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COVID - 19 | LATIN AMERICA

# Growing Educational Gaps in Latin America: How to Avoid the Most Lasting Scar from COVID-19

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# 1. The COVID-19 pandemic put education at serious risk of disruption

In the last twenty-five years, Latin America experienced progress in reducing inequality and poverty, and their intergenerational persistence<sup>1</sup>. The COVID-19 pandemic put this progress at a serious risk. Many Latin American countries were among the countries with the highest rates of infections and deaths per hundred thousand inhabitants in the world. To contain the spread of the virus, governments implemented lockdown policies of various degrees. In addition, as individuals took their own precautions to avoid contagion, demand for many goods and services fell. Compounded by the fall in exports, tourism and capital inflows, these dislocations in domestic demand and supply caused sharp reductions in output, employment, and income. Compared to their pre-shock income, households across the entire income distribution were hit by the crisis. The short-term impact of the pandemic on inequality and poverty in the end partly depended on the government's response in the social protection front.

As the economies recover, incomes are likely to bounce back. However, long-lasting effects on poverty and inequality may occur because some households get trapped in their new circumstances. Of the various channels by which the current situation is going to impact the future, education is perhaps the most important one. According to UNICEF, 97% of children were out of the classroom during 2020. While schools shut their doors for children of all socioeconomic backgrounds, their ability to continue learning depends on their family environment. High-educated parents have better access to internet, laptops, and so on, as well as the knowledge to support their children's homeschooling. They also have the economic resources to hire tutors and purchase the best online learning options. Children in low-parental education households, in contrast, find it difficult to continue their education at home due to lack of adequate equipment, connectivity, and one-on-one coaching.

Governments across the region have implemented a series of measures – whose scale varies significantly across countries – such as TV, radio, printouts, and online learning schemes, as well as income-support programs. These initiatives, however, might have fallen short from preventing severe reductions in learning or dropping out of school altogether, especially for disadvantaged children. Indeed, growing educational gaps may be Latin America's most lasting scar from COVID-19. Our research<sup>2</sup> suggests that, on average, Latin American children from highly educated

families lost nine days of schooling (an amount equivalent to 5% of the school year), while the average amount of days lost by children from low-educated families is 71 (37% of the school year). As a consequence, the likelihood of today's students to complete secondary education may drop from a regional average of 61% to 46%. This average, however, hides striking differences across socioeconomic groups. The probability of completing secondary school for children in low-parental education households could even fall by almost 20 percentage points, from 52% to 32%. This low level of educational attainment for children of disadvantaged families was reported for cohorts born in the 1960s. In contrast, children from highly educated families will be hardly affected.

The growing educational gap will damage social mobility and equality of opportunity for years to come unless we take the warning signs seriously and act fast. There will be a need to make up for the losses by increasing both the amount and quality of learning time. School systems will need to contemplate extended schedules, summer and after-school programs, and more personalized instruction. Efforts should also be geared to developing online and offline resources available for free and expanding connectivity. Special attention should be placed on the socioemotional needs of vulnerable children at risk of school dropout. These remedial actions and rescue operations will require resources, especially financial resources. One key recommendation is for governments not to cut education spending when they face the inevitable need to reign in fiscal deficits (deficits that were acceptable during the pandemic). If anything, fiscal resources devoted to education may need to rise. The challenge is so daunting that help will be needed from non-state actors as well. Private philanthropy, the for-profit sector, and community-based organizations together with governments should launch a crusade to save the next generation of vulnerable children from falling behind.

The aim of this policy brief is rising the awareness about the dramatic consequences of the pandemic on learning gaps and the reproduction of today's inequalities in future labor markets, while contributing to the discussion on how to avoid the potentially most lasting scar from COVID-19. In section 2, we describe the extent of school closures in Latin American countries during 2020. In sections 3 and 4, we report the different educational policy responses enacted by governments, and their interaction with pre-existing structural characteristics of countries with respect to internet coverage and digital capabilities. In section 5, we show and discuss the results of our research, in which we estimate the longer-run impact of the pandemic on educational inequality and intergenerational mobility. Our estimation results are based on a nowcasting procedure, which enables us to make a prognosis on the learning losses suffered by children from different socioeconomic backgrounds in

Latin American countries. To back up these results, in section 6 we collect the findings of real-time studies on actual learning losses, measured for instance with test-scores, and current administrative reports on educational drop-out rates in the region. In addition, in section 7 we summarize the findings on how the pandemic affected the well-being of Latin American children in multiple other dimensions, such as child labor, early pregnancy, and mental health. Finally, in section 8 we conclude reviewing a selection of policy proposals that address the question “What can be done?”.

## 2. The extent of school closures in Latin America

The COVID-19 pandemic is placing Latin America at serious risk of unraveling the progress the region has made in the last decades in terms of educational achievement. In most countries in the region, schools closed early in March 2020 at the beginning of the pandemic to reduce infection risk among children, school personnel and families. At the end of 2020, Latin America’s schools had been fully open for just around ten days on average over the entire academic year. Table 1 shows the extent of school closures in Latin America during 2020.

**Table 1. School closures in Latin America**

	Days schools were ... in 2020 (ranked by the proportion of days fully or partially closed)			Total instruction days in a regular school year	Schools fully or partially closed as % of school year
	fully closed	partially closed	fully open		
PRY	158	23	0	181	100.0%
SLV	205	0	0	205	100.0%
BOL	192	2	1	195	99.5%
BRA	191	9	1	201	99.5%
HND	147	43	1	191	99.5%
PAN	211	0	1	212	99.5%
ECU	169	12	2	183	98.9%
ARG	111	88	3	202	98.5%
CHL	67	132	3	202	98.5%
PER	77	121	3	201	98.5%
GTM	165	22	3	190	98.4%
COL	115	58	3	176	98.3%
VEN	170	0	3	173	98.3%
CRI	189	0	4	193	97.9%
DOM	171	0	6	177	96.6%
MEX	180	0	8	188	95.7%
URY	20	94	37	151	75.5%
NIC	0	75	108	183	41.0%

Source: UNICEF Data on COVID-19 and School closures,  
Last update: 2 March 2021.

## 3. Educational mitigation efforts differ across countries

The education of children is substantially influenced by two factors, the school and the family. When schools are closed, parents with high education may compensate the instructional loss, while children of low educated parents rely mainly on the supply of schooling provided by the education system through the support of home learning. The range of the resulting learning loss may, in principle, range from zero to 100%; i.e. the potential loss due to school closures may be completely offset by parental and public interventions, or the entire year of schooling might be lost due to the pandemic, respectively.

Going backwards in education is not just bad for the children directly affected. In addition to lower intergenerational mobility and less equality of opportunity, Latin America's future could witness losses in economic growth and increased political polarization as a result. In recognition of the detrimental short and long run consequences of the pandemic on learning losses and children's well-being, governments across the region implemented a series of measures such as TV, radio, printouts and online learning schemes. However, the scale of these mitigation measures varied significantly across countries in the region. Table 2 shows the remote learning tools provided by Latin American countries during school closures in 2020. As the table highlights, Latin American countries reacted differently and with distinct measures, but all provided alternative resources to sustain remote learning during school closures. All countries provided a website with learning material, and most of them also provided educational programs via television or radio. Fewer countries also distributed printed materials at a nationwide level; even less provided assistance to children and parents via cellphone.

**Table 1. Differences across countries in the**

	Remote learning provided by education systems via...				
	Website	Cellphone	Television	Radio	Printed copies
Argentina	●	X	●	●	●
Bolivia	●	X	●	●	X
Brazil	●	X	●	●	X
Chile	●	●	●	X	●
Colombia	●	●	●	●	X
Costa Rica	●	X	●	●	X
Dominican Republic	●	X	X	●	X
Ecuador	●	X	●	●	●
El Salvador	●	X	●	X	●
Guatemala	●	X	●	●	●
Honduras	●	●	●	●	●
Mexico	●	X	●	X	X
Nicaragua	●	●	X	X	X
Panama	●	X	●	●	X
Paraguay	●	X	●	●	●
Peru	●	X	●	●	X
Uruguay	●	X	●	X	X
Venezuela	●	X	●	X	X

*Source: Different sources. See the Supplemental Material of Neidhöfer, Guido, Nora Lustig, and Mariano Tommasi. "Intergenerational transmission of lockdown consequences: prognosis of the longer-run persistence of COVID-19 in Latin America." *The Journal of Economic Inequality* (2021): 1-28.*

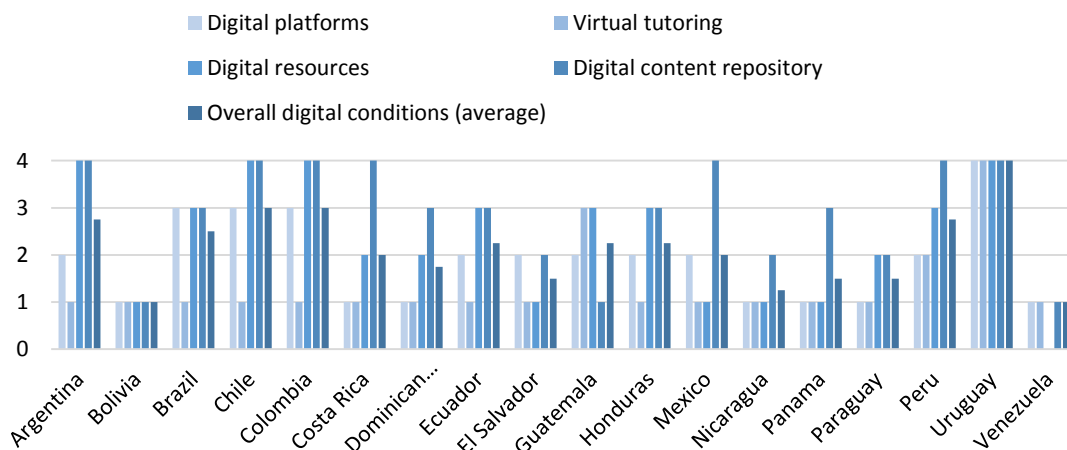


## 4. Structural hurdles cause educational mitigation efforts to fail

Increasing digitization and technological change made it possible to make use of new digital technologies in the education sector. The pandemic, and the associated closure of educational institutions, provoked an unprecedented and intensive use of the internet and other online resources worldwide to assure the continuity in learning for children and young people. However, countries, and in particular their education systems, were differently prepared to face such a situation and not all could swiftly adapt to the new reality.

Figure 1 shows the digital conditions of education systems when COVID-19 hit the region. Four items are recorded on a scale ranging from one to four (where a score of four signals better and more established conditions): digital platforms, virtual tutoring, digital resources, and digital content repository. The last bar shows the average value across these four categories as an indicator of the general digital conditions of the education system. As is evident, the digital conditions of Latin American schools are relatively low. The average score for the entire region is about 2. Only Uruguay reaches the highest attainable score over all four items. The scores are particularly low across all countries in virtual tutoring.

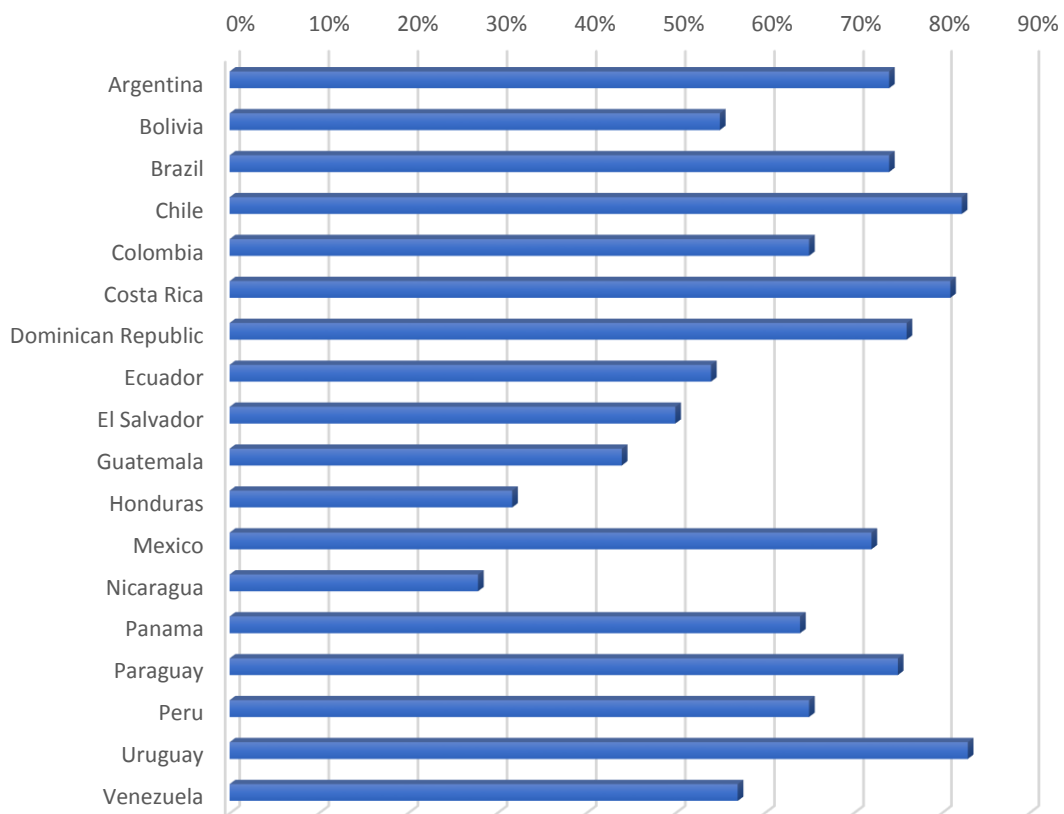
**Figure 1. Digital conditions of Latin American education systems in 2020**



Source: Authors' elaboration based on Rieble-Aubourg, S. & Viteri, A. (2020), "Nota CIMA # 20: ¿Estamos preparados para el aprendizaje en línea?."

On top of that, structural hurdles, such as a not widespread and uneven distribution of access to internet, made it even more difficult to a considerable number of students to benefit from the provided online learning resources. In most Latin American countries, a significant part of the population has no access to internet. On average, only 63% of the population in the region has unrestricted online access.

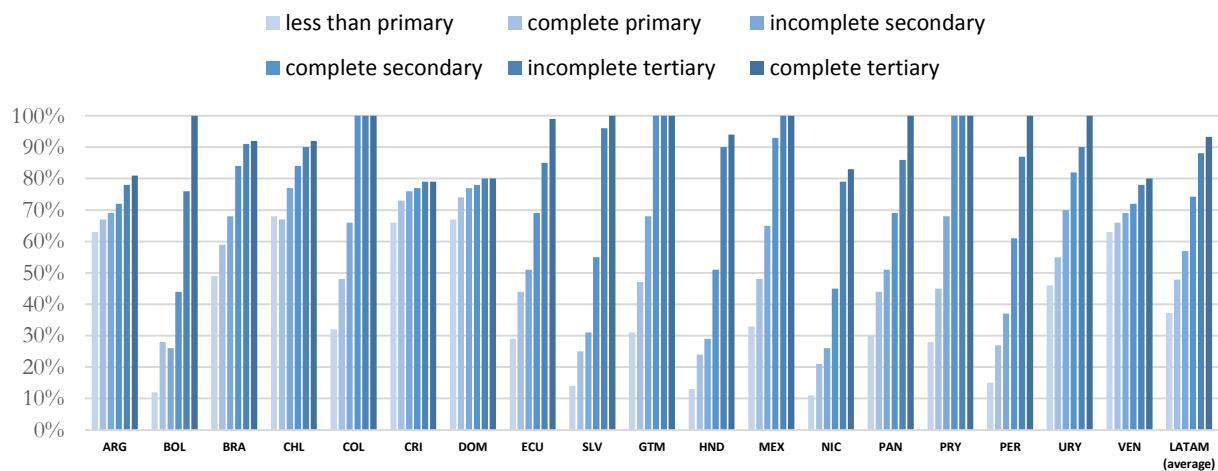
**Figure 2. Percentage of the population in Latin American countries with access to internet**



*Source: Authors' elaboration based on World Bank open data - Individuals using the Internet (% of population)*

Furthermore, strong inequalities in access to digital resources exist. Just as an example of such inequalities, internet coverage for households whose head has less than secondary school in Bolivia, El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua is around 30% while it is above 90% in families, within the same country, headed by adults with more than secondary education. Figure 3 shows the distribution of internet access by level of education of the household head in Latin American countries. While, on average for the entire region, 93% of households whose head has completed tertiary education have access to internet, this number is just 37% for households whose head did not complete primary education.

**Figure 3. Distribution of internet access by level of education of the household head in Latin American countries**



Source: Distributions estimated with national household survey data for each country. See Neidhöfer, Guido, Nora Lustig, and Mariano Tommasi. "Intergenerational transmission of lockdown consequences: prognosis of the longer-run persistence of COVID-19 in Latin America." *The Journal of Economic Inequality* (2021): 1-28.

## 5. Unequal educational disruptions: a threat to intergenerational mobility in Latin America

As shown above, the governments' response to compensate for school closures was heterogeneous across the region. In addition, connectivity through digital means – a crucial input to a successful mitigation strategy – not only varies by country but by socioeconomic groups within countries. This reinforces the unequal ability of children with low-educated parents to replace formal schooling by remote learning. What is the potential impact of these inequalities on schooling outcomes, educational inequality, and intergenerational mobility? To answer this question we projected the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic through a counterfactual exercise. This nowcasting exercise<sup>3</sup> reveals an alarming picture as shown below.

As mentioned before, while schools shut their doors for all children, their ability to continue learning at home depends on their parents' socioeconomic level. As in other regions of the world, high-educated parents have better access to internet and laptops, tablets, and so on, as well as the knowledge and non-cognitive skills to support their children's homeschooling. They also have the economic resources to hire tutors and purchase the best online options for course materials. Children in low-parental education households, in contrast, may find it difficult if not impossible to continue their education at home due to lack of adequate equipment, connectivity and – above all – one-on-one coaching. Hence, while individuals from highly educated families are hardly affected, the probability of completing secondary school for individuals with low-educated parents might be considerably lower in the post-pandemic.

Table 3 shows the average days of instructional time lost in 2020 by advantaged and disadvantaged children. These numbers, deriving from our simulations, account for

the days of school closures and the capacity of parents and education systems to mitigate the instructional loss through remote learning. Advantaged children are children whose parents completed at least secondary education, disadvantaged children are those whose parents did not complete secondary education. On average, Latin American children from advantaged background lost nine days of schooling; an amount equivalent to just 5% of the entire school year. In contrast, the average amount of days lost by children from disadvantaged families is 71 (37% of the school year).

**Table 3. Average days of instructional time lost in 2020 by advantaged and disadvantaged children**

	Days of instructional time lost in 2020		... in percentage of the school year	
	disadvantaged children	advantaged children	disadvantaged children	advantaged children
Argentina	46	6	23%	3%
Bolivia	103	15	53%	8%
Brazil	84	10	42%	5%
Chile	36	4	18%	2%
Colombia	50	4	28%	2%
Costa Rica	80	12	41%	6%
Dominican Rep.	91	13	51%	7%
Ecuador	67	8	37%	4%
El Salvador	107	14	52%	7%
Guatemala	66	7	35%	4%

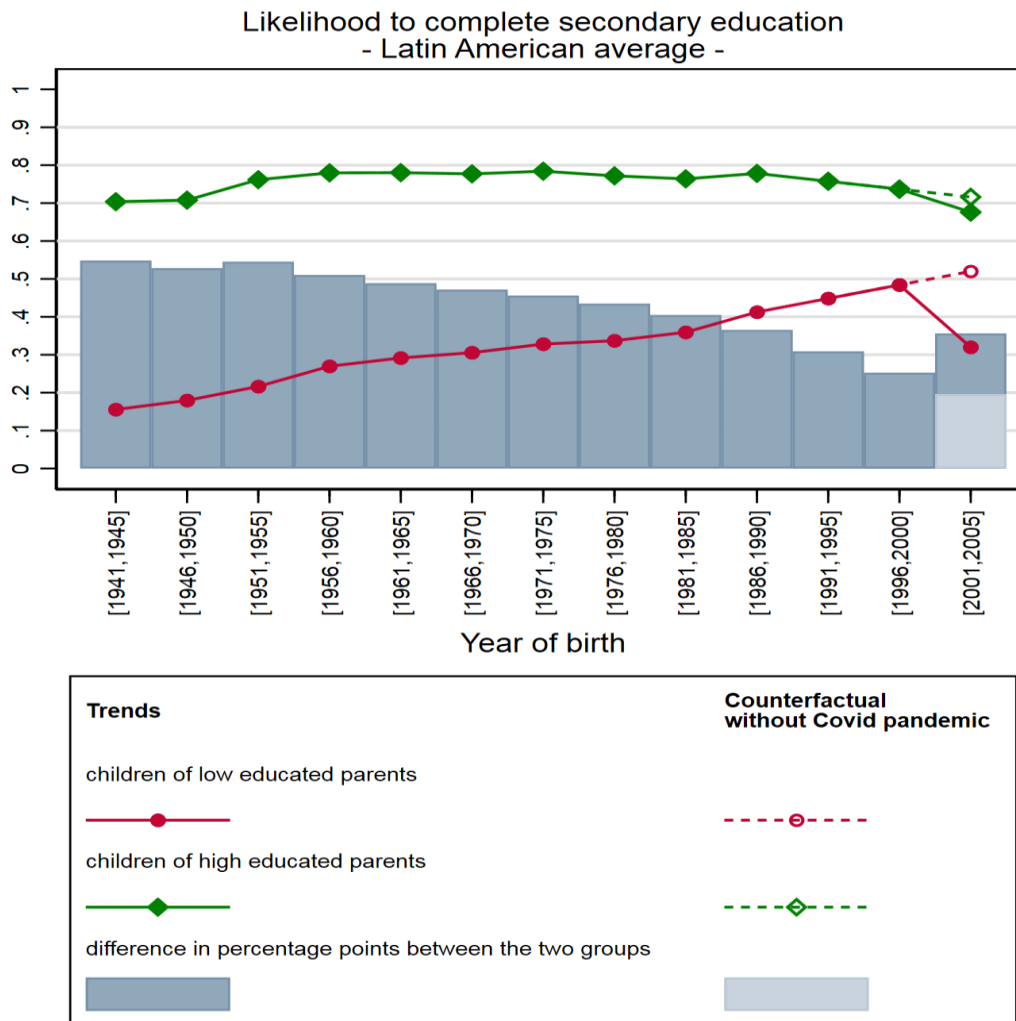
Honduras	56	6	29%	3%
Mexico	102	13	54%	7%
Nicaragua	24	3	13%	2%
Panama	106	14	50%	7%
Paraguay	69	8	38%	4%
Peru	69	8	34%	4%
Uruguay	30	3	20%	2%
Venezuela	96	14	55%	8%

*Notes: Disadvantaged children are children whose parents did not complete secondary education. Advantaged children are those with at least one parent who completed secondary education. Days of instructional time lost by both groups estimated following the method developed in Neidhöfer, Guido, Nora Lustig, and Mariano Tommasi. "Intergenerational transmission of lockdown consequences: prognosis of the longer-run persistence of COVID-19 in Latin America." *The Journal of Economic Inequality* (2021): 1-28.*

The consequences of this situation might be dramatic. The results of our projections show that the likelihood of today's students to complete secondary education in Latin America may drop from a regional average of 61% to 46%.

Furthermore, this average hides striking differences across socioeconomic groups. Figure 4 shows the updated trends in the likelihood to complete secondary education for advantaged and disadvantaged children, as well as the inequality in secondary completion rates between these two groups. While the estimated decrease in the likelihood of advantaged children is low, an alarming drop by almost 20 percentage points, from 52% to 32%, is observed for disadvantaged children. As the graph shows, this low rate of secondary school completion for children of low-educated families was reported in Latin America for cohorts born in the 1960s. The inequality between the two groups would be around 15 percentage points higher than it would have been without the pandemic.

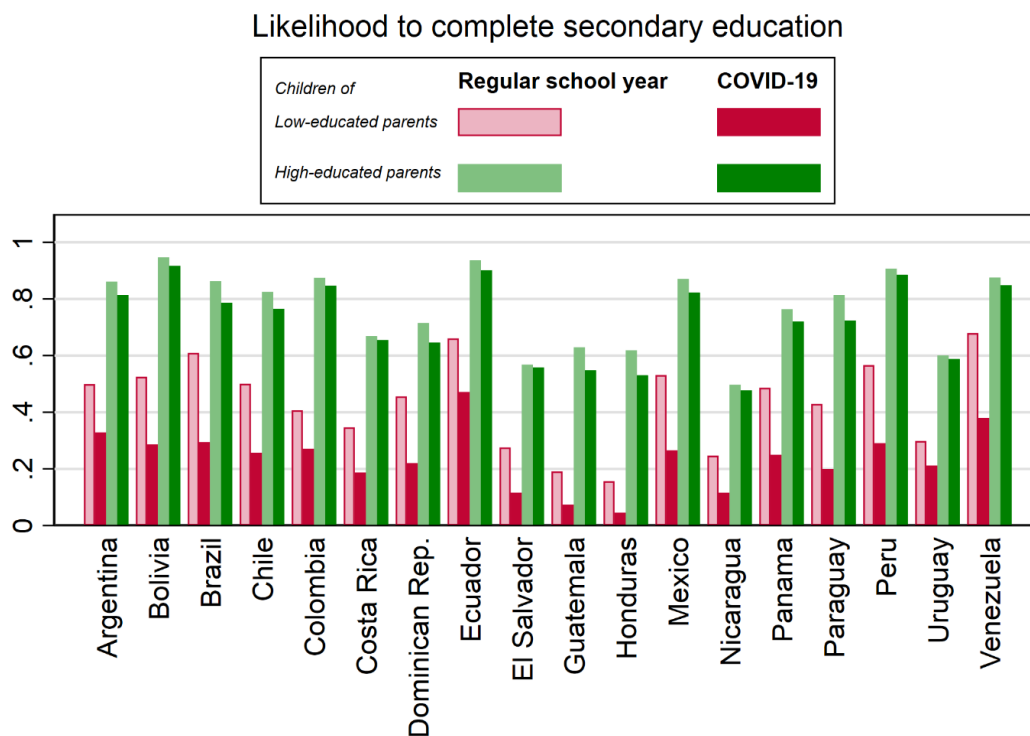
**Figure 4. Changing trends in educational attainments in Latin America**



Source: Graph shows an update of the estimates provided in Neidhöfer, Guido, Nora Lustig, and Mariano Tommasi. "Intergenerational transmission of lockdown consequences: prognosis of the longer-run persistence of COVID-19 in Latin America." *The Journal of Economic Inequality* (2021): 1-28.

These averages hide also substantial differences across Latin American countries. Figure 5 shows an update of our estimations for all countries. The sharpest decline is estimated for Brazil: 32 percentage points; the least dramatic, for Uruguay: 9 percentage points. In Guatemala and Honduras, the probability of secondary school completion of individuals from lower educated families might even fall below 10%. In contrast, differences in secondary school completion rates are almost negligible in all countries for children of high-educated parents.

**Figure 5. Estimated change in the likelihood to complete secondary education in Latin American countries**



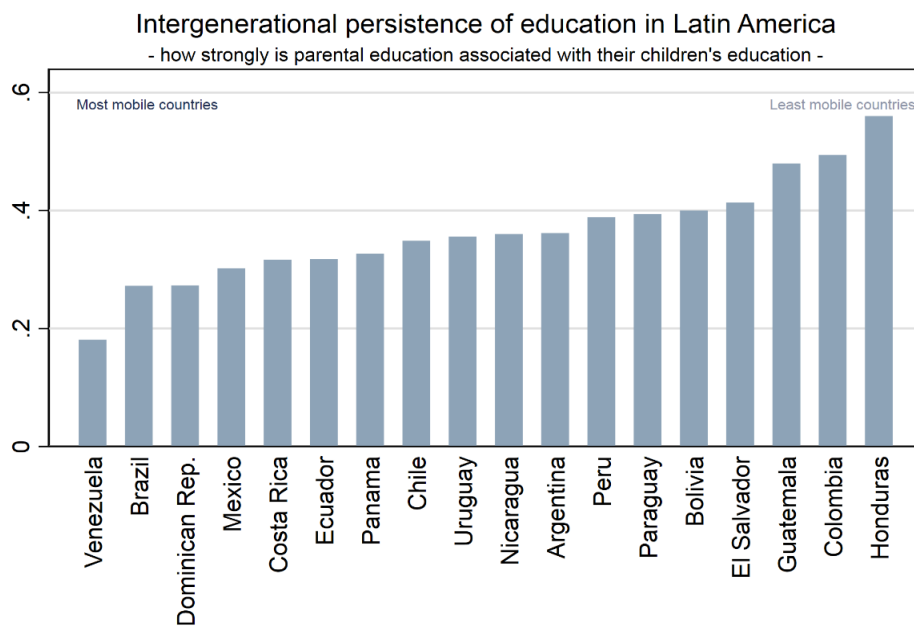
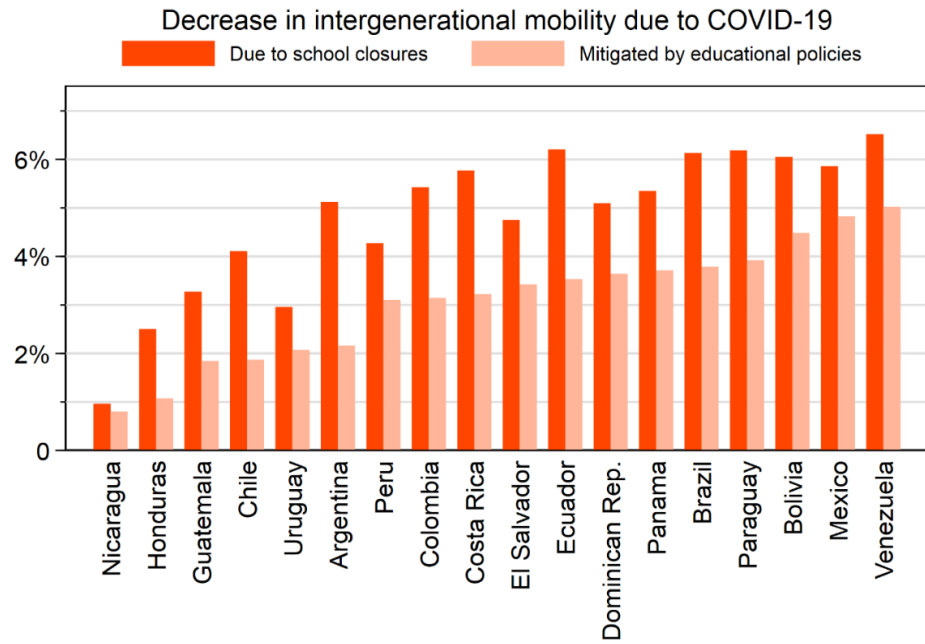
Source: Graph shows an update of the estimates provided in Neidhöfer, Guido, Nora Lustig, and Mariano Tommasi. "Intergenerational transmission of lockdown consequences: prognosis of the longer-run persistence of COVID-19 in Latin America." *The Journal of Economic Inequality* (2021): 1-28.



As a result, after decades of continuous improvement, the overall degree of intergenerational mobility could drop significantly. Figure 6 shows the estimated decrease in intergenerational mobility due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Intergenerational mobility is measured by the slope coefficient of intergenerational persistence, which measures the association of the education of parents with the education of their children. Countries are ranked by their percentage decrease in mobility, considering school closures and the educational mitigation strategies enacted by governments. To highlight the effectiveness of the enacted educational mitigation measures, the counterfactual decrease in mobility only due to the length of school closures in each country is shown as well. Furthermore, to provide a benchmark, the figure shows for each country the degree of intergenerational mobility of people born in 1987-1994.

Our projections show that, although the negative impact of the pandemic on intergenerational mobility could have been much higher without educational mitigation measures, in no country the enacted measures seem to have been enough to completely offset the negative effect of school closures on mobility. The final decrease in intergenerational mobility due to school closures and considering mitigation strategies ranges between about one and five percent. To put this numbers into context, between 1940 and 1990 – a period marked by upward educational mobility – the slope coefficient for Latin America, measured as an average over all countries, declined by 4% from one four-year birth cohort to the next. In other words, the loss in intergenerational mobility could be substantial.

**Figure 6. Changes in intergenerational mobility and effect of educational mitigation policies**



*Source: Graphs show an update of the estimates provided in Neidhöfer, Guido, Nora Lustig, and Mariano Tommasi. "Intergenerational transmission of lockdown consequences: prognosis of the longer-run persistence of COVID-19 in Latin America." *The Journal of Economic Inequality* (2021): 1-28. Lower graph shows intergenerational mobility of education, measured by the slope coefficient of intergenerational persistence, of the 1987-1994 cohort. Upper graph shows the impact of COVID-19 on intergenerational mobility (measured by the slope coefficient), first only considering the length school closures and then the educational mitigation measures.*

## 6. Real-time data on the impact of COVID-19 on education in Latin America

Our early projections suggest that the gap in the likelihood of completing high-school between children of low-educated families and children of high-educated families — already high before the pandemic — could thus rise significantly. Children in disadvantaged households will end up with lower levels of learning and many might drop out of school altogether. This will result in lower social mobility, stronger inequality of opportunity, and eventually higher wage inequality in the future.

Although most of our predictions and their repercussions will show their effect in the long run, real-time data, for instance on educational drop-outs and enrolment, can be used to get a first sense on the actual impact that the pandemic is having on education. Table 4 reports information that we could collect, among others from administrative sources, that may help to assess the short-run impacts of the pandemic on education.

**Table 4. Real-time data on the effects of COVID-19 on educational disruptions**

Argentina	<p>In July 2020, 10% of the student population (1.1 m children) had disconnected from school. One third of those were reattached with a national initiative “Programa Acompañar” by March 2021.<sup>4</sup> In October 2020, 3.5% of teenagers in secondary school declared their intention to not go back to school when they will open again.<sup>5</sup></p>
Bolivia	<p>Educational coverage increased by 0.95 percentage points from 2019 to 2020.<sup>6</sup> In previous years, the increase was 1.11 (from 2018 to 2019) and 1.06 (from 2017 to 2018) percentage points.</p>
Brazil	<p>The risk of dropping out of school – defined as not having any register of official grades during an entire quarter – increased by 365% for children and young people enrolled in school in São Paulo under remote learning. Average test scores decreased for children in all grades.<sup>7</sup></p>
Chile	<p>Dropout rates decreased by 0.4 and 1.42 percentage points between 2019 and 2020 for basic and middle education, respectively. This decrease is higher for boys than girls. Approval rates increased by 1 and 1.9 percentage points, while failure rates decreased by 0.6 for both primary and secondary level.<sup>8</sup> Also, completion rates on secondary education increased by 3 percentage points.</p> <p>While between 2018 and 2019 enrolment in initial education increased by 3.25%, from 2019 to 2020 it dropped by 0.07%. At primary level, enrolment increased by 0.11%, less than the 1.31% increase between 2018 and 2019. Enrollment in secondary education increased more than in previous years, 0.62% between 2019 and 2020 compared to 0.11% between 2018 and 2019.</p>

Colombia	<p>Overall dropout rates decreased from 2019 to 2020 by 0.6 percentage points. However, in primary and upper secondary education dropout rates increased by 0.03 and 0.67 percentage points, respectively. The effect is compensated by a sharp decrease of dropouts on pre-primary and lower secondary education. Failure rates increased by 0.51 percentage points at primary level, by 1.5 at lower secondary and by 2.15 at upper secondary level. Grade repetition rates increased in all educational levels, the major change was in lower secondary school, where it rose by 5.07 percentage points.<sup>9</sup> Enrolment in tertiary education decreased by around one million students from 2019 to 2020; a drop in net coverage rates by 0.6 percentage points.<sup>10</sup> Net coverage of tertiary education dropped by 0.6 percentage points between 2019 and 2020.</p>
Mexico	<p>It is estimated that 2.5 million students (i.e. 10% of all students) may drop-out of education due to the pandemic.<sup>11</sup> Net coverage of basic education reached 61.9% of children on school age during the school year 2019-2020 and decreased to 60.6% during the 2020-2021 academic year. The percentage of children not enrolled in school due to COVID-19 related reasons increased by 1.7 percentage points between the two school years.<sup>12</sup></p>
Peru	<p>Dropout rates increased in Peru; at primary level by 2.2 percentage points, at secondary level by 0.5 percentage points. Enrolment decreased in all levels, from 1 768 758 to 1 5629 153 at initial level, 3 667 092 to 3 636 123 at primary level, and 2 588 822 to 2 569 267 at secondary levels, between 2019 and 2020. A subgroup of 337 870 students (from all levels) transferred from private to public schools between 2019 and 2020, around 4.3% of children enrolled.<sup>13</sup> This result is alarming compared to the 1% of students transferring from</p>

Peru	<p>private to public institutions at primary level between 2018 and 2019, and the lack of student transfers at initial and secondary level for the same period.</p> <p>During 2020, 174 544 students interrupted their tertiary studies, an increase of 6.2 percentage points compared to 2019.<sup>14</sup> 9% of students dropped out from public schools, while 22% dropped out from private schools.</p>
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## 7. Education and beyond: adverse effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on children's well-being

Besides its direct effect on educational disruptions, the COVID-19 pandemic is affecting children's well-being in multiple other dimensions. For instance, although the likelihood of children and young adults to get seriously sick after an infection with SARS-COV-2 is relatively low, the health of vulnerable children could still deteriorate during lockdowns and as a consequence of the economic hardship suffered by families. Social isolation and school closures can have a dramatic impact on health, especially among children. Furthermore, the nutrition of children from disadvantaged backgrounds, as well as their medical care, is often supported by schools and other educational institutions. Prolonged school closures and home confinement can have a detrimental impact on children's health, for instance on obesity, due to reduced physical activity, irregular sleep patterns, and less favorable diets. Many factors can hereby also contribute to the psychological impact of the pandemic, even causing post-traumatic stress: fear of infection, frustration, lack of social contact with friends and teachers, lack of personal space, and family financial loss. It is not inconceivable that socio-economic disparities will play a role on the seriousness of these impacts.

Families at the bottom of the distribution are suffering a substantial reduction in their economic resources and are facing a very stressful situation characterized by strong uncertainty. These negative shocks will have a deep impact on future generations, especially in countries with high monetary costs of education, for instance because of tuition fees, and those with strong disparities in quality between public and private schools. In addition, job loss of the chief earner has been shown to induce other members of the household to increase their labor market participation. Older children in particular could therefore drop out of school to enter the labor market as soon as possible, leaving school without a valid qualification. Also among younger children, affected by the closure of pre-primary education facilities, a substantial impact of the pandemic on learning is likely to occur.<sup>15</sup> In addition, confinement and deprivation is believed to dramatically worsen also the situation regarding child abuse and teenage pregnancy, especially among vulnerable families.

Table 5 summarizes current findings on how the pandemic is affecting the well-being of Latin American children in multiple other dimensions, such as child labor, early pregnancy, and mental health.

Table 5. Information-box on the multidimensional impact of the pandemic on children in Latin America

**Child labor** has been decreasing over the past decades in Latin America, from about 14 million in 2008 to 8.2 million children in 2020. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the ILO and UNICEF projected a worldwide increase in child labor from 160 to 206.2 million children employed in 2022.<sup>16</sup> ECLAC and the ILO estimated rising child labor in Peru and Mexico.<sup>17</sup> Evaluations of current household surveys by CEDLAS show that Argentina, Ecuador, and Paraguay present an increase in children's employed at least in one trimester between 2019 and 2020, while Mexico presents an increase of 0.3 percentage points in child labor during the period 2020-2021.<sup>18</sup>

According to the UNFPA, due to limits in access to contraceptive methods, **early pregnancies** could increase by 6 to 11 percentage points. Indeed, 17 million women discontinued the use of contraceptive methods (3.9m could not access provision by private health institutions, and 13.1 m could not access provision because of shortages of public services).<sup>19</sup> Estimates by ECLAC and the UNFPA project a rise from 61 to 65 live births per 1000 teenagers.<sup>29</sup>

A report by UNICEF highlights the detrimental impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the **mental health of adolescents and youth**.<sup>21</sup> In Latin America, 27% of respondents reported to feel anxiety and 15% depression in the last seven days before being surveyed. For 30%, the main reason influencing their current emotions was the economic situation. 46% reported having less motivation to do activities they usually enjoyed. 36% felt less motivated to do regular chores. 43% of interviewed women and 31% of men felt pessimistic about the future. 73% felt the need to ask for help concerning their physical and mental well-being. Despite this, 40% did not ask for help.



<p>Argentina</p>	<p>Intrahousehold violence: there was a 25% increase on reported domestic violence. Furthermore, calls by women asking for help rose by 67% in April 2020 with respect to the previous year.<sup>22</sup> Child health: 28% of children aged under 6 weren't vaccinated according to their vaccination plans and 48% experimented a disruption on their eating habits, while 46% suffered from disturbed sleep.<sup>23</sup></p> <p>Child labor: 33.65% of teenagers reported to help an adult from their same household on their job place, and 16% declared to work.<sup>24</sup> An increase compared to 13.3% of children between 5 and 17 who declared to work in 2017.<sup>25</sup> However, the number of children between 10 and 14 years old employed remained stable between 2019 and 2020.<sup>26</sup></p> <p>On October 2020, 24% of interviewed teenagers between 13 and 17 claimed to be upset, 14% scared, and 12% depressed.<sup>27</sup></p> <p>47% of teenagers between 15 and 19 reported to be stressed over uncertainty about the future.<sup>28</sup></p>
<p>Bolivia</p>	<p>When comparing April 2019 to 2020, the access to contraceptive methods dropped by 64% for women between 20 and 24 years old, and by 75% for women between 15 and 19 years old.<sup>29</sup> Reports on violence against girls dropped between 2019 and 2020 (15%), although the number of cases are higher compared to 2017 and 2018.</p>
<p>Brazil</p>	<p>Reports on gender violence increased by 50%.<sup>30</sup> Child labor is reported to have decreased by 1.5 percentage points.<sup>31</sup></p>

Chile	Two third of children under 6 did not have regular medical checks during lockdowns, and 28% were not vaccinated. 25% reported to have trouble sleeping, and 16% eat worse than before the pandemic. It was estimated that 43% of children were exposed to conflicts at home. <sup>32</sup> 61% of interviewed children below six experienced more anger and irritability, 43% have less patience than before the pandemic, 37% are sadder, and 59% cry more; relative to pre-pandemic times. <sup>33</sup>
Colombia	Between March 25 <sup>th</sup> and June 23 <sup>rd</sup> , 22 cases per day of sexual abuse against girls were reported. <sup>34</sup> This goes in line with a 51% increase on registered cases of intra-household violence. <sup>35</sup> Over 50% of interviewed children below six suffer anguish due to the pandemic; around 25% reported being tense, preoccupied, and experience sadness; over 30% suffers from sleeping disorders. <sup>36</sup>
Costa Rica	Almost 70% of children below six suffers anguish due to the pandemic, more than 40% reported being tense, 50% are preoccupied, over 30% experience sadness, and almost 40% suffers from sleeping disorders. <sup>37</sup>
Dominican Republic	Regarding health issues of youth, 11.9% of children aged under 5 did not access vaccines and 12.3% of pregnant women did not access regular medical checks. 37.3% of households reported to have reduced food portions; 26.8% reduced the number of meals per day; 20.7% could not access some products at local markets; and 3.7% spent some days without eating. <sup>38</sup>

Ecuador	Child labor in Ecuador decreased by 0.3 percentage points. <sup>39</sup> 79% of surveyed teenagers reported to have difficulties on handling emotions or stress but did not seek for help. <sup>40</sup>
El Salvador	Around 55% of interviewed children below six suffers anguish due to the pandemic, more than 35% reported being tense, 35% are preoccupied, over 28% experience sadness, and more than 30% suffers from sleeping disorders. <sup>41</sup>
Guatemala	Access to contraceptive methods dropped by 41% for teenage girls, and 6% for young women between 20 and 24 years old. <sup>42</sup>
Mexico	<p>Estimations predict 22 000 more teenage pregnancies than usual due to lack of access to contraceptive methods.<sup>43</sup> Also, reports on violations increased from 2 to 5 per day in April 2020.<sup>44</sup> Not only physical, but psychological disturbance is taking place among youngsters: one third of children and teenagers report suffering from anxiety (this number increases to 44% if three or more children live in the household).<sup>45</sup></p> <p>Estimations suggest that child labor could increase by 0.4% if no measures are taken, implying a two-year setback on reduction efforts.<sup>46</sup> Studies found an increase in child labor between 2020 and 2021 by 0.3 percentage points.<sup>47</sup></p>

Mexico	<p>Food security decreased from 27.8% to 21.1% over May 2020-2021. One third of households with children suffered moderate or severe food insecurity. Psychological welfare was disrupted, as 30.35% of households reported that at least one member battled with depression during the pandemic.<sup>49</sup> More than one third of households with children reported anxiety situations; even 44% among households with more than 3 children.<sup>50</sup></p>
Paraguay	<p>The number of employed children aged between 10 and 14 has been decreasing over time, but this trend experienced a slowdown. The average difference had decreased by 1.1 percentage points between 2019 and 2020, and decreased by only 0.4 percentage points between the first trimesters of 2020 and 2021.<sup>51</sup> On July 2021, 50% of surveyed teenagers between 15 and 19 reported being insecure about the future.<sup>52</sup></p>
Peru	<p>During the first 107 days of lockdown, 17 000 calls reporting sexual violence against children were registered.<sup>53</sup> Child labor, is estimated to increase between 1 and 3 percentage points.<sup>54</sup> However, between 2019 and 2020 average child labor decreased by 1.5 percentage points.<sup>55</sup></p> <p>70% of interviewed children below six suffers anguish due to the pandemic, more than 45% reported being tense, 50% are preoccupied, over 30% experience sadness, and suffer from sleeping disorders.<sup>56</sup></p>

## 8. What can be done?

In this final section, we provide an annotated and selected review of the main measures suggested by major organizations and specialists to counteract the effects of school closures on education, with emphasis on assisting most vulnerable students to balance the unequalizing effects documented so far. We start the section with some general considerations from our reading of the situation and of said recommendations, and then, in Table 6, we highlight some primary axes of suggestions.

There are a number of considerations to bear in mind when thinking such strategies.

1. Many educational systems in Latin America faced major challenges even before COVID-19. The post-COVID “reconstruction”, if it does take place, might provide a window of opportunity to address some of those previous challenges. This includes paying special attention to the new approaches to human development, with special emphasis on socioemotional skills.
2. The COVID-19 situation has increased the challenges for Latin American education systems but this next stage also faces some new opportunities, in terms of technological connectivity, in terms of human connectivity, and in terms of political economy. On this last issue, parents’ movements claiming for school reopening may have started to provide an organized voice to the previously unorganized side of the political economy of education.
3. Given the learning losses induced by school closures, a natural focus for remediation efforts consists in finding intelligent and cost-effective ways of recovering the learning-time losses. This “quantitative” focus needs to be complemented with a “qualitative” one, which pays special attention to the emotional wellbeing of students (especially vulnerable ones) and teachers (especially those that work with most vulnerable students).

4. It will be crucial to maximize and optimize the use of information for monitoring, assessment, prevention and targeting. Latin American educational systems, with some exceptions, are not particularly effective in this regard, and the current situation demands the intelligent use of information, including information about the emotional wellbeing of students. This has been implemented, for instance, in Chile by the National System of Early Alert to detect 57.000 students at risk of dropout and its causes.
5. The remedial actions and rescue operations will require resources, especially financial resources. One key recommendation is for governments not to cut education spending when they face the inevitable need to reign in fiscal deficits incurred over the pandemic. If anything, fiscal resources devoted to education need to rise. The challenge is so daunting that help will be necessary from non-state actors as well. Private philanthropy, the for-profit sector, and community-based organizations together with governments should launch a crusade to save the next generation of vulnerable children from falling behind.
6. Given scarcity of various resources, it will be necessary to focus, at various margins, and to take a stance with regards to various trade-offs. Policies should differentiate across cohorts, specially enhancing the recovery of vulnerable students relative to others. Focus on some areas of the curriculum, students at risk, and enforcing certain skills are some examples of the target-policies needed to ensure a rapid recovery.
7. Country level specificities will have to be taken into consideration when defining priorities and strategies.
8. At the same time, education is surely a matter that goes beyond national borders. Educational tools and resources should be designed and provided at the international level, for instance by international organizations and supranational institutions. Hereby, interventions should aim at taking advantage of economies of scale and comparative advantages, particularly among countries with a common language.

Table 6. Overview of main policy recommendations

GENERAL RECOMMENDATION	WHY?	MAIN MESSAGE	SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS	FURTHER CONSIDERATIONS
<b>Recovering educational losses</b>	Loss of instructional time has an adverse impact on educational outcomes and may affect future life earnings (1).	Compensate for the instructional time and contents unlearned during lockdowns.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Extending school days (7)(9)(11).</li> <li>-Targeted learning for challenged students(10).</li> <li>-Modular learning: short, dynamic and accessible(4).</li> </ul>	
<b>Improving access and use of technology</b>	Disparities on access to technological resources among children increased educational gaps, and school disengagement across cohorts.	Meet technological needs to ensure learning and use technology to promote student engagement.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Targeted messaging for vulnerable groups to encourage re-enrolment (11).</li> <li>-Provide tech labs and trained teachers at schools, and digital services for students at home (2).</li> </ul>	Take into consideration the interaction of modern information technologies with the technologies of human interaction. For instance, invest on connectivity at communal hot spots, such as recreational centres, tutoring centres, and parks frequented by vulnerable children.
<b>Improve detection and assessment</b>	Lack of information on students' educational and family situation makes targeted policies difficult to implement.	Reinforce systems of educational information and management in order to monitor student's individual trajectories (6).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Keep track of what is going on at school (2).</li> <li>-One-on-one assessment tests focused on personal, digital, socio-emotional and mental health needs (11).</li> <li>-Recognize absences, and understand why students are not involved (8).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-For example, Chile implemented a system which detected 57 000 students at risk of dropout (5).</li> <li>-Information on students at risk could improve policy targeting and effectiveness.</li> <li>-In some countries, such as Argentina, many vulnerable urban students</li> </ul>

				have cell phones and schools try to reach lost students using their cell phone numbers. However, they have difficulty in reaching them because their numbers change too often. Promoting permanent personal numbers could facilitate school reach, as well as other social policies.
<b>Focus on emotional well-being</b>	Lockdown caused emotional distress on children and adolescents. Uncertainty about the future, not being able to see their friends, and intra-household violence are common consequences they experienced.	Acknowledge problems associated with emotional well-being and implement pedagogic strategies to overcome them.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Strengthen psychological support and counselling services at schools (7).</li> <li>-Ensure the wellbeing and inclusion of vulnerable students (7).</li> <li>-Training to ensure mental well-being of students and how to deal with trauma (10).</li> <li>-Help children consider, evaluate and strengthen their mental health and emotional well-being.</li> <li>- Prioritize resilience, caring for others and self-management of learning (4).</li> <li>-Teachers need training on how to recognize and support students at risk, and to deal with traumatized students (7).</li> </ul>	Students from vulnerable families may have suffered more loss and uncertainty during the pandemic. It is vital to tailor the programmes and actions being implemented to their needs.
<b>Towards more holistic teaching</b>	Learning losses may not be recovered if programmes, curricula, and pedagogic strategies from pre-pandemic times are applied.	Move away from curriculums composed by the sum of different subjects. Focus on the learning and human	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Acquire new skills in short time and motivate learning through a credit-based curriculum (5).</li> <li>-Incentive teacher collaboration to integrate different areas of knowledge</li> </ul>	



		development process of each classroom and each student.	<p>on projects focused on problem solving (2)(5).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Support teachers to reorganize classroom work to deliver more individualized instruction and provide accelerated learning and remedial responses when necessary (7).</li> <li>-Train teachers to listen and teach according to student needs (8).</li> </ul>	
<b>Focus on teachers</b>	Teachers are the main link between the school and families. Their working environment has changed drastically, making some abilities and teaching techniques obsolete. Also, teachers have suffered substantial stress during the pandemia.	Train teachers to address student needs and adapt to new learning mechanisms, with a main focus on the use of digital devices. Provide psycho-social support to ensure their well-being and that of their students.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Strengthening school leadership's support for teachers (9).</li> <li>-Monitor classrooms to detect burnout stress (9).</li> <li>-Adhere to health protocols (9).</li> <li>-Implement a revised curriculum with access to education technology (9).</li> <li>-Provide high-quality professional development tailored to teacher's needs (9).</li> <li>-Engage teachers actively to understand their concerns and act upon them (9).</li> <li>- Increase support for teachers, which may translate on higher support for students and families (8).</li> </ul>	Implement a reward system for teachers (and schools) that made exceptional efforts to maintain vulnerable students connected.
<b>Redefine alliance between schools and families</b>	<p>A large percentage of dropouts or absentees are due to the lack of communication and involvement of families and educational institutions.</p> <p>Poor communication between parents and</p>	Increase dialogue between families and schools by different channels that may foster participation on educational activities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Insert the role of the family on institutionalized debate and the design of educational policies (5).</li> <li>-Include families on the design and implementation of strategies to overcome educational losses (11).</li> <li>-Foster community outreach through email, texts and phone calls(11).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Perú used informative campaigns and messages focused on trust and motivation for families to encourage the return to schools (5).</li> <li>-Messaging through WhatsApp may be a cost-effective solution for</li> </ul>

	schools contribute towards low student performance (9).		-Provide a dedicated hotline, email address, or WhatsApp phone number for receiving feedback from parents (9).	expanding school outreach.
<b>Promote the role of civil society organizations that assist children in vulnerable contexts</b>	In many vulnerable locations in Latin America there are important intermediate actors in the community that complement, articulate and promote the relationship between families and schools, and promote learning within broader care efforts.	Promote civil society engagement.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Encourage civil organizations to increase school tutoring, and provide school meals and jobs (5).</li> <li>-Support organizations which make students' needs visible (5).</li> <li>-Promote the role of organization on linking school and families, which is crucial for preventing dropout and supporting learning (5).</li> <li>-Respond to socialization needs and create a sense of community (7).</li> <li>-Establish social networks of community volunteers and parents to help children engage on learning (4).</li> </ul>	
<b>Focus on the right margins</b>	Focus on vulnerable locations and students would be crucial to mitigate the unequalizing effects of school closures we described. But even within "vulnerable schools", different situations require different strategies.	Given scarcity of various resources, it will be necessary to focus, at various margins, and to take a stance with regards to various trade-offs. These include trade-offs across education levels; focus on most vulnerable students; and even focus across different groups of vulnerable students.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Prioritize presence in school of students which are at risk, more vulnerable, or have been affected by school closure in a wider way (12).</li> <li>-Offer solutions that guarantee student's learning continuity and compensate learning gaps (6).</li> <li>-Prioritize women, as the gender gap was deepened during the pandemic (5).</li> <li>-Foster the role of disengaged parents and communities in school by regular check-ins by teachers and monitoring of families (9).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Give special focus to vulnerable schools, supply materials, food and socioemotional support.</li> <li>-Due to limited resources, a possible trade-off that policy makers or school principals may face is to prevent drop-out or focus on students that have already dropped school (10).</li> </ul>

			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Encourage peer-to-peer mentoring systems to promote student engagement (9).</li> <li>-Promote re-enrollment by fee waivers and school meals, school supplies, and facilitate enrollment processes (9).</li> <li>- Invest on differential planning strategies in order to meet diverse educational demands (8).</li> </ul>	
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## Notes

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# FUTURE OF WORK IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH

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## ABOUT FOWIGS

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