

EDUCATIONAL POLICIES IN THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: WHAT CAN BRAZIL LEARN FROM THE REST OF THE WORLD?

April 2, 2020

The rapid dissemination of COVID-19¹ has forced governments of all countries to take on substantial measures. The focus has been on the challenges imposed on the health systems, however, education systems are also directly affected: in just over three weeks, about 1.4 billion students were out of school in more than 156 countries (Figure 1).²



Figure 1 – In red, countries that have imposed full school closures

This note shows how other countries mitigated the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on education. Below are the key questions answered:

- A. What is the effectiveness of closing schools to contain the spread of COVID-19?
- B. What are the risks of closing schools?
- C. What can education networks do to promote inclusive learning and teaching while schools are closed?
- D. Can the educational system provide support to fight COVID-19?
- E. What educational policies can be undertaken in the short term?
- F. Post-Pandemic Educational Policies.

¹ Caused by SARS-CoV virus-2 (Novel Corona Virus).

² Education Systems' Response to COVID19 (UNESCO 2020)

³ Jérôme Adda, Economic Activity and the Spread of Viral Diseases: Evidence from High Frequency Data, *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, Volume 131, Issue 2, May 2016, Pages 891-941

A. What is the effectiveness of closing schools to contain the spread of COVID-19?

Closing schools, in addition to protecting children and young people, reduce the chances for them to spread the virus to their families and communities, especially to the elderly and other risk groups. International evidence³ shows the positive effects of school closures in reducing the propagation of infectious diseases, particularly in the Brazilian context, where a significant number of children live with elderly family members in the same household (figure 2).

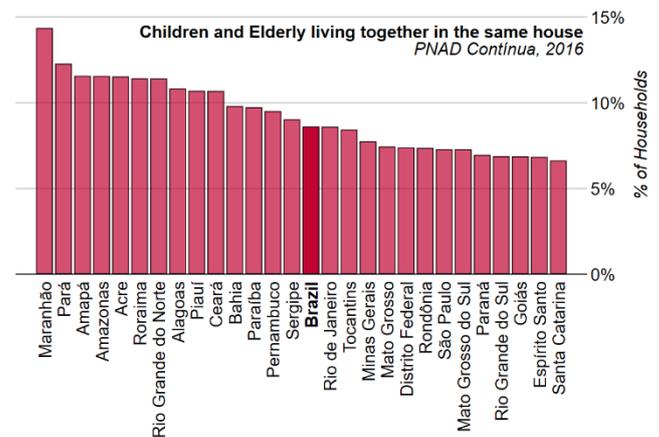


Figure 2 – School-age children living with elderly in the same household, % by State

How many schools should close? At least three approaches have been adopted internationally: **total closure**, adopted by 156 countries, such as Peru, France and Malaysia; **partial closures**, such as in the United States, where schools in risk areas were closed first⁴, or in Finland where only children in the early grades of school and whose parents are working in critical sectors for society were allowed to go to school; and finally, **maintaining the schools open**, like Sweden that claims that the costs of school closure do not outweigh its gains. Some countries are taking progressive measures, such as Portugal, which initially closed schools in greater risk areas, but chose to close all schools after an increase in the number of cases and after realizing that the high level of stress students were undergoing could jeopardize learning. Brazil chose the most conservative alternative: total closure.

How long should schools be closed for? There are different answers by different countries. School activities in certain provinces of China restarted about three weeks after closure. The US Center for Disease Control (US-CDC) suggests a period of approximately eight weeks of school closure in the country. On the other hand, countries like the UK already

⁴These actions are updated by governments as the pandemic evolves. The state of Virginia, for example, has already announced total closure of public and private schools until the end of the school year (June) in the US.

decided for the suspension of the rest of the school year to face the pandemics. In all these cases, it is crucial to consider the effect of the time of school closure in the dissemination of the virus. Short closure periods are ineffective to contain the virus; very long closure periods may generate high socioeconomic impacts, such as lack of school meals, negative effects on learning, structural obstacles on implementing distance learning, and a potential increase in dropout rates among students less likely to stay in school under normal conditions. Overall, it is important to balance the risks of a pandemics and the socioeconomic and community context of schools and their neighborhoods.

B. What are the risks associated with school closures?

School closures could mean a disruption in the learning process and increase the dropout rates, especially for highly vulnerable children in socioeconomic terms. The lack of interaction between students and teachers breaks the learning process, and depending on how long the pandemic lasts, it may not be possible to catch up on subjects when schools reopen. Another high risk is the potential increase in dropout rates, especially among students from highly vulnerable households. The amount of time and quality of family support so that the child studies at home varies depending on family background, according to literature for several countries.⁵ And this is not different in Brazil (figure 3).

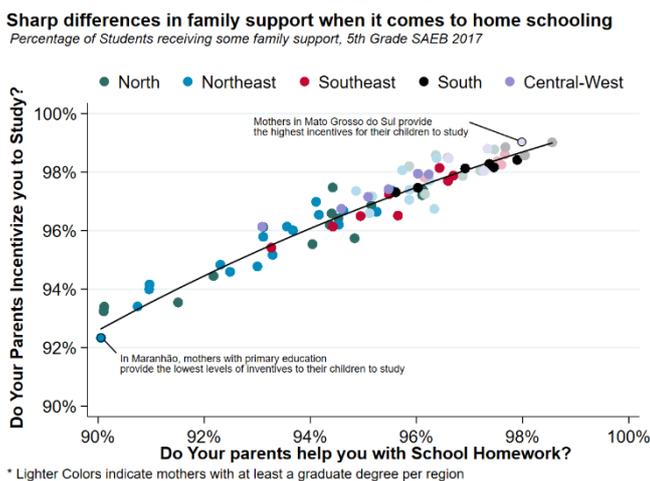


Figure 3 - Family Support for a child to study outside of school

School closure also affects the social safety network. A number of children have their only regular and proper meal at school; and many women who are often responsible for the primary care of children, end up overwhelmed by the accumulation of their own work with childcare during pandemic times.

C. What can education networks do to promote inclusive learning and teaching while schools are closed?

Distance Learning. With schools closed, many countries have intensified their efforts to reduce the discontinuity of classes by introducing distance learning. The success of this strategy depends on the infrastructure available and familiarity of teachers with distance learning tools already in place. An effective and equitable implementation depends heavily on these aspects. For example, while China, with a robust connectivity structure, has been successful in offering distance learning, countries with low internet coverage⁶, mobile phones or televisions, such as Vietnam and Mongolia, are facing difficulties to advance in this agenda.

The replacement of face-to-face classes by distance learning must overcome the unequal access to online learning tools. In addition to the socioeconomic status of families, other unequal aspects like differences in Internet connectivity among Brazilian regions, and among households in the rural and urban areas (figure 4) must be considered. This difference can also be observed among private and public schools.

The skills and experience of teachers and managers in the use of distance learning technology is a critical factor. Teachers in Spain, for example, were asked to prepare content and offer online classes. In Singapore, training is being given to teachers on educational strategies to online teaching. The need for technological training of teachers shows evidence that, even in richer Brazilian states, schools have internet access but teachers do not show familiarity with the use of internet in the classroom.

Expanding distance learning requires a robust design to prevent further rise of learning inequalities within and among education networks. A sudden transition to distance learning at scale without considering the capacity of schools to offer quality classes and that of students to have the structure and support in place to absorb this material tends to exacerbate the already high learning inequalities in Brazil. The effective support to teachers in the transition to distance learning involves continued training and use of tools to monitor activities performed by students. However, even when the above is considered, a decline in learning is expected at least in the short term. International evidence shows that the negative impact on the transition to distance learning is due to: (i) lack of familiarity with the tools used in distance learning, (ii) lack of incentive within the family to make online learning successful, (iii) and misalignment between what was taught in the classroom and what is taught online.

⁵Guryan, Jonathan, Erik Hurst, and Melissa Kearney. 2008. "Parental Education and Parental Time with Children." *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 22 (3): 23-46.

⁶According to the IBGE (Continuous PNAD, 2017), almost 70% of people over age 10 have access to the internet in Brazil. 75% of municipalities have access to the Internet, and at home, mobile access is predominant.

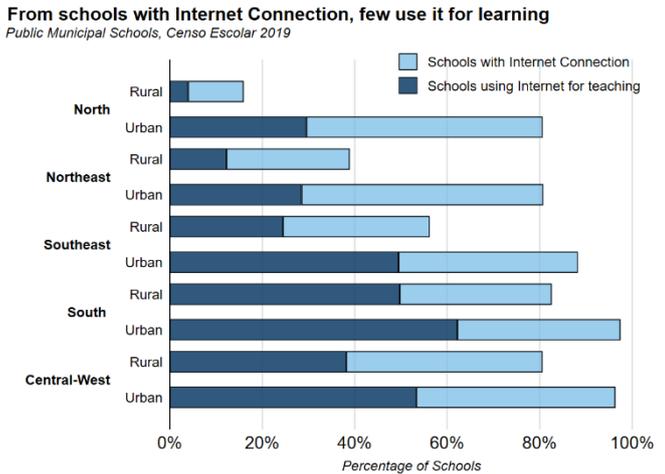


Figure 4 - Availability and use of the Internet in school learning, by region and area

To facilitate the implementation strategy of distance learning, managers may also consider ways to enable internet connectivity and access to devices that are already available in the households, such as mobile phones (figure 5), or computers and tablets available at school (figure 6).

When households have access to internet, virtually all do it via phone
Percentage of Households, PNAD Contínua 2017

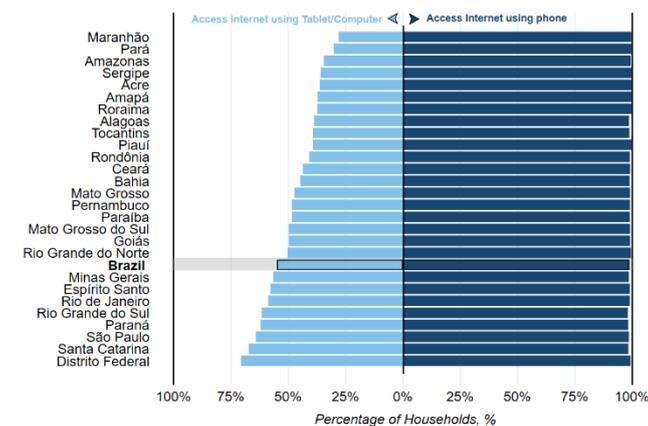


Figure 5 – Computers, Tablets and Phones in Brazilian Households

What can be learned from international experience regarding implementation of distance learning in a low-capacity scenario?⁷ Assess the infrastructure and capacity of students and teachers to adapt to distance teaching technologies is key. For this reason, governments must consider different approaches to distance learning to include online classes and distribution of printed materials.

How can distance learning be more responsive, effective and equitable to promote learning? An alternative would be to focus on creating or using existing mobile applications and to

encourage information sharing. In order to have a focused action, it is important to select a specific number of apps and platforms that best fit the educational and social context of each region. Similarly, it is important to create partnerships with local internet service providers to reduce costs of sharing educational materials. Another key element is the promotion of continued education and training cycles for teachers, coordinators and directors in order to structure lessons that will promote student engagement in online classes.

In this process, it is key to encourage parent’s engagement in their children’s homeschooling. One option to raise awareness is through the use of radio and television to reinforce the importance of parental support to their children's learning.

Availability of Tablets and Laptops at Brazilian Schools
Public Municipal Schools, Censo Escolar 2019

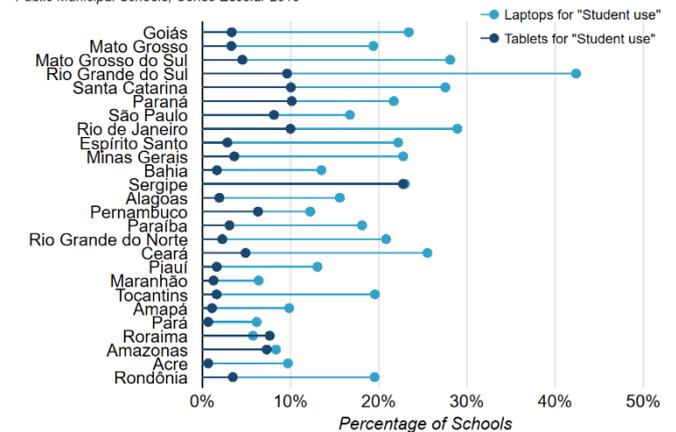


Figure 6 – Availability of Computers, Tablets and Phones in Schools

⁷ Adapted from article UNESCO: How to plan distance learning solutions during temporary school closures.

D. Can the educational system help support the fight against COVID-19?

Schools can also take a direct response to the spread of the virus and become an awareness and fighting tool. But how to use their own premises and the community to mitigate the impact of COVID-19?

School as the space to control the spread of COVID-19. In scenarios of low capacity and infrastructure, some countries are using schools premises and community members to provide support to the community in facing the crisis. For example, in regions with low or no connectivity, closed schools have become medical care centers for community members. Furthermore, in countries such as Liberia and Sierra Leone, school managers and teachers make up a strategic group able to disseminate information about the virus. Thus, the school becomes a central space for virus containment, assisting in crisis management.

Several governments have started campaigns on good hygiene and cleaning practices to combat the virus in school premises. In Ethiopia, for example, the Ministry of Education distributed informative material to students and guardians on how to reduce the risk of exposure to the disease. Thus, school premises can become key channels to disseminate information on care and prevention of COVID-19.

E. Short-term educational actions to deal with COVID-19

The urgency imposed by the challenges of rapidly spreading COVID-19, makes it important to observe short-term solutions and strategies that educational networks around the world have implemented.

Educational content

- Efforts to create lists of online resources that could be used in the learning process;
- Curated content for teachers and students, taking into account appropriate language and connectivity level .

Infrastructure

- Use of other media such as radio and television;
- Development of websites with free content that can be accessed offline (after information is downloaded);
- Provision of Internet access points in public places such as squares, parks, schools and parking lots.

Teachers

- Creation of educational groups in messaging apps, where teachers of the same subjects prepare content and strategies together;

- Creation of a direct channel of contact with teachers for questions on the use of distance learning tools;
- Identification of champions to support educational activities locally for the school community;
- Monitoring of activities performed by students.

Parents or guardians engagement

- Production of teaching materials with detailed instructions on how to perform each activity;
- Support for parents or guardians to be able to develop a routine for studies with their children;
- Emotional and psychological support to parents, guardians and children;
- Using text messaging and such to keep close contact with parents.

F. Post-Pandemic Educational Policies

The importance of preparing education departments and schools prior to reopening schools. Even if the focus is now on emergency measures, it is important to start designing post-pandemic actions to mitigate potential social and learning inequalities resulting from confinement. It is important to establish strategies for reopening schools taking into consideration higher or lower risk areas and create protocols to clean school premises before the beginning of classes. In educational terms, it is important to establish ways to help students who had poorer access to distance education and assess which distance learning practices can be kept taking advantage of the structure that was put in place during the pandemic. It is also important to establish centralized actions for at risk groups such as youth at high risk of school dropout and highly socially vulnerable families, in addition to supporting low-income families to reduce the economic shock of the pandemic, which also affects children's return to school.