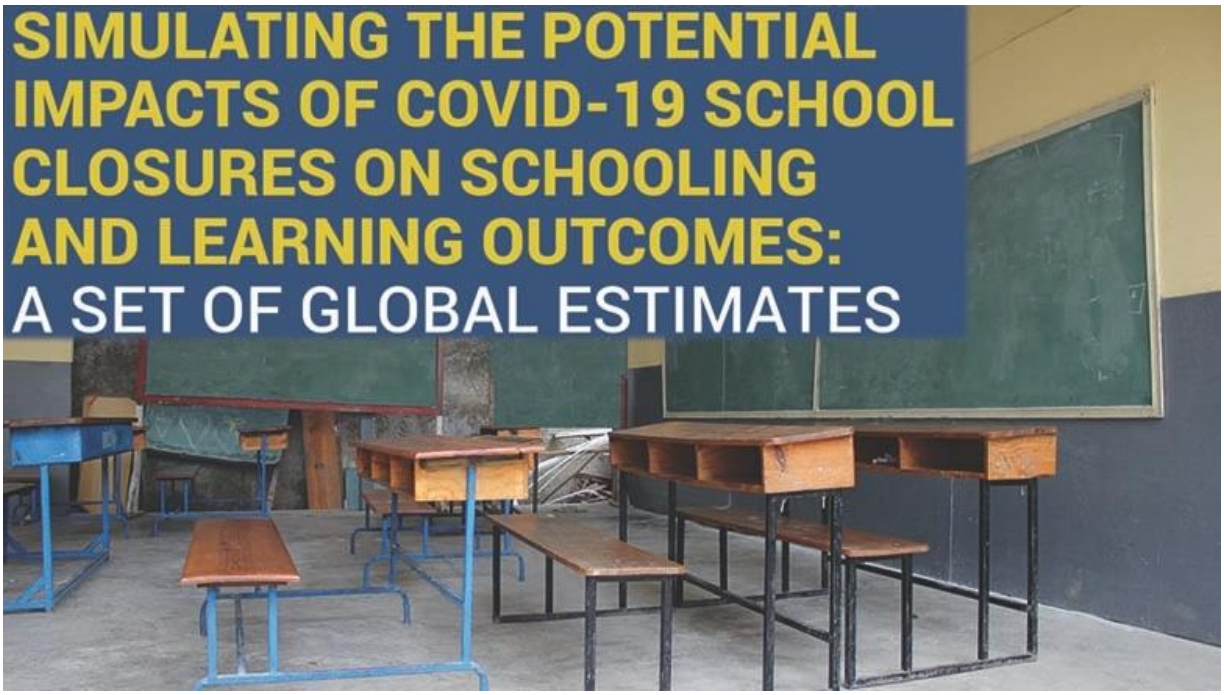
Simulating the Potential Impacts of the COVID-19 School Closures on Schooling and Learning Outcomes: A set of Global Estimates

JUNE 18, 2020



School closures due to COVID-19 have left over a billion students out of school. Governments are pursuing a variety of approaches to mitigate school closures. At the same time, all countries are undergoing the largest economic contractions of our lifetime, reducing public budgets and household incomes. What effect might this perfect storm have on schooling attainment and learning?

This paper presents the results of simulations considering different lengths of school closure (3, 5, and 7 months) and different levels of mitigation effectiveness (mostly remote learning), resulting in an optimistic, intermediate, and pessimistic global scenario

- COVID-19 could result in a loss of 0.6 years of schooling adjusted for quality, bringing down the effective years of basic schooling that children achieve during their schooling life from 7.9 years to 7.3 years.

- Put another way, in the absence of effective policy action, each student from today's cohort in primary and secondary school could face, on average, a reduction of $872 in yearly earnings. This is approximately equivalent to $16,000 over a student's work life at present value.

- Without effective policy responses when students return to school, approximately $10 trillion of lifecycle earnings (at present value in 2017 PPP) could be lost for this cohort of learners — because of their lower levels of learning, their lost months in school closures, or their potential for dropping out from school. This is approximately 16% of the investments that governments have made in this cohort of students' basic education.

- While school closures could lead to falling test scores on average, in the intermediate scenario there may be as much as a 25% increase (from 40% to 50%) in the share of lower secondary-aged children who are below the minimum level of proficiency. This highlights the importance of increasing the readiness of education systems to teach children at the right level.

- Before the COVID-19 outbreak, the world was already tackling a learning crisis, with 53% of children in low- and middle-income countries living in Learning Poverty — unable to read and understand a simple text by age 10. Unless drastic remedial action is taken, the effects simulated here will likely create a substantial setback to the goal of halving the percentage of learning poor by 2030.

- The combination of being out of school and the loss of family livelihoods caused by the pandemic may leave girls especially vulnerable, and exacerbate exclusion and inequality — particularly for persons with disabilities and other marginalized groups.

- These simulated effects should be used to inform mitigation, recovery, and "building back better" strategies. This includes effective remote learning strategies to provide learning continuity while schools are closed using multiple education technology solutions (radio, television, mobile phones, digital/online tools, and print) with support to students, teachers and parents. Governments should also implement appropriate actions to ensure the safe reopening of schools consistent with each country's overall COVID-19 health response, and to accelerate learning by building more equitable and resilient post-COVID education systems that enable children to learn continuously both in schools and at home.