# Education responses to COVID-19:

# an implementation strategy toolkit

This toolkit provides education system leaders with an implementation framework and questions to consider in the development of their education responses to the COVID-19 crisis. It builds on an analysis of education policy actions taken during the initial stages of the COVID-19 crisis.

What dimensions need to be considered for implementing education responses to COVID-19? Lessons learned show that emergency strategies such as those triggered by COVID 19 need to take into consideration some constraints: fixed initial contextual factors, limited evidence available and no time for capacity development.

Implementing an education response to the COVID-19 pandemic that supports equity, quality and wellbeing should rely on the capacity of schools and education professionals as well as technological resources available. The engagement of stakeholders to develop a broadly supported overarching solution may need to be limited to key actors initially and integrated in later stages, as there is an optimal trade-off between involvement and reactivity. But the policy can actually be based on schools having leeway to design their own approaches, following the shaping of a national or regional vision, generic health and educational guidelines, and the provision of support to those in need to manage inequities. An effective implementation strategy will bring together these dimensions and make them actionable in terms of timeframes, responsibilities, tools and available resources.

## Introduction

The global crisis linked to the COVID-19 pandemic has exceeded by far the public health sphere, and deeply affected the education world. No less than 188 countries around the world shut down all schools, affecting the lives of almost 1.6 billion children, youth and their families (UNESCO, 2020[1]).

Implementing an education response to crises such as COVID-19 has been and continues to be challenging in light of uncertainties. Many countries have progressed collaboratively in shaping their immediate school closures, as reported in a survey led by the OECD and the Harvard Graduate School of Education. The same survey also highlighted that many countries consider for instance that ensuring the

continuity of education or supporting the learning of students who lack autonomy or those at a disadvantage may be challenging (OECD and Harvard Graduate School of Education, 2020[2]).

To support countries in their efforts to design and implement education system responses during the COVID-19 crisis, Gouëdard, Pont and Viennet (2020[3]) propose a set of recommendations for effective implementation of education responses to the pandemic. These have been developed following the analysis the school continuity approaches adopted across OECD countries during the initial stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as research evidence and country practices.

This toolkit for education system leaders presents the recommendations for implementing a way forward to COVID-19 education responses in a user-friendly format. Despite the global character of the pandemic, there is no one-size-fits-all implementation strategy for coping with the crisis. This is why this toolkit presents recommendations with guiding questions, so they can be adapted to the specific education system and its context. The toolkit can be used by individual policy makers or teams at the local, regional or national level to shape the implementation of their education response strategies.

The toolkit is structured as follows: following the introduction, the first section presents the recommendations, with a set of questions for guidance. The second section presents a table for system leaders to consider in more detail the practicalities of implementation: How, who, when, and how it will be measured. The last section presents a figure where either collectively or individually, those using the toolkit can rate their strategies on a scale from 1 to 5 and see where they may need to invest for an effective implementation strategy to move forward.

## Shaping a COVID-19 education implementation strategy

While closing schools appeared necessary to slow down the epidemic and protect children and those surrounding them, it disrupted their learning process. Many students around the world moved to distance (or remote) learning from home, whether technology based, television, radio, and paper based, or alternative approaches that schools quickly implemented to remain connected. Student external assessments have been cancelled or replaced, and families have been expected to take a larger role in supporting student learning. Many school systems also decided to reduce the learning areas covered.

School closures can have a negative impact on children, on learning and increase inequalities if governments do not effectively implement measures to ensure every child has sufficient resources to learn in good conditions, in particular in countries where non-school factors play a determinant role in learning outcomes. This is why implementing education strategies for student learning in the next stages of COVID-19 is vital.

The emergency situation has demanded and continues to demand speed in the implementation of responses, and a coherent implementation perspective can help ensure that these responses reach schools effectively. As countries explore ways forward to continue providing education to their students, reopening schools and designing new models of education that expand the borders of the physical schools through technology, there are a range of considerations for the effective implementation of their education strategies.

In times of emergency, when constraints on resources, capacity, and time are binding, and evidence of what may work is limited, having an implementation framework can save time, efforts, and result in better outcomes. By weaving together policy design that provides a vision, tools, and gives schools autonomy over their learning approach, just-in-time stakeholder engagement that informs decision making, and key contextual factors such as available resources and complementary policies required to build policy coherence around schools and students, countries can shape an actionable implementation strategy, successful in bringing about effective change (Figure 1).

## Figure 1. The Implementing Education Policies framework
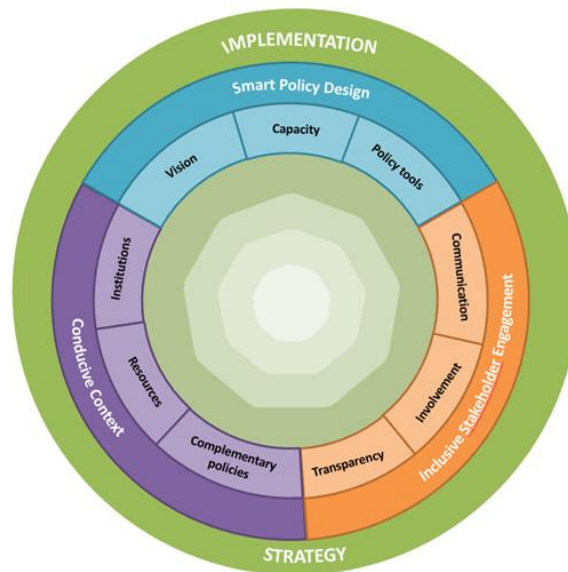


*Source*: adapted from Viennet and Pont (2017[4]), "Education policy implementation: a literature review and proposed framework", OECD Education Working Papers, No. 162, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://dx.doi.org/10.1787/fc467a64-en.

Overall, the crisis is a stress test challenging the resilience and equity of our education systems. At a time when individuals and schools are isolated, there is a risk that connections between students and schools, and with their community are broken. This is especially important when non-school factors play a determinant role in learning outcomes. Yet, the crisis may be an opportunity to explore alternative education organisation approaches that bring schools and homes closer together, that foster the autonomy of students to manage their own learning, and provide additional support to those at a disadvantage. For education systems, the next steps are about assuring quality, equity and well-being in education:

- Quality: to minimise the disruption in learning and ensure that students are able to complete their studies with the required level of competences.

- Equity: to ensure that all students from the same cohort enjoy the same learning opportunities, and that students impacted by the crisis will graduate with the same level of competences as their peers from unaffected cohorts.

- Well-being: to ensure not only students' physical and mental health, but also the development of socio-emotional skills, by preserving the school community, and the link between peers and teachers.

But how can this be done? The lessons learnt from the first stage of the pandemic can pave the way for more strategic education implementation processes. In times of emergency, when constraints on resources, capacity, and time are binding, and evidence of what may work is limited, having an implementation framework can save time, efforts, and result in better outcomes. An effective implementation strategy will weave together the contextual factors, the engagement of stakeholders and the policy design in an actionable way so that the policy can reach its intended objectives. In the case of COVID-19 education measures, this implies considering available human and technological resources, engaging stakeholders and developing a policy that takes into consideration student and school health, wellbeing and learning.

### *Identify key contextual factors relevant to the crisis*

To be feasible and implemented quickly, the development of a policy response to a crisis must rely on immediately available resources, but can also build on existing institutions to expand the scope of the emergency measures. Policy coherence around schools and students is necessary to ensure that all educational aspects surrounding schools affected by the crisis are covered by the policy response. In shaping the next steps of the educational response to the COVID crisis, countries can consider the following contextual factors in their strategy:

**Assess the available resources**

- What are the the technical (broadband coverage, laptops, tablets) in schools and homes and financial resources (budget leeway) available?
- What are the financial, logistical, and other welfare-targeted support required for those from a disadvantaged background or those at risk of dropping-out who have limited access to resources?

**Broaden co-operation with potential partners**

- How can you build on existing school networks, national pedagogical centres or other institutions to develop your strategy?
- How can you build potential partnerships with non-profit or private actors to enhance the education system response capacity in the short term?

**Consider health, welfare and assessment policies in the education response**

- How can you include health consideration and health experts to inform your decision-making processes at different levels?
- How can the range of services, other than educational (e.g. meal distribution, mental health support, counselling services), that are essential be continued?
- How can assessment practices be adapted? In particular, how can the agenda and potential reorganisation of high-stakes examinations be clarified?

### *Consider stakeholders as the main drivers of change*

The crisis has shown that when things move fast, success relies on the capacity at the frontline to respond quickly, within supportive guidelines established centrally. This requires that roles of education stakeholders at each level of the system are clear and co-ordinated. In complex environments, consultation with education stakeholders is also instrumental to accomplish change, as practitioners hold the expertise of what is feasible on the ground and responsibility to make it happen at the local level and around schools. However, given the short time frames, this consultative process may need to be initially limited and targeted to key actors, as an optimal trade-off between involvement and reactivity.

**Co-construct the education response with key stakeholders**

- What type of consultation processes can bring in representatives of teachers, school principals, parent associations, education and health specialists, to shape a solution adapted to stakeholders' reality?
- How can insights on the desirability and feasibility of a policy response be drawn quickly, to manage a balance between inclusive engagement and reactivity?

**Focus responsibilities of the different stakeholders on supporting education delivery**

- How can the responsibilities and expectations for those in schools, for students, parents, local authorities, be clarified to ensure consistency in the delivery of education?
- What kind of guidelines at the central level can be drawn that provide room for local adaptation and fit different contexts?

**Build on existing tools for communication**

- How can contact between stakeholders within school communities and across the system be maintained to cultivate trust and make up for the limitations imposed on physical proximity?
- How can existing communication platforms such as websites, applications or school portals be used effectively for communicating coherent messages on the policy? How can best practices be identified and communicated?
- How can existing surveys or current data collection processes provide continuous feedback to fine tune the policy response?

*Design a smart policy to mitigate the educational impact of the crisis*

In the early stages of the pandemic, the vision guiding the policy response may have not been clearly stated in some countries, while schools and teachers exerted their autonomy to shift rapidly to distance learning, either through synchronous instruction via online classrooms, or asynchronous instruction relying on self-directed learning content, TV or radio broadcasts. As governments are now defining their mid-term strategies, they can build on the crisis momentum to consider the design of their response to the crisis for student learning and wellbeing.

### Define a guiding vision with strategic principles

- What will be the guiding vision that refers not only to performance, but also include equity and well-being?

### Choose the adequate mode and support for education delivery

- What is the mode of education delivery that is suitable according to the previous assessment of resources available and feedback by stakeholders?
- How can technology, distance and hybrid models of learning be developed to enhance opportunities for teacher-student interactions during physical school closures or other emergency situations?

### Empower schools in the delivery of learning and build the system resilience for the future

- What kind of organisational structures can be introduced to empower teachers in terms of pedagogical content and school leadership to ensure higher levels of readiness for change, self-efficacy, and innovation adoption?
- What kind of professional development will be provided for teachers and parents to support learners in their instructional approach? Who can provide it?

### *Make the strategy actionable*

Bringing together the different dimensions into an implementation strategy make them actionable. The strategies adopted by OECD countries following school closures to ensure education continuity were bounded by short timelines, and shaped in line with the progression of the COVID pandemic. Countries and economies are now taking a step back, as they consider the next steps in their back to school strategies. Surveys, questionnaires, and other feedback loops have been used to gather information on practices and their success at different levels of the system. This knowledge should serve as input for education policy makers and leaders across systems to shape the next strategies to cope with the pandemic.

> **Shape and communicate the implementation strategy**
>
> - How will the different elements be weaved together into a coherent and compelling strategy that spells out clear responsibilities, resources, and timeframes?
> - In what kind of document will this strategy be provided?

> **Monitor to understand progress and potential pitfalls**
>
> - How will systematic feedback be provided to monitor progress with implementing the education measures?
> - How can the strategy take on board the feedback and be adjusted in case of need?

> **Establish a communication strategy that can reach different audiences**
>
> - What kind of communication and engagement campaigns will be designed to ensure they reach different audiences such as teachers, students, parents or regional or local system leaders?

## A planning tool to shape the implementation strategy of the education response

### Table 1. Planning the next steps

| Implementation levers (What) | How will this be done? | Who is responsible? | Resources? | When? | Measure progress? |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Identify and build on key contextual factors relevant to the crisis* | | | | | |
| Assess the resources necessary for a transition to distance or hybrid learning approaches. | | | | | |
| Broaden co-operation with potential partners. | | | | | |
| Weave health, student welfare and assessment policies in the education response. | | | | | |
| *Consider stakeholders as the main drivers of change* | | | | | |
| Co-construct the education response with key stakeholders to ensure broad policy support. | | | | | |
| Define and focus responsibilities of the different stakeholders on supporting education delivery. | | | | | |
| Use existing tools to enhance communication between stakeholders within school communities and across the system and gather feedback. | | | | | |
| *Design an educational policy informed by the educational impact of the crisis to respond to school needs* | | | | | |
| Develop a vision that acknowledges the crisis and its implications, and restates the national commitment to key educational principles, equity, quality, wellbeing and safety. | | | | | |
| Choose the mode of education delivery based on the assessment of resources and stakeholders' feedback. Focus on how technology, distance and hybrid models of learning can enhance school based learning in times of need. | | | | | |
| Empower schools in the delivery of learning, building on the experience of the COVID-19 crisis to transform schools and provide professional development for teachers and leaders. | | | | | |
| *Shape a clear and coherent implementation strategy* | | | | | |
| Shape the implementation strategy by bringing together the different relevant dimensions in terms of timeframes, responsibilities, tools, and available resources. | | | | | |
| Develop knowledge to monitor implementation, understand progress and avoid potential pitfalls. | | | | | |
| Establish a communication strategy that can reach different audiences. | | | | | |

## A dashboard to gauge progress with the implementation strategy of the education response

Completing this dashboard (Figure 2) can allow you to identify the strengths and areas where further investments are necessary in the development of the implementation strategy. The dashboard is aligned with the planning tool presented previously, and the recommendations for developing a coherent implementation strategy (Table 1).

For each lever, please consider where the strategy stands in terms of the recommendation and associated actions on a scale from 1 to 4. Choose 1 for the lowest level of development in the recommendation and 4 for having accomplished the recommendation. You may also consider doing this collectively to develop a shared understanding of where there has been progress, and what are the areas for further development. You can do this directly onto this toolkit or request the authors for the associated file to complete.

Once you have identified the least developed part of your implementation strategy, you can switch back to the planning tool (Table 1), and initiate actions to strengthen it. The continuous iteration between these two tools will provide support for the development of a coherent implementation strategy to ensure effective change aligned to the education response.

### Figure 2. Gauging progress with the education response strategy

# Implementing policies:
# supporting change in education

This document was prepared by the Implementing Education Policies (IEP) team at the OECD.

The OECD programme Implementing Policies: Supporting Effective Change in Education offers peer learning and tailored support for countries and jurisdictions to help them achieve success in the implementation of their policies and reforms in school education. The tailored support consists of three complementary strands of work that target countries' and jurisdictions' needs: policy and implementation assessment, strategic advice and implementation seminars.

**For more information**

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**See:** Gouëdard, P; B Pont and, R Viennet (2020), *Education Responses to Covid-19: Implementing a Way Forwar*d, OECD Education Working Papers, No. 224, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/8e95f977-en

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