

Pandemic Threatens to Push 72  
Million More Children into  
Learning Poverty—World Bank  
outlines a New Vision to ensure  
that every child learns, everywhere

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**WASHINGTON, December 2, 2020** – COVID-related school closures risk pushing an additional 72 million primary school aged children into [learning poverty](#)—meaning that they are unable to read and understand a simple text by age 10—according to two new World Bank reports released today. The reports outline a new vision for learning and the investments and policies, including on education technology, that countries can implement today to realize this vision.

The pandemic is amplifying the global learning crisis that already existed: it could increase the percentage of primary school-age children in low- and middle-income countries living in learning poverty to 63 percent from 53 percent, and it puts this generation of students at risk of losing about \$10 trillion in future life-time earnings, an amount equivalent to almost 10 percent of global GDP.

The new report, [\*Realizing the Future of Learning: From Learning Poverty to Learning for Everyone, Everywhere\*](#), lays out a vision for the future of learning that can guide countries today in their investments and policy reforms, so that they can build more equitable, effective, and resilient education systems and ensure that all children learn with joy, rigor, and purpose in school and beyond the school walls.

The accompanying report, [\*Reimagining Human Connections: Technology & Innovation at the World Bank\*](#), presents the World Bank’s new approach to guide investments in education technology, so that technology can truly serve as a tool to make education systems more resilient to catastrophic shocks like COVID-19 and help in reimagining the way education is delivered.

“Without urgent action, this generation of students may never achieve their full capabilities and earnings potential, and countries will lose essential human capital to sustain long-term economic growth,” said Mamta Murthi, World Bank Vice President for Human Development, in today’s [launch event](#). “Having over half of children worldwide in learning poverty is unacceptable, and so we cannot continue with business as usual in education delivery. Through visionary and bold action, policymakers and stakeholders around the globe can turn this crisis into a boon to

transform education systems so that all children can truly achieve learning with joy, rigor, and purpose, everywhere.”

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought two massive shocks. School closures have left most students on the planet out of school—1.6 billion students at the peak in April 2020, and still almost 700 million students today. The negative impact of the unprecedented global economic contraction on family incomes has increased the risk of school dropouts. Marginalized groups are likely to fall further behind. Girls are facing increased risk of adolescent pregnancy and early marriage during the pandemic. And children with disabilities, ethnic minorities, refugees, and displaced populations are less likely to access suitable remote learning materials and to return to school post-crisis.

In responding to the pandemic, education systems have been forced to rapidly implement innovations in remote learning at scale. To reach as many children and youth as possible, they have used multi-modal remote learning approaches that combine online resources with radio, TV, mobile, as well as printed materials for the most vulnerable. However, the huge digital divides – from connectivity to digital skills – and inequalities in the quality of parental support and home learning environments is amplifying learning inequality.

“Effective action today to mitigate large and mounting learning losses, recover, and rebuild stronger is needed more urgently than ever to accelerate the acquisition of foundational skills and, increasingly, 21st-century skills for every child,” said **Jaime Saavedra, World Bank Global Director for Education**. “There is a window of opportunity to build on the lessons of the pandemic and to build back a system that is equitable, where all schools and homes have the conditions and support for learning; that is effective, where teachers and schools are equipped to support each student at the level she needs; and that is resilient, with education services that are well-managed and ensure continuity in the learning process between the school and the home and community.”

Countries can chart their own path with a political commitment to carry out investments and reforms in five pillars that ensure that:

1. *Learners are prepared and motivated to learn*—with a stronger emphasis on whole-child development and support to learning continuity beyond the school, as well as better preparation through quality preschool, early stimulation, and nutrition.
2. *Teachers are effective and valued*—and ready to take on an increasingly complex role supported by technology that enables teaching students of diverse learning levels. This requires a meritocratic career path and continuing support through practical training that focuses on the quality of instruction.
3. *Learning resources, including an effective curriculum and blended learning*, supporting pedagogical practices that ensure that every student is taught at the level she needs.
4. *Schools are safe and inclusive spaces*—with a whole-and-beyond-the-school approach to prevent and address violence and leave no child behind.
5. *Education systems are well-managed*—with school leaders who spur more effective pedagogy and a competent educational bureaucracy adept at managing using technology, data, and evidence.

What core principles should guide reform efforts, so that policies within each of these pillars offer the greatest value for money and are scalable and sustainable? While there is no single path toward the future of learning, high-performing systems share some common tenets: pursue systemic reform, supported by political commitment and a whole-of-government approach, that focuses on learning for all children; focus relentlessly on equity and inclusion; act on the basis of evidence and focus on results; ensure the necessary financial commitment; and make smart investments in education technology.

Throughout the five pillars, countries can effectively harness the power of education technology—or “EdTech,” encompassing hardware, software, digital content, data, and information systems—to support and enrich teaching and learning and improve education management and delivery. As noted in the Bank’s new [\*Reimagining Human Connections: Technology & Innovation at the World Bank\*](#) report, EdTech can create new connections between teachers, students, parents, and broader communities to create learning networks. The investments in EdTech can pay off if ministries of education ensure they are:

- Embedded in broad, sustainable policies and programs that enable schools and education systems to provide blended in-person and multi-modal remote learning;
- Geared to support teachers being prepared to navigate distance learning and personalize instruction in and beyond the school; and
- Oriented toward assessing that learning is actually happening and using data to develop early warning mechanisms to identify and help children who are at risk of dropping out or falling behind.

For its part, the [World Bank's Education Global Practice](#) has rapidly ramped up its support to countries. In all, the World Bank is supporting COVID-19 response investments in 62 countries, covering the entire cycle from early childhood to higher education. The Bank's overall new commitments in education during the last fiscal year reached US\$5.2 billion, the largest figure ever, and expects to add another US\$6.3b this year. The World Bank is supporting the appropriate, cost-effective use of EdTech for expanding access and improving learning for all students. So far, WB efforts are reaching over 400 million students and 16 million teachers—about one-third of the student population and nearly a quarter of the teacher workforce in current client countries.

Overall, the [World Bank Group \(WBG\)](#), one of the largest sources of funding and knowledge for developing countries, is taking [broad, fast action](#) to help developing countries strengthen their pandemic response. It is supporting public health interventions, working to ensure the flow of WBG supplies and equipment, and helping the private sector continue to operate and sustain jobs. The WBG is making available up to \$160 billion over a 15-month period ending June 2021 to help more than 100 countries protect the poor and vulnerable, support businesses, and bolster economic recovery. This includes \$50 billion of new IDA resources through grants and highly concessional loans and [\\$12 billion for developing countries](#) to finance the purchase and distribution of COVID-19 vaccines.