

LEARNING RECOVERY AFTER COVID-19 IN EUROPE AND CENTRAL ASIA

Policy and Practice Brief

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Introduction

The vision of the education team for Europe and Central Asia (ECA) is for education systems to empower all students to reach their full potential. The COVID-19 crisis has created an opportunity for these systems to incorporate valuable lessons from remote learning and to develop new strategies for improving student learning and learning equity.

This brief highlights the key aspects of the World Bank’s ECA learning recovery plan that should be prioritized given the current situation in the region. The plan consists of three stages: (i) coping with the closing of schools and compensatory programs for preventing learning losses; (ii) ensuring continuity in reopened schools by providing foundational skills to reduce learning loss and to improve learning among disadvantaged students; and (iii) improving and accelerating learning by making schools more resilient and equitable through educational innovations and evaluation.

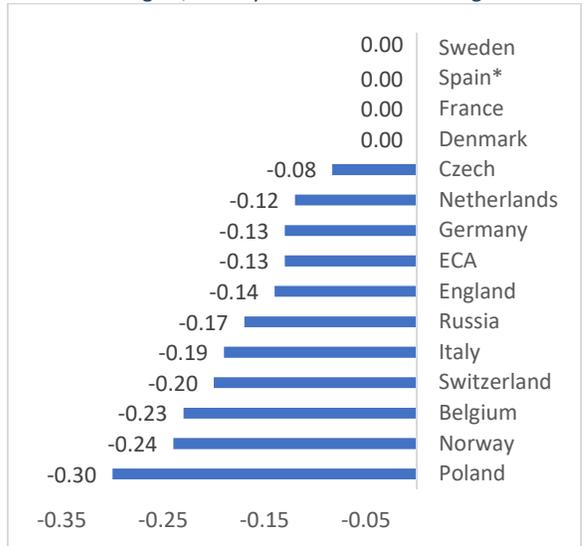
1. Actual Learning Losses

After the onset of the pandemic, most schools in ECA were closed but to varying degrees. Between March 2020 and September 2021, schools in these countries were completely closed for 64 days and were partially closed for

77 days on average.¹ This means that most students in ECA lost the equivalent of at least 33 percent of the school year. As of November 30, 2021, Azerbaijan, Turkey, and Serbia had reported the highest number of school days lost due to closure (more than 140), while at the other end of the scale, Belarus and Tajikistan reported having zero lost school days. While more countries are reopening schools after the scheduled winter break (as of January 12, 2022), the speed, modalities, and, in some countries such as Moldova and Spain, labor supply have been affected by surging infection rates of the latest COVID-19 Omicron variant.²

These school closures and interruptions due to the COVID-19 pandemic have created a learning crisis. In ECA, 10 of 13 countries have reported learning losses among their students, equivalent to about one-third of a year’s worth of learning (Figure 1). Learning lags among disadvantaged students from low socioeconomic, rural, and minority backgrounds and among students with disabilities are already a challenge for many education systems in ECA, but the closures have worsened the situation.

Figure 1: Actual Learning Loss (standard deviations) in ECA - on average 1/3 of a year's worth of learning is lost



Source: “Is vaccination the silver bullet for keeping schools open?” Eurasian Perspectives Blog, World Bank.
Note: *Data only from one faculty at one university.

Since resources spent on education build human capital, then a one-third of a year's worth of learning loss translates into at least a 3 percent earnings loss. In ECA, it has been estimated that each student stands to lose US\$686 annually in their future earnings, which amounts to a lifetime per student loss of US\$16,883. Total losses in the region are projected to be US\$2.9 trillion. Lifetime earnings losses as a percentage of current GDP are likely to amount to 13 percent. In annualized terms, this equals 0.6 percent of lost GDP in ECA.

School closures also have a harmful effect on children's health and psychosocial well-being. Long periods of self-isolation have been shown to increase the incidence of anxiety and depression among students and have a particularly adverse effect on the physical and psychological well-being of disadvantaged students and staff. Other detrimental health and social impacts include myopia, malnutrition, abuse, child labor, early marriage and/or pregnancy, and risky behavior.

2.

School Reopening Priorities

As schools reopen, countries should adapt the curriculum and expand compensatory programs in accordance with the second stage of the learning recovery plan. Based on international experience, there are three critical actions in this second stage: (i) simplifying the curriculum to prioritize foundational skills such as numeracy, literacy, and socioemotional skills; (ii) implementing standardized tests to identify the learning level of each student; and (iii) implementing compensatory policies, targeted mostly to disadvantaged students.

Increasing vaccination among teachers will also be critical for reopening schools. In many ECA countries, vaccine production is high, and

teachers are designated as a priority group for receiving vaccines. Yet, ECA has the highest rate of hesitancy among all regions, with one in four people expressing doubts about getting vaccinated (as of October 2021). In November 2021, among the Bank's client countries in ECA, only five countries reported having teacher vaccination levels higher than 70 percent, another 10 countries had rates between 30 and 70 percent, and two countries had levels of lower than 30 percent.³

To bolster the effects of these actions in the *short term*, governments should also consider the following complementary interventions to make the reopening of schools more effective:

- Ensure that teachers are on the priority list for COVID-19 vaccinations and are vaccinated before providing students with in-person instruction
- Provide disadvantaged students with income subsidies and school meals to foster their participation in remote/in-person schooling
- Make mental health and psychosocial assistance available to students, teachers, and parents
- Use improved learning packages, such as Teaching at the Right Level to accelerate learning recovery
- Use hybrid modes of instruction, while incorporating lessons from remote learning
- Implement tutoring programs that target disadvantaged and low-performing students
- Protect education funding and redistribute education expenditures to fund compensatory programs (lessons can be learned from Albania's major budget reallocation to finance its COVID response).⁴

In the *medium term*, the process of reopening schools should also involve investing in educational infrastructure to ensure students' health and safety such as improving classroom ventilation, providing hand washing and sanitation facilities and clear guidance on safety protocols, and using ICT to enable them to quickly adapt to different modes of instruction.

The World Bank-funded, *Turkey Safe Schooling and Distance Education Project* (US\$160 million) is one of the largest projects in ECA and is a good example of a digital infrastructure intervention.

⁵ In Romania, the ongoing Romania Secondary Education (ROSE) project (P148585) and the new Romania Safer, Inclusive, and Sustainable Schools Project (P175308) are helping to make the school system more resilient to future crises. In Kosovo, the Education Systems Improvement Project (P149005) is providing schools with development grants (US\$1.2 million) to enable them to procure goods and training to meet their immediate needs related to COVID-19.

3.

Teachers as Catalysts for Recovery

A key to the success of the learning recovery plan is to invest in the welfare, training, and performance of teachers. Extensive research has shown the positive correlation between teacher quality and student achievement. Moreover, teachers can have considerable influence over parents' belief in the importance of education and trust in their children's school. Thus, the following activities can enhance teachers' ability to serve as catalysts for the recovery:

- As mentioned earlier, teachers should be prioritized for COVID-19 vaccinations in all countries and encouraged to get vaccinated. Policymakers should work with trade unions to ensure that teachers can comply with health regulations and return to work safely.
- All teachers must be prepared and supported to participate in learning recovery programs and to integrate digital technology into their instruction without unduly increasing their workload nor that of parents.
- Preschools should have their own programs that provide teachers with pedagogical support and guidance on child cognitive stimulation, positive parent-child interactions, and continuation of learning. For example, Turkey's e-learning platform, which

offers preschools a comprehensive array of support services to increase their digital access and improve the quality of digital pedagogy.⁶

- Teachers' salary levels should be maintained, and teachers should be paid on time to encourage the retention and recruitment of qualified professionals.
- Educational innovations should be evaluated based on how well they support teaching and on their cost-effectiveness.

4.

Assessments to Inform Decision-making

While many EU countries in ECA have reported learning losses and are conducting ongoing research on this issue, there is a lack of information on learning losses in the World Bank's client countries in the region. Historically, too much attention has been paid to high-stakes examinations and not enough to formative assessments. Moreover, many ECA countries chose to cancel or postpone their national examinations in 2020 to ensure a smoother transition between education levels for all students, especially for those at risk.⁷ Thus, it may take many months—if not years—to build up a complete picture of the learning losses in the region.

The pandemic has emphasized the need to make student assessments more flexible to ensure that policymakers can stay informed about the country's academic performance. National examinations need to be able to adapt to continue assessing and advancing students to provide them with a smooth transition between education levels. Meanwhile, rapid one-on-one testing of children in real-time helps instructors to understand the specific learning needs of each child, to group children with similar learning needs into manageable clusters, and to use level-appropriate activities to help children to learn. This is especially helpful for revealing the

percentage of students who are not meeting the minimum requirements for their grade, what kinds of support they need, and what grade is right for them. The assessment process also enables instructors and mentors to track academic improvements and helps policymakers to refine policies to ensure that the whole system is focused on increasing learning.

5.

Long-term Policy Responses

As in all other regions, the entire education ecosystem in ECA was disrupted by COVID-19, creating the need for a revolution in the dynamics of learning—requiring not only immediate policy shifts and innovations but also a long-term strategy.⁸ ECA countries have coped with the pandemic by rapidly implementing remedial and compensatory programs aimed at recovering learning, retaining students in school, and ensuring the safety of students and teachers. However, the pandemic is lasting longer than predicted and, in the process, has become an opportunity to introduce structural reforms into the region’s education systems. To this end, the following recommended policies and actions can guide the transformation of education and improve learning and learning equity in the long term.

Provide high-quality, school-based tutoring programs to boost student learning outcomes over time. Access to quality tutoring works well in recovering learning losses. For instance, in England, trials of a national tutoring program established during the pandemic showed that three months of consistent tutoring can help to restore a loss of up to five months of normal schooling.⁹ In Italy, three hours of online tutoring per week proved to be enough to produce strong and significant positive effects on disadvantaged lower secondary school students' academic performance (up by 4.7 percent), aspirations (up by 39.7 percent in a composite index), well-being

(up by 26 percent), and socio-emotional skills (up by 21.1 percent).¹⁰ Similarly, notable improvements in math and the development of socioemotional skills were seen among disadvantaged students who participated in a targeted online tutoring program in Spain.¹¹ Thus, the evidence is clear that quality tutoring programs yield consistent and substantial positive impacts on learning outcomes. The key aspects of the success of these programs are: (i) hiring teachers and paraprofessionals (trained tutors) to provide the tutoring as opposed to parents and non-professionals and (ii) conducting the programs during the school day rather than after school hours.¹²

Implement an improved hybrid learning model to ensure quality, equity, and efficiency. The drop in school attendance due to COVID-19 will continue to affect school budgets in those ECA countries that allocate funds based on student enrollment rates. This highlights the need to continue aspects of remote learning that can bring economies of scale to instruction costs. However, as discussed above, there is evidence that remote learning has not been equally effective everywhere in ECA. Going forward, for hybrid learning to deliver on its potential, it will be crucial to ensure that there is a strong alignment between three complementary components: (i) effective teaching; (ii) suitable technology; and (iii) engaged learners.¹³ Estonia offers a good model for other countries in the region as the Ministry of Education and Research has launched a process for updating the general education curricula, including developing new digital competence models and new digital textbooks (including for students with special education needs) as well as partnering with Estonian EdTech companies to offer free-of-charge solutions and apps in schools.¹⁴

Conclusion

Due to new variants, ECA may still be experiencing school closures, that will have a protracted impact of school children. Schools

and education systems will need more support in coping with teacher shortages and varying schedules. Hence, despite countries reconsider quarantine regulations, schools or classes will need to switch between face to face and online learning, in a less disruptive but more efficient

way. Therefore, making online and face-to-face tutoring available and improving hybrid and distance learning will help adapt to COVID crisis and become resilient to potential disruptions leaving no child, no teacher, and no school behind.

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⁹ The Economist. 2020. [“England’s catch-up tutoring programme has bold ambitions.”](#)

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¹¹ Arriola, M., L. Gortazar, C. Hupkau, Z. Pillado, and T. Roldán. 2021. [A high-impact, on-line tutoring programme for disadvantaged pupils in response to Covid-19](#).

¹² Nickow, A., P. Oreopoulos, and V. Quan. 2020. [The Impressive Effects of Tutoring on Prek-12 Learning: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis of the Experimental Evidence](#). National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper No. 27476.

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