ensured proper transition from home-based schooling during school closures^v.

Clarify roles and responsibilities at county and school levels

These provinces typically announced the school reopening dates approximately two weeks in advance to allow for adequate preparation. At the time of announcement, the provincial departments of education also issued an official guidance to the county education bureaus and schools to specify roles and

responsibilities at different levels to help support the transition process. For instance, Yunnan Provincial Department of Education requested all schools to establish task forces to reinforce public health protocols and other logistics associated with school reopening. These task forces are led by school principals with roles and responsibilities specified at school, grade, and class levels. The school level task forces will maintain close communication with local government authorities including education, health, police, transportation, and foreign affairs to ensure smooth coordination and information flow.

Establish and reinforce public health protocols

These provinces have established public health protocols as part of their guidance to the county education bureaus and schools. This include actions before and after school reopening.

Before school reopening

- Complete **individual based vetting** by collecting information from students and teachers and decide if the person will require additional time away from school
- Stock up **key supplies** including thermometers, disinfectants, soaps, hand sanitizers, masks, etc.
- Thoroughly **clean and disinfect** all areas on campus and ensure air flow in indoor space
- Designate a **space for temporary isolation** in case presumed cases occur on campus
- Sensitize school personnel and parents to key **preventative measures**

After school opening

- Practice **social distancing** whenever possible with examples including allowing students from certain grades, e.g. the graduating classes, to register earlier than others to avoid peak traffic and avoiding large scale gathering by canceling parent days, campus events, and large-scale teacher training
- Routinely carry out **simple health screening**, monitor instances of **high-risk symptoms** and health related **absence**, and provide **daily updates** to local authorities
- **Manage the access** of vendors, service providers, and visitors to campus
- **Disinfect** and maintain a **daily record** of areas cleaned
- Sensitized the student body to **good personal hygiene practices**

Contingency plan

- Establish a **school-based process flow** in case symptoms of COVID-19 are reported on campus
- Establish a **rapid reporting and response mechanism** in case two or more students or teachers show symptoms of COVID-19 within the same shared space during a short period of time
- Designate personnel to provide **psychotherapy** to affected individuals and help **track contact history**
- Work closely with local health authorities to decide on time and scope for **school reclosure** in case of confirmed or suspected COVID-19 cases reported on campus
- During school re-closure, thoroughly **disinfect campus**, work with local health authorities to create a list of individuals to recommend for **quarantine**, and maintain a close **communication mechanism** between school leadership, teachers, and students

Ensure proper transition from home-based schooling

In light of China's delay in school reopening for the Spring 2020 semester, the MOE launched a nationwide *Disrupted Classes, Undisrupted Learning* initiative to ensure the teaching and learning will continue through home-based schooling during school closures. From the national level, some resources were

provided to teachers and students to ensure connectivity and access to digital learning materials, but the specific rollout plans were carried out at the provincial, county, and school levels. More information can be found in the section below.

However, in anticipation of the possible limitations to home-based learning, the MOE did not intend for this modality to substitute completely for school-based learning and in fact it issued a separate guidance note stating that formal curriculum should not be carried out as part of home-based learning and teachers should not feel obliged to record and share course instruction online if they are not equipped to do so^{vi}.^{vii}. In light of this guidance, one common approach for the provinces that have open schools is to start from the beginning of the Spring semester curriculum but allow for some flexibility in implementing lessons plans considering some of the preparatory learning have taken place during school closure^{viii}. Below is some of common approaches taken by the provinces.

- **Re-adjust school calendar to make up for lost face-to-face instruction time.** This is the approach in Shandong, Sichuan, Shaanxi, Hunan, and Guangdong provinces. In particular, Shandong Department of Education stated clearly in its guidance that the total time for instruction will remain unchanged so the exact number of days missed from the original school open date will be made up from some of the weekends in the Spring semester and parts of the summer recess. For some of the provinces, there is a plan to postpone “Zhongkao”, the entrance exam to senior secondary school, from June to July^{ix}. On March 31st, MOE also announced that “Gaokao”, the national college entrance exam, is postponed by a month this year, from June 7-8 to July 7-8^x.
- **Assess students upon their return to schools.** In anticipation of the possible learning gap from home-based schooling, the Department of Education for Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region required the assessments to be administered to all students upon returning to school so the teachers can adjust their teaching plans accordingly.
- **Make individualized plans for students with disadvantaged backgrounds.** For students who lag behind their peers upon returning to school, some provinces request schools to carry out individualized learning plans to help them catch up. This measure is particularly sensible in relatively poor provinces where some students are more likely to have poor or no internet connectivity. Education authorities in Sichuan and Hainan provinces specified such guidelines as part of the action plan for opening school^{xi}.^{xii}

“Disrupted Classes, Undisrupted Learning”

During the school closures due to COVID-19 outbreak, the Chinese government launched the *Disrupted Classes, Undisrupted Learning initiative* to allow the teaching and learning to continue at home. To facilitate the rollout of this initiative, the national government i) worked with key telecom providers to ensure stable internet connectivity and in remote areas with little internet coverage satellite TV has been leveraged to deliver education contents; ii) provided free access to digitized textbooks, teaching guides, and other digital resources through cloud based platforms such as www.eduyun.cn; and iii) worked with several universities and think tanks to prepare for strategies and tips for teaching online and made these toolkits freely available for teachers online^{xiii}.

With these support from national government, the rollout of the home-based learning is carried out at the local level in accordance with local condition. For instance, Zhejiang Provincial Department of Education requested the rollout plans to be developed by counties and detailed schedule for online education to be developed by schools. It encouraged teachers to take advantage of education resources

offered in national and provincial education digital platforms and have the option to conduct either livestreaming or recorded lessons on a video to be shared with students, whichever worked best for them. It further recommended length per online class session (20 and 30 minutes for primary and secondary schools, respectively) and a cap for total amount of online instruction (2 hours, 4 hours, and 5 hours for primary schools, junior secondary schools, and senior secondary schools, respectively)^{xiv}.

The preliminary results of a large-scale national online survey conducted by China National Institute of Education Sciences demonstrate the following findings of the online learning initiative^{xv}:

- *Most teachers supported the idea of online education during school closures but believe there was a large room for this process to improve.* Nearly 80 percent of the surveyed teachers were supportive of online education activities during school closures. However, only a third (37.35 percent) of the surveyed teachers were satisfied with the experience. Teachers with relatively longer experience (15 years or more) faced more challenges adapting teaching online and were more inclined to rely on existing digital materials rather than creating new digital learning resources.
- *More help is needed for low performing rural schools.* Teachers in relatively low performing schools in rural areas were less likely to take advantage of the digital learning resources, were less interactive with students during the online learning process and were less satisfied with the online learning activities carried during school closures, if any^{xvi}. This was echoed by relatively lower satisfactory rate reported by the parents whose children attend these schools^{xvii}.
- *Possible ways to improve the effectiveness of online teaching.* The surveyed teachers indicated the following ways help improve their teaching online: training on skills and technologies that promote interactions (indicated by 70.2 percent of the surveyed teachers), technical support to allow teachers to spend more time on teaching versus navigating the technology itself (60.9 percent), ensuring availability of relevant teaching and learning content (57.5 percent), and systematic training on how to conduct online education (53.4 percent).

Lessons learnt

Establish sound policy, meticulous vetting process, and clear roles and responsibilities ahead of school reopening.

- Decentralized decisions with a set of principles agreed at the national level helped provinces to develop customized plans for re-opening school in accordance with local conditions.
- Phased approach for re-entering school helped avoid peak traffic.
- A combination of location and individual based vetting processes helped minimize transmission risk.
- Allow time between public announcement for school reopening and the actual date for school opening to ensure proper preparation.
- Accompany announcement for school reopening with action plans to provide all stakeholders with clarity and purpose.
- Setup of special task forces at school level can help reinforce public health protocols and logistics associated with the transition period and ensure close communication with local government in case of emergency.
- Action plans before and after school opening helped avoid blind spots.

ICT assisted home-based learning can enable education continuity during school closures and can be effective when supported by prepared teachers, stable connectivity, easy access to digital resources, and proper remedial actions for disadvantaged students.

- The option of home-based learning allowed the education sector to respond rapidly to COVID-19 risks and continue learning activities during school closures.
- With clear guidance from teachers, stable connectivity, and the availability of digital resources, students were able to become more accustomed to the curriculum and teachers had the opportunities to fast-track the implementation of teaching plans after school re-opening.
- Due in part to equity concerns, China did not intend to use home-based schooling to deliver formal curriculum during school closures. However, more developed provinces like Zhejiang were able to effectively convert face-to-face lessons into online lessons at scale and set clear guidelines that ensured online lessons were delivered in a structured manner. In these regions, the online modality demonstrates potential for formal curriculum delivery.
- According to the feedback from teachers in China, training and technical assistance in the following areas can help improve the effectiveness of teaching online: skills and technologies that promote interactive learning, technical support to allow teachers to spend more time on teaching versus navigating the technology itself, ensuring supply of relevant teaching and learning content, and systematic training on how to conduct online education. Technical assistance can target teachers who are less exposed to education technology and relatively low performing schools in rural areas.
- Remedial actions such as baseline learning assessments and individualized learning plans can help teachers identify and bridge the proficiency gaps after students return to school from home-based learning.

Annex: Planned Dates for School Re-openings in Chinese Provinces as of April 21, 2020

Province/ Municipalities	Planned Dates for School Re-openings
Jiangsu	March 30 for graduating classes in secondary schools (i.e., Grade 9 and Grade 12 equivalent) April 7 for other grades in primary and secondary schools April 13 for select tertiary institutions
Jiangxi	April 7 for graduating classes in secondary schools April 23 for graduating classes in tertiary institutions May 7 for the other grades in tertiary institutions
Hainan	April 7 for graduating classes in secondary schools May 9 for graduating classes in tertiary institutions
Shaanxi	March 30 for Grade 12 (including vocational track) and April 7 for Grade 9 April 27 for graduating classes in tertiary institutions May 6 for the other grades in tertiary institutions
Shanxi	April 10 for graduating classes in tertiary institutions April 15 for graduating classes in senior secondary schools and senior vocational schools April 25 for graduating classes in junior secondary schools and secondary vocational schools
Ningxia	March 25 for graduating classes in secondary schools April 20 for tertiary institutions
Qinghai	March 9 - 13 for senior secondary schools – both academic and vocational tracks March 16 -20 for junior secondary schools March 25 - 31 for primary school and special education schools April 1 -15 for undergraduate and vocational institutions
Tibet	Tentative plans to open in late March (likely delayed with no further plans)
Guizhou	March 16 for graduating classes in secondary schools April 21 for graduating classes in tertiary and vocational institutions April 28 for the remaining grades in secondary schools Mid-May for the remaining grades in tertiary and vocational institutions, primary schools, and kindergartens
Xinjiang	March 16 for graduating classes in secondary schools March 23 for other grades in basic education April 8 for select tertiary institutions
Yunnan	March 23 for graduating classes in secondary schools April 20 for other grades in secondary schools and secondary vocational schools May 6 for graduating classes in tertiary institutions May 11 for other grades in tertiary institutions
Guangxi	April 7 for graduating classes in secondary schools April 14 for graduating classes in tertiary institutions April 21 for other grades in tertiary institutions
Inner Mongolia	March 30 for graduating classes in secondary schools
Fujian	April 7 for Grade 12
Sichuan	April 1 for Grade 12 April 7 for Grade 9
Anhui	April 7 for Grade 12

	April 13 for Grade 9 April 20 for other grades in basic education May 6 for graduating classes and graduate programs in tertiary institutions
Liaoning	April 15 for Grade 12
Beijing	April 27 for Grade 12 May 11 for Grade 9
Tianjin	April 20 for Grade 12 and 9 Early or Mid-May for graduating classes in tertiary institutions
Hebei	April 23 for Grade 12 May 7 for Grade 9
Jilin	April 7 for Grade 12
Heilongjiang	April 7 for Grade 12 April 13-17 for Grade 9, except for Harbin City and Mudanjiang City
Shanghai	April 27 for Grade 12, 9 and graduating classes in tertiary institutions May 6 for other grades in tertiary institutions
Zhejiang	April 13 for Grades 12 and 9 April 20 for other grades in secondary schools and Grades 4-6 in primary schools April 26 for Grades 1-3 in primary school
Shandong	April 26 - May 10 for tertiary institutions April 15 for Grade 12 except Jiaozhou City
Henan	April 7 for Grade 12 April 25 for graduating classes in tertiary institutions May 6 for other grades in tertiary institutions
Hunan	April 7 for Grade 12 and 9
Guangdong	April 27 for Grade 12 and 9 May 11 for graduating classes in tertiary institutions May 18 for other grades in tertiary institutions
Chongqing	April 20 for graduating classes in secondary schools
Sichuan	April 1 for Grade 12 April 7 for Grade 9
Gansu	April 9 for Grade 12 in secondary schools and graduating classes in secondary vocational schools April 13 for graduating classes in tertiary institutions April 20 for other grades in tertiary institutions

Note: these plans may subject to change

ⁱ Tencent News, Feb 6th, 2020, "Will Schools start on February 17th? Two local education bureaus announced news that the school opening time is delayed again." Available online: <https://new.qq.com/omn/20200206/20200206A04PH900.html>

ⁱⁱ Xinhua News Agency, March 17, 2020, "Millions of students back to school as coronavirus retreats in China." Available online: http://www.china.org.cn/china/2020-03/17/content_75823811.htm

ⁱⁱⁱ Tencent News, March 26, 2020, "The opening date of Spring 2020 semester has been announced with caution in 19 provinces and regions". Available online: <https://new.qq.com/omn/20200326/20200326A07USN00.html>; Beijing News, March 26, 2020, "Fujian Province announced plans to reopen school for Grade 12 students" Available online: <http://www.bjnews.com.cn/edu/2020/03/26/709123.html>

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- ^{iv} China News, Mar 9, 2020, “Qinghai is the first to officially announced school re-opening! How far are you from school?” Available online: <http://www.chinanews.com/sh/2020/03-09/9119041.shtml>
- ^v The information from the section is largely based on official guidelines from provinces that have already opened schools including Yunnan and Inner Mongolia.
- ^{vi} China News, Feb 4, 2020, “Ministry of Education: do not start teaching of new semester courses online before the official school day.” Available online: <https://m.chinanews.com/wap/detail/zw/gn/2020/02-04/9078125.shtml>
- ^{vii} Xinhua News Agency, February 17, 2020, “Suspending Classes Without Stopping Learning: how to teach and how to learn?” Available online: http://www.xinhuanet.com/2020-02/17/c_1125583839.htm
- ^{viii} Xinhua News Agency, March 16, 2020, “Schools in Guizhou, Xinjiang, Qinghai are re-opened! When will the primary and secondary schools resume teaching the rest of the country?” Available online: http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2020-03/16/c_1125720894.htm
- ^{ix} Tencent News, March 14, 2020, “Zhongkao is delayed until July in 22 cities in China. How about the other provinces and cities? How about Gaokao?” Available online: <https://new.qq.com/omn/20200314/20200314A0QWZY00.html>
- ^x Ministry of Education, March 31, 2020, “Announcement on the schedule of the 2020 national college entrance examination”. Available online: http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_xxgk/s5743/s5744/202003/t20200331_436662.html
- ^{xi} China Internet News Center, March 4, 2020, “Sichuan: local schools are not allowed to charge students for online education resources.” Available online: http://news.china.com.cn/2020-03/04/content_75770768.htm
- ^{xii} China Education daily, March 13, 2020, “These provinces re-open schools recently, what measures do they have to prevent the coronavirus transmission?” Available online: http://fc.china.com.cn/2020-03/13/content_41088893.htm?f=pad&a=true
- ^{xiii} Ministry of Education, Jan 29, 2020, Suspending Classes Without Stopping Learning: China’s Education Emergency Management Policy in the COVID-19 Outbreak. Available online: http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_xwfb/gzdt_gzdt/s5987/202001/t20200129_416993.html
- ^{xiv} The People’s Government of Zhejiang Province, Feb 6, 2020, Teaching guidelines issued in Zhejiang to fully implement online education for primary and middle schools during school closure. Available online: http://www.zj.gov.cn/art/2020/2/6/art_1654331_41948673.html
- ^{xv} Guangming Daily, April 21, 2020, “Disrupted Class, Undisrupted Learning – Lessons from China”. Available online: https://news.gmw.cn/2020-04/21/content_33755332.htm
- ^{xvi} The news resource didn’t cite any statistics in these result areas.
- ^{xvii} The news resource didn’t cite any statistics in these result areas.