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# RESILIENCE IN RETURN TO LEARNING DURING COVID-19

## COLOMBIA CASE STUDY

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This report is dedicated to the tireless teachers, learners, and parents around the world who continue to endure this global emergency.

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## ACRONYMS

DANE	National Administrative Department of Statistics
COP	Colombian Peso
ECD	Early childhood development
FARC	Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia)
FECODE	Colombian Federation of Education Workers (La Federación Colombiana de Trabajadores de la Educación)
FOME	Emergency Mitigation Fund (Fondo de Mitigación de Emergencias)
ICBF	Colombian Family Welfare Institute (Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar)
INEE	Interagency Network for Education in Emergencies
IRC	International Rescue Committee
MOE	Ministry of Education
PDET	Los Programas de Desarrollo con Enfoque Territorial (Peace Agreement with FARC)
PTA	Parent-teacher association
RERA	Rapid Education and Risk Analysis
RtL	Return to learning
USAID	United States Agency for International Development

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## INTRODUCTION TO RESEARCH

This case study examines the return to learning (RtL) processes and strategies of the education system in Colombia from March 2020 to April 2021. The report sits within a [compendium of five case studies](#) and an overarching synthesis report (Heaner et al. 2021) that examine the RtL process during COVID-19 in Colombia, Lebanon, Georgia, Nigeria, and Zambia.

The overarching purpose of this research was to (a) document descriptions of the processes of keeping learners engaged during school closures and reopening across a range of diverse national contexts and alongside multiple ongoing shocks and stressors; (b) capture the perspectives and learning of education stakeholders and institutions in order to understand how systems absorbed and adapted to the dynamic context of COVID-19; and (c) examine the ways in which education was positioned as a key sector in support of national resilience and recovery efforts. The research was informed by USAID’s Return to Learning framework (Boisvert and Weisenhorn 2020), which largely structured the thematic lines of inquiry for the case studies and USAID’s Resilience White Paper (Shah 2019), which framed the overall methods and analysis.

## METHODS

The research team was comprised of four international “core” team members in addition to five local research consultants, one in each case study location. This case study was comprised of four waves of qualitative, primary data collection in Colombia, conducted by the team’s local research consultant from December 2020 to April 2021. The researcher conducted 43 key informant interviews targeting education stakeholders that included Ministry of Education officials at the national and *Secretaría* (local) levels, and other government officials, donors, international and local NGO actors, and civil society organization staff. Over the course of the research, ongoing review of documents and literature that described the RtL processes, decision-making, policies, and strategies occurred.

Across the five case study locations, all consultants, the core team, and USAID came together to review findings and process after each wave. The purpose of these workshops was to unpack findings, compare across contexts, iterate lines of inquiry and priorities for the subsequent wave, and share methodological challenges and learning. After each wave, context-specific research teams developed priorities, plans, and targeted interviews for the next wave. After four waves, data for each location were transcribed and analyzed within the team. The findings from each case study are offered as descriptive, stand-alone pieces and are analyzed alongside each other in a synthesis report.

## CONTEXT AND COVID-19

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, Colombia struggled with a variety of social, political, economic, and environmental challenges. By 2020, the country had seen more than 60 years of internal armed conflict, which left more than 7 million internally displaced people. Despite 2016’s peace agreement, smaller conflicts endured. Economically, Colombia in 2020 was one of the most unequal countries in Latin

America, with 17.5 percent of its population in multidimensional poverty.<sup>1</sup> Environmentally, Colombia continued to struggle with high exposure to natural hazards such as earthquakes, floods, and landslides. Colombia also faced a migration crisis as a result of the economic, political, and social crisis in neighboring Venezuela. Of the more than 5.2 million Venezuelans who had left their country since 2015, the International Rescue Committee estimated that by 2020, 1.7 million were living in Colombia, 460,000 of whom were school-aged children (IRC 2020).

In 2016, the education sector received the highest government allocation in comparison to any other sector.<sup>2</sup> The National Law on Education (115 of 1994) prescribes no national curriculum and schools operate under an “autonomy principle,” with some general mandates. The Ministry of Education (MoE) is organized around 96 education secretariats (*Secretarías*). Since 2002, municipalities with 100,000 or more inhabitants and adequate technical, administrative, and financial capacity have been certified as education *Secretarías*. The flexible academic calendar can be adapted to the regional economic conditions or schools’ traditions, and each *Secretaría* has its own calendar with specific dates approved by the MoE.

On March 15, 2020, the national government announced a nationwide school closure, urging schools and education *Secretarías* to revise their study plans and offer online education services to their students. Three months later, official national guidelines were published to restart face-to-face learning under an *alternancia educativa* scheme (partial in-person and face-to-face learning). To qualify for return to learning, schools were required to write and submit a plan that would need to be approved by the *Secretaría*. Meanwhile, while schools were closed, the shift to a distance learning modality was declared nationally (March 16, 2020). That same day, the MoE launched two websites, *Aprender Digital* (Digital Learning) and *Aprende en Casa* (Learn at Home), which would support children’s education processes across the country.<sup>3</sup> Some face-to-face learning resumed by August 2020; by April 2021, 18 percent of schools had reopened under *alternancia educativa*.<sup>4</sup>

## FINDINGS

This report describes the alignment of response with the USAID RtL framework’s five priorities, as well as challenges and opportunities for contributing to resilience during the responses. Because of the decentralization of Colombia’s RtL approaches, the research team conducted deep dives into three selected *Secretarías* (Barranquilla, Cúcuta, and Palmira) to better reflect how the return to learning process was managed in different regions of the country, given the diverse possibilities across those areas. Information regarding the situation of Venezuelan migrants was also pursued to bring out issues related to equity and inclusion.

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<sup>1</sup> The Multidimensional poverty index (MPI) encompasses acute deprivations in health, living standards, and education to complement monetary poverty measures ([Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative](#) 2021).

<sup>2</sup> “In 2016, the public investment in education represented 9.8 percent of the total government expenditures, of which 7.4 percentage points were allocated to preschool, basic, and secondary school, and the remaining 2.4 points to higher education. In 2020, the public investment in the education sector was established at nearly \$12 billion, which is the highest value invested in education from public resources in the history of the country” (RERA 2020).

<sup>3</sup> Aprender Digital: [https://www.mineduacion.gov.co/1759/w3-article-394002.html?\\_noredirect=1](https://www.mineduacion.gov.co/1759/w3-article-394002.html?_noredirect=1) and Aprende en Casa: <http://aprendedigitalqa-2012125942.us-east-1.elb.amazonaws.com/aprende-en-casa>.

<sup>4</sup> There was no information available to clarify why the remaining 82 percent of schools hadn’t opened. During the interviews with the MoE and the *Secretarías* it was evident that it was because some *Secretarías* hadn’t sent their plans, the schools hadn’t submitted their protocols, or both had but they weren’t approved.

The case study makes clear that as a result of the Colombian education system’s decentralization, the degree to which *Secretarías* and schools within them were able to make and carry out plans depended on their capacity. Those with higher capacity planned and implemented return to learning largely in alignment with the RtL framework; this included attention to equity and inclusion in learner (re)engagement efforts, reopening plans, modifications to exams, promotion guidelines, and curricula. Where *Secretarías* had limited capacity, however, this alignment was not seen, highlighting the main challenge with providing inclusion and equity across Colombia’s RtL.

Within this, though, a number of “pockets of promise” were identified that highlighted capacities that were leveraged to respond to the challenges of COVID-19. These included: (a) parent group actions, including advocating to school principals and *Secretarías* to re-open schools, and meeting with other parents to alleviate their fears of COVID-19 so that they, too, would support re-opening schools (and feel comfortable sending their children); (b) *Secretaría*-level adaptation of the curriculum to lessen teacher workload and support student well-being; (c) teachers and schools taking the initiative to engage with communities early on to identify and act on needs and capacity gaps in the re-opening process; (d) the MoE leveraging a “G20” model to provide customized support to *Secretarías* to help them apply their RtL plans;<sup>5</sup> (e) new alliances forming between education stakeholders to respond to challenges during the pandemic; (f) *Secretarías’* and principals’ growing appreciation of the need for data to make evidence-based decisions; (g) a window of opportunity recognized by some education stakeholders that school is more than a place to educate children, but is also a supportive and protective environment for entire communities, something that became evident to many as something that was lost during the school closures.

The education system has been able to deploy localized adaptive responses to COVID-19 and its secondary effects, but a number of factors, not least that the COVID-19 emergency continued during the period of research, has hindered these responses from being reflective of sustained, transformative change. At the same time, the way in which the education sector has dealt with COVID-19 up to April 2021 has also highlighted some existing capacities that may be built on to contribute towards systemic resilience. Rebuilding the resilience of the broader system has the potential to reignite public trust in education and mitigate some of the factors that currently render the system susceptible to recurrent shocks and stressors.

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<sup>5</sup> The G20 is made up of a group of MoE personnel who are organized into sections, and each section works closely with a group of *Secretarías* to provide them with technical support.

## I. INTRODUCTION

This case study sits within a compendium of five case studies and an overarching synthesis report that examine the return to learning (RtL)<sup>6</sup> process during COVID-19 in Colombia, Georgia, Lebanon, Nigeria, and Zambia. Learning regarding RtL processes and resilience in education systems more broadly is explored further in a synthesis report (Heaner et al, 2021). The overarching purpose of this research was to (a) document the processes of keeping learners engaged during school closures and reopening across a range of diverse national contexts and alongside multiple ongoing shocks and stressors; (b) capture the perspectives and learning of education stakeholders and institutions to understand how systems absorbed and adapted to the dynamic context of COVID-19; and (c) examine the ways in which education was positioned as a key sector in support of national resilience and recovery efforts. The research was informed by USAID’s Return to Learning framework (Boisvert and Weisenhorn 2020), which largely structured the thematic lines of inquiry for the case studies, and USAID’s Resilience White Paper (Shah 2019), which framed the overall methods and analysis; it was ultimately guided by seven research questions ([Appendix B](#)).

Each of the case studies examines, describes, and analyzes specific localized processes, decision-making, and intricacies of continuing education and reopening schools, guided and organized by USAID’s RtL framework. With equity and inclusion at its core, this framework recognizes that crises affect learners in different ways, and offers guidance on critical plans and processes during crisis response that are critical in order to ensure that education authorities: (1) support all learners to return to/maintain a connection with learning during COVID-19; (2) mitigate learner drop-out because of the crisis; and (3) facilitate return to learning both for learners who have dropped out during the crisis and for learners who were outside the system prior to the crisis. When facilitating this return to learning—in person, at a distance, or both—the RtL framework encourages education planners, partners, and leaders to “leverage this opportunity to address historic educational disparities faced by the most marginalized” (USAID 2020a, 1) to ensure that not only is learning loss mitigated during crisis response, but that systemic resilience is, in fact, built through crisis response.

USAID defines resilience in education as the “ability of people, households, communities, countries, and systems to mitigate, adapt to, and recover from shocks and stresses in a manner that reduces chronic vulnerability and facilitates inclusive growth” (USAID 2012). USAID’s Resilience Framework may be understood in relation to pathways of resilience and vulnerability during COVID-19 (Shah 2019). This research set out to understand this framework in context to better understand how it may be more effectively applied.

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<sup>6</sup> Throughout this report, “return to learning” or “RtL” is referred to when describing the broad effort to get learners back into some capacity of in-person, distance, or hybrid modality of education services, and the “RtL process” refers to the various steps in getting there, which may not necessarily include, at that moment, in-person learning.

**Absorptive resilience capacities** – The ability of learners, schools, communities, or institutions to minimize exposure and sensitivity to shocks and stressors through preventative measures and appropriate coping strategies to avoid long-term negative impacts.

**Adaptive resilience capacities** – The ability of learners, schools, communities, or institutions to make informed choices and changes in response to longer term social, economic, and environmental change.

**Transformative resilience capacities** – The ability of communities and institutions to establish an enabling environment for systemic change through their governance mechanisms, policies and regulations, cultural and gender norms, community networks, and formal and informal social protection mechanisms.

While reviewing country responses to the COVID-19 pandemic across the case studies, it is important to keep in mind that research was undertaken concurrent with growth in global understanding of the nature and characteristics of the virus. Realization that the ‘shock’ of COVID-19 was not abating as quickly as initially hoped saw initial responses to the pandemic – which, in many cases, were initially intended to be short-term in nature – started to require much more long-term thinking and planning as learning for how, in contingency planning and in future crisis response, potential could be in-built for stressor mitigation and response.

## METHODS OF INQUIRY

The research team was made up of four international consultants (three researchers and one technical advisor) who served as the core team, and one local consultant per case study country.<sup>7</sup> One core team researcher served as the main point of contact for the local consultant for each case study. In general, the local consultant was responsible for conducting interviews (in-person or online/by phone, as appropriate) and supplying notes or recordings to the core team member, who would review and provide feedback as necessary. In some cases, the core team member participated in interviews or conducted interviews on her own. The local consultant also collaborated with the core team member on refining lines of inquiry, selecting participants, supporting data analysis, and writing the report. The study comprised three phases: (1) inception, (2) document collection and review; and (3) four waves of primary data collection via key informant interviews. After each wave, lines of inquiry were refined as needed.

As part of the inception phase, five countries were selected in a manner that considered Mission-level capacity to support and benefit from the study and consideration of various features and characteristics of the contexts. USAID (either the Missions themselves, or colleagues working in the regions) suggested an initial set of 14 countries. From those 14, the team aimed to select five that would allow for comparison across contexts in order to identify common themes, but with enough breadth to show diversity in contextual approaches to RtL. A scoring rubric was prepared to assist in this selection of five. The rubric was designed to allow for each case study context to be coded on two administrative

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<sup>7</sup> In the Nigeria case study, an additional local consultant was brought on to support outreach to the state-level government agencies.

criteria (USAID Mission concurrence and existing vetted GK Consulting contacts), and five situational criteria to generate a “contextual profile” for each, thereby balancing the uniqueness of a case study with its complementarity within the set. These situational criteria were:

1. Resilience: experience with a health crisis, or a crisis in which schools closed at scale for a protracted period of time
2. Return to learning status: schools have reopened/are currently open/funding allocated or provided
3. Context vulnerability: nature of existing shocks and stressors on society, and specifically on learners
4. Diversity of income levels
5. Geographical diversity (aim to include one each from Latin America and the Caribbean, Sub-Saharan Africa, and the Middle East and North Africa)<sup>8</sup>

The five countries selected using the criteria were: Colombia, Georgia, Lebanon, Nigeria, and Zambia. Colombia was selected because of its upper-middle income status, as well as experience dealing with natural hazards and an ongoing refugee situation. Georgia served as a good contrast to Colombia given that it, too, had an upper middle-income status but had fewer ongoing shocks. Nigeria was selected because of its lower-middle income status and previous experience battling a public health crisis (Ebola in 2015) along with recurring instances of violence in the north. Lebanon and Nigeria complemented each other in terms of their similarly multi-risk contexts and lower-middle income status, but were distinct from one another in terms of geography and geopolitics.

Also during the inception phase, the research questions initially articulated by USAID were elaborated upon and situated within a conceptual framework of resilience, and local consultants were hired to lead the case studies in each of the selected contexts.

For the second phase, the research team conducted a comprehensive desk review and gathered (a) frameworks published by international agencies on education sector responses to COVID-19; (b) reports on education during the pandemic school closures; (c) situation analyses of access to education during school closure in each of the countries; and (d) government plans drafted and decreed in response to COVID-19 (specifically in the education sector) for each of the countries. At this point, additional thematic areas of focus were considered for certain contexts. In Colombia, it was determined that because of the decentralization of RtL approaches, the researchers would conduct deep dives into selected *Secretarías* (Barranquilla, Cúcuta, and Palmira)<sup>9</sup> to better reflect how the return to learning process was managed in different regions of the country, given the diverse possibilities across those areas. Information regarding the situation of Venezuelan migrants would also be pursued to bring out issues related to equity and inclusion.

The third phase focused on interviews with key informants in the education sector—from national and local government agencies, donor agencies, NGOs, civil society organizations, and the private sector—over a series of four waves of research. After each wave, the local and international research teams

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<sup>8</sup> A separate set of case studies had already been planned through the USAID Asia Bureau, so Asian countries were not considered in the set.

<sup>9</sup> The MoE is organized around 96 education secretariats (*Secretarías*). Since 2002, municipalities with 100,000 or more inhabitants and adequate technical, administrative, and financial capacity have been certified as education *Secretarías*.

convened to discuss emerging findings and recalibrate the research questions and sample set for subsequent waves. It was at this point that the three *Secretaría*-level locations were selected. The *Secretaría* of Cúcuta was chosen because of the high influx of Venezuelan migrants (one of the highest in Colombia, being a border city), Palmira because it was one of the first in the country to start a reopening process, and Barranquilla because it had been mentioned by the Ministry of Education (MoE) as having good management of the pandemic despite its size (one of the biggest in Colombia) and high percentage of Venezuelan students. In total, forty-three unique key informants were interviewed at least once over the course of this research (Exhibit I).

**Exhibit I. Respondents in Colombia interviewed during phase three**

INFORMANTS INTERVIEWED IN COLOMBIA	NUMBER
Government officials – national level	15
Government officials – <i>Secretaría</i> level	5
Donors	2
United Nations or World Bank	1
International NGOs	3
Civil society and local NGOs	15
Private education sector	2
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>43</b>

*\*In addition, a developmental learning meeting took place with ten participants, including USAID/Colombia staff members, USAID/Washington, the Juntos Aprendemos Activity (implemented by Partners of the Americas and its three core partners, ProAntioquia, Parque Explora, Fundación Carvajal), and the members of two of the Secretarías interviewed for this case study. The preliminary results of the research were presented during the meeting and conversations considered how the information could be used by the Juntos Aprendemos activity. In addition, the members of the Secretarías provided complementary information and reflected on their regional experience. Attendees at this event are not included in the table above, as it was not considered a formal interview.*

**Common limitations across five case studies**

Several limitations must be considered in contextualizing the findings of this study:

**Subjectivity and potential for bias from research team**

As with respondents, researchers are subject to their own biases, which can emerge in the data, particularly with the open-ended qualitative approach employed for this study. The local researchers had significant influence and autonomy over shaping the questions that were asked in each interview, and in analyzing and interpreting responses. This helped ensure that the questions were relevant and appropriate to the context at the time in terms of COVID-19 and other developments in the education sector in each setting. Constant reflexivity within the research team, as well as a process of triangulating information (where possible), served to mitigate some of the inherent biases that individual researchers

brought to their work. Specifically, local consultants regularly engaged with the core team and those working on the other country case studies to share findings and analysis. Local consultants were also asked to reflect on their own biases emerging from the research.

### **Focus on first fourteen months of ongoing crisis**

This study was conducted during the six months from November 2020 to April 2021 and was designed to reflect both on the initial eight months of crisis response and on the ongoing response, decision-making processes, and actions that took place during the course of the six months of data collection. It was beyond the scope of this study to capture longer term outcomes of the RtL process. As such, some of the research questions can only be partially addressed, and in some cases, have introduced more questions to ask in subsequent research. For example, our research found that the majority of coping strategies deployed across the contexts were absorptive in nature, more so than adaptive or transformative, given that the COVID-19 emergency was ongoing. Thus, the research focus is balanced toward absorptive capacities deployed and the characteristics that have allowed some contexts to more readily build on these to then deploy adaptive strategies, and in less depth on transformative capacities. The potential for both adaptive and transformative capacities to be further leveraged in the future has been explored in the pockets of promise and serves as an important focal point for future research.

### **Context-specific limitations**

#### **Limited or difficult-to-obtain government-level documentation on the RtL process**

When describing the plans for RtL, documentation from each of the contexts was particularly helpful in providing the foundational information sought for the descriptive components of this study. Documents were also used as the basis for subsequent interviews where respondents were asked to reflect on the content. However, in some cases, such documentation either did not exist or was extremely difficult to obtain in a timely manner. This was true in Colombia, where it was necessary to be in touch with *Secretarías* directly to learn more about their unique processes. A small sample of three *Secretarías* was selected to try to represent a broad array of types of *Secretaría*, but of course, this sample does not represent all possible responses in Colombia.

#### **Challenge accessing information from key informants**

While the multi-wave methodology allowed for a substantial amount of time to reach out to key informants and to build relationships with individuals and organizations/agencies over the course of the research, there were limitations in the team's ability to access some individuals. For many interviews, a connection from key individuals at the MoE was required to reach others in the MoE at national and local levels, and this was not always easy to obtain. Once an interview was secured, there were sometimes challenges in hearing candid responses from that individual. As a result, in some cases, the perspective of a *Secretaría* is provided by just a few individuals there with a particular perspective on successes or challenges; in some cases, these perspectives were in contrast to more critical descriptions offered by other respondents and, as a result of difficulty obtaining interviews across multiple sectors in a single region, the researchers were not able to rigorously verify this information.

## 2. CONTEXT

### COLOMBIA'S MULTI-RISK AND MULTI-HAZARD CONTEXT

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, Colombia struggled with social, political, economic, and environmental challenges. The country has seen more than 60 years of internal armed conflict with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, which left more than 7 million internally displaced people, and since 2016's peace agreement, has transformed into multiple smaller conflicts. Economically, Colombia is one of the most unequal countries in Latin America, with 17.5 percent of its population in multidimensional poverty (12.3 percent in urban areas and 34.5 percent in rural areas), and 82.4 percent of the people from the lowest socio-economic status having no internet connection (DANE n.d.).<sup>10</sup>

Environmentally, Colombia has high vulnerability to climate change and faces multiple natural hazards such as earthquakes, gales, floods, and landslides: one study showed that 90 percent of the Colombian population has been exposed to at least one hazard and 80 percent to two or more (GFDRR 2010). Since 2016, more than 600 natural hazard events have been reported in Colombia each year, higher than anywhere else in Latin America (GFDRR 2016). In November 2020 alone, severe flooding damaged 23 departments of the country (Chocó, La Guajira, San Andrés y Providencia, Bolívar were among the most affected) and later that month, hurricane Iota passed through San Andrés, Providencia, and Santa Catalina Islands, and the northern coast of Colombia (especially Guajira), generating a humanitarian emergency. From January 1 to March 15, 2021, there were severe weather events registered in 176 municipalities across 23 departments, affecting thousands of people (Davies 2021).

Colombia also faces a migration crisis as a result of economic, political, and civil instability in neighboring Venezuela. Of the more than 5.2 million Venezuelans who have left their country since 2015, the International Rescue Committee (IRC) estimates that by 2020, 1.7 million were living in Colombia, 460,000 of whom were school-aged children (IRC 2020). Social services have thus become strained, and reports of xenophobia are widespread. The national government announced temporary protective status for Venezuelan migrants in February 2021, an important first step in helping integrate Venezuelans into Colombia, but only in early May were migrants able to sign up to access the policy's benefits (Government of Colombia 2021).

The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic were first felt in Colombia in March 2020 with a country-wide lockdown. A gradual reopening of economic activities led to a new peak of infections in September 2020. From then until April 2021, the lockdowns were more selective (e.g., individual regions of the country) and aimed to slow the spread of COVID-19. Schools remained mostly closed. According to the World Bank "an estimated 67 percent of the country's workforce (more than 15 million people) felt the economic effect, and many micro, small and medium enterprises had to close due to negative demand and financial shocks" (World Bank 2021). The World Bank also estimated that around 1.45 million people had fallen into poverty, three percentage points above the previous poverty line, although the expansion of social protection system coverage and the additional cash transfers provided to 4.5 million beneficiaries may have kept an estimated 632,000 people out of poverty (World Bank 2021). The National Administrative Department of Statistics estimated that the economy contracted by 6.8 percent

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<sup>10</sup> The multidimensional poverty index is composed of five dimensions: educational conditions of the household, conditions of children and youth, health, work and housing conditions, and access to public services.

in 2020 due in part to COVID-19 and that the unemployment rate for February 2021 was 15.9 percent compared to 12.2 percent in 2020 (DANE 2021). Youth unemployment went from 17.7 percent in 2019 to 24.2 percent in 2020 (Colombia Reports 2021).

## COLOMBIAN EDUCATION SYSTEM

The MoE is located in Bogotá, the capital city, and is organized around 96 education secretariats (*Secretarías*). Since 2002, municipalities with 100,000 or more inhabitants and adequate technical, administrative, and financial capacity have been certified as education *Secretarías* (Elacqua et al. 2019). If these requirements are not fulfilled, the education activities of the municipality become the responsibility of the department in which they are located.

The education system in the country is divided in two sections: preschool, basic, and secondary education and tertiary education. The MoE has two vice ministers, one in each of these sections. The National Law on Education (115 of 1994) stipulates that there is no national curriculum, and schools operate under an “autonomy principle,” though the MoE mandates some general guidelines (Congress of the Republic of Colombia 1994). Accordingly, the academic calendar is flexible and can be adapted to regional economic conditions or schools’ traditions. Each *Secretaría* has its own calendar with specific dates approved by the MoE, but it is required to be organized in yearly periods of 40 weeks or 20-week semesters. Schools choose to adhere to one of two types of calendars: Calendar A begins the school year in February and ends in December; Calendar B begins in September and ends in June. Public schools generally follow the February to December calendar. Private schools can apply the calendar they choose as long as they comply with the mandated weeks of instruction (MoE 2018).

Due in part to the curricular autonomy, each school implements its own evaluation and testing scheme. However, all students must take a national assessment test during the last grade of secondary education (grade 11) which can be taken during the first or second semester of the year depending on the calendar the school responds to (i.e., Calendar B schools’ students take the test in the first semester of the year and calendar A in the second) (MoE 2010).

As of March 2021, the Colombian education system had 9.6 million students enrolled in preschool, basic, and secondary section, of which 81.4 percent attended public schools. There were approximately 18,000 schools and 54,000 school venues, of which around 8,600 schools and 44,000 venues were public.<sup>11</sup> Eighty percent of the public-school venues were located in rural areas and 55 percent of the venues provided services to 50 or fewer students.<sup>12</sup> There were an estimated 329,000 teachers and teaching directors in the public system, of which 15 percent were older than 60.<sup>13</sup>

Colombia has 98 percent net primary school enrollment; 95 percent of females and 98 percent of males progress to secondary school. Compared to its previous test, as assessed by PISA (ICFES 2019), the country’s average score decreased; however, the average scores in math, reading, and science have

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<sup>11</sup> One school can have multiple venues. This is especially true in the public schools because of the geographical location of students.

<sup>12</sup> The 23.5 percent of schools, both public and private, are attended by between 101 and 500 students; 19.3 percent between 21 and 50; 19.2 percent between 11 and 20; 16.4 up to 10 students; 10.8 between 51 and 100 students; 6.5 between 501 and 1,000; and only 4.2 more than 1,000 students.

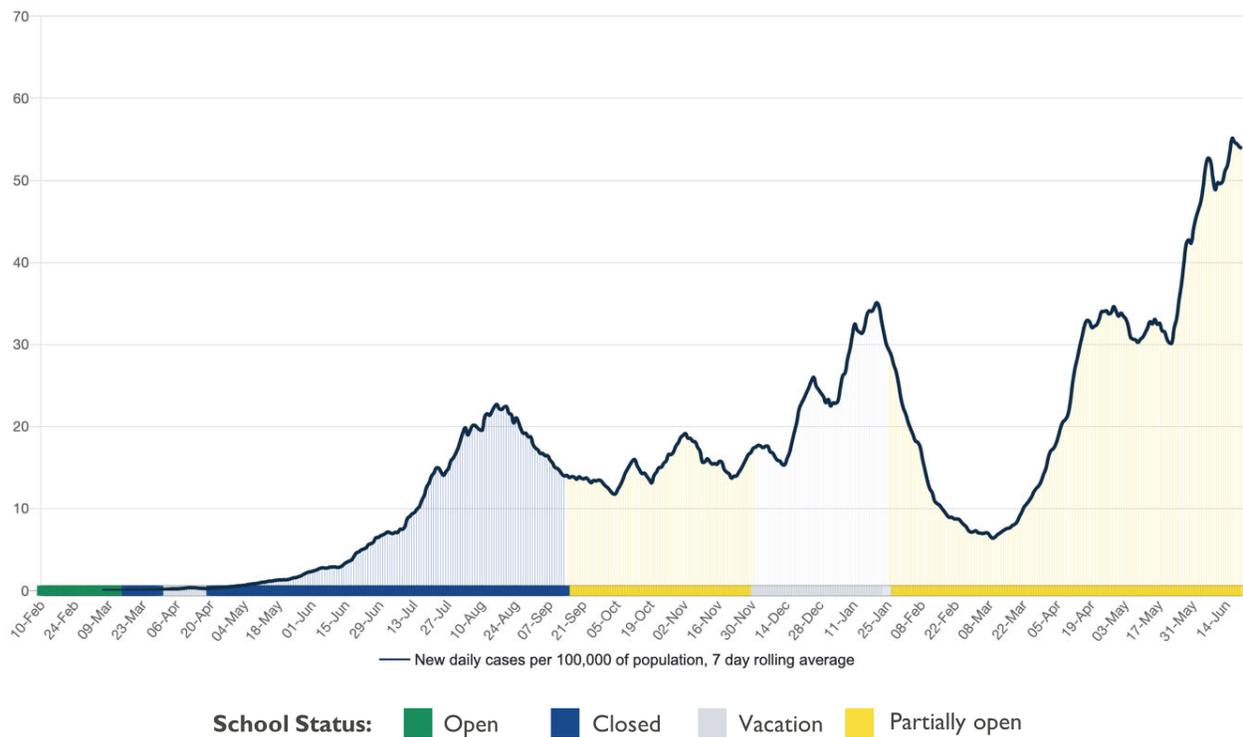
<sup>13</sup> From presentation provided at Ministry of Education meeting on April 28, 2021.

improved. Compared to other participant Latin American countries, Colombia performed below Chile, Uruguay, Mexico, and Costa Rica and above Argentina, Panama, and the Dominican Republic in the three tests.

## TIMELINE OF KEY COVID-19 EVENTS AND OTHER CONTEXTUAL STRESSORS

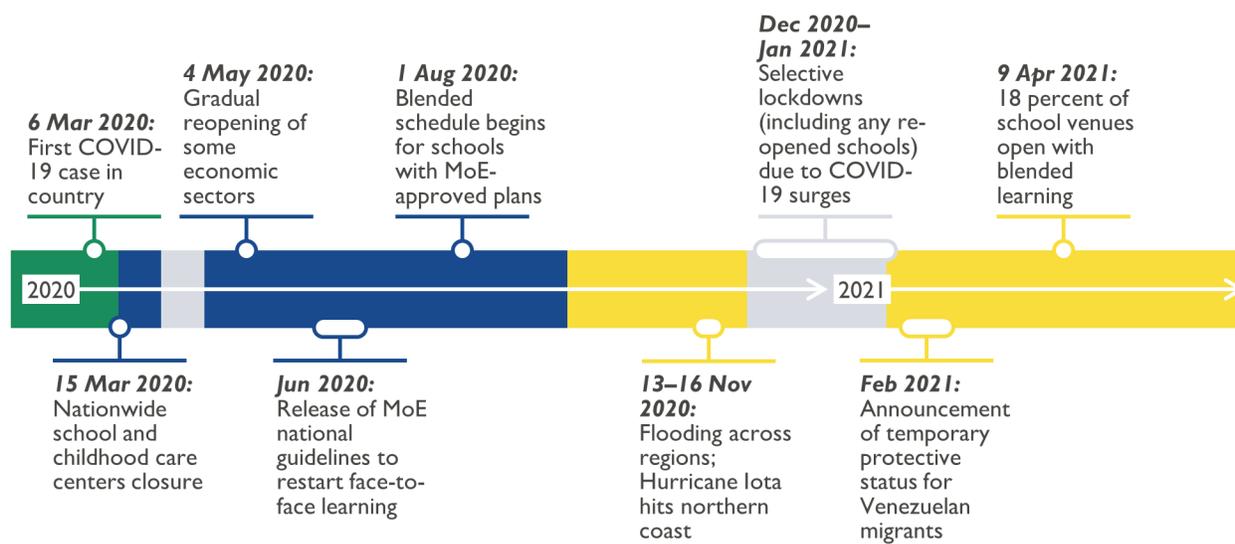
On March 15, 2020 the national government announced a nationwide school closure, and online instruction was launched the following day, eventually leading to the government’s *Aprender Digital* and *Aprende en Casa* (Learn at Home) websites that would support children’s education processes across the country. Official national guidelines were published in June 2020 that pointed toward an *alternancia educativa* scheme (partial in-person and face-to-face learning) for schools able to write a plan that was considered adequate by the *Secretaría*. By April 2021, 18 percent of schools had reopened under *alternancia educativa*.<sup>14</sup>

**Exhibit 2. School status and COVID-19 cases in Colombia from February 2020 to June 2021 (Insights for Education)**



<sup>14</sup> There was no information available to clarify why the remaining 82 percent of schools hadn’t opened. During the interviews with the MoE and the *Secretarías*, it was evident that it had to do with either the fact that some *Secretarías* hadn’t sent their plans, the schools hadn’t submitted their protocols, or one or both had but they weren’t approved.

## TIMELINE OF KEY EVENTS



Below is a high-level timeline of key events undertaken in the Colombian education system in response to the COVID-19 pandemic up to time of writing (May 2021).

**Exhibit 3. Timeline of key COVID-19 events and responses in Colombia**

DATE	EVENT
March 6, 2020	First COVID-19 case reported in Colombia.
March 11, 2020	WHO declares COVID-19 a pandemic.
March 15, 2020	National government announces nationwide school and early childhood care centers closure and a shift in the academic calendar.
March 16, 2020	First day of school closure. Students start vacations (March 16–April 19) and teachers and school principals start a two-week period of preparation for distance learning (16–27 March) followed by a vacation period (March 30–April 19).
March 25, 2020	Mandatory national lockdown declared by the president.
April 20, 2020	Students, teachers, and principals return from vacations and continue the academic year through distance learning.
May 4, 2020	Reopening of some economic sectors (construction and infrastructure).
June, 2020	MoE publishes official national guidelines to restart face-to-face learning under <i>alternancia educativa</i> scheme. School reopening is set to begin in August once <i>Secretarías</i> get their plans approved by MoE, and after that, once each school gets its plan approved by its <i>Secretaría</i> .
July 31, 2020	Distance learning ends for the schools that have had their return plans approved by their <i>Secretaría</i> , the others remain operating virtually.

DATE	EVENT
August 1, 2020	Face-to-face learning under <i>alternancia educativa</i> scheme starts for schools that have had their return plans approved by their <i>Secretaría</i> ; the others remain operating virtually. <sup>15</sup>
August–November 2020	The government gives 400 billion Colombian pesos of the FOME ( <i>Fondo de Mitigación de Emergencias</i> [Emergency Mitigation Fund]) to the 96 education <i>Secretarías</i> to help them finance implementation of biosafety protocols in public schools around the country.
September 1, 2020	The national government declares a new phase in the national lockdown: physical distancing with selective lockdown (for certain age groups, co-morbidities, etc.) and individual responsibility.
November, 2020	One hundred percent of education <i>Secretarías</i> have sent their PAEs ( <i>Planes de Alternancia Educativa</i> ) to the MoE for approval.
November 13, 2020	Twenty-three departments are severely damaged by seasonal flooding (Chocó, La Guajira, San Andrés y Providencia, and Bolívar are among the most affected).
November 16, 2020	Hurricane Iota passed through San Andrés, Providencia, and Santa Catalina Islands and the northern coast of Colombia (especially the Guajira department), generating humanitarian emergencies.
November–December 2020	The Colombian Family Welfare Institute ( <i>Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar</i> ) (ICBF) runs a pilot program to reopen early childhood development centers and announces great results.
December 2020–January 2021	Selective lockdowns by region/city; return to in-person learning depends on the approvals of plans and COVID-19 situation in each city/department.
February, 2021	Announcement of temporary status for Venezuelan migrants.
February 25, 2021	MoE urged <i>Secretarías</i> to prioritize the school reopening process.
March 1, 2021	ICBF publishes guidelines for the reopening of early childhood development centers.
March 31, 2021	The MoE ratifies the obligation on reopening and establishes that schools that want to close again need to have the Ministry of Health's approval.
April 9, 2021	Eighteen percent of school venues (out of more than 53,000) have opened under the <i>alternancia educativa</i> scheme, while the rest remain in distance learning mode.
May 2021	The MoE announces that by May 2021 all schools (more than 19,000 schools and more than 53,000 of those school's venues (sites)) in the country should be open under the <i>alternancia educativa</i> schedule scheme.
May 3, 2021	Strikes around tax reform escalate into violence, leaving at least 24 dead in a week; among the conditions of the committee organizing the strike is to stop the return to learning process, which has seen pushback from the Union of Teachers.

<sup>15</sup> No statistics on reopening rates were made available until early 2021.

According to Bloomberg, “Latin America faces lasting impact of its ‘worst educational crisis ever’”: there are 120 million school-aged students at risk of losing more than one academic year of in-person education to COVID-19, a situation that, according to the World Bank, could “translate into a drop of \$1.7 trillion in future potential earnings, or about 10 percent of baseline earnings,” and a 15 percent increase in dropouts (Bloomberg 2021).

The pandemic made children more vulnerable, exacerbating the already existing gaps and risks, and making evident that the education system was far from fulfilling its promises of access to quality education for all. Parents struggled to meet their children’s basic needs, having lost income from formal and informal jobs, and because of not being able to rely on the social services provided by schools (INEE 2021). The Interagency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE) stipulated that in Colombia, around 4 million students relied on school feeding programs, and the Norwegian Refugee Council reported that 86 percent of refugee and migrant populations have had to reduce their number of daily meals since the beginning of the pandemic (INEE 2021). Because of the increased economic insecurity, some children started working, and there was a rise in the forced recruitment of children during school closure by guerrillas and smaller delinquent groups (113 percent more in 2020 than in 2019; this was also a symptom of post-peace accords instabilities) (Ávila 2020), both of which are assumed to be contributing to dropouts.<sup>16</sup> In addition, the youth-focused civil society organization Niñez Ya reported that in comparison to 2019, in 2020, on a national level there were 4,255 more reports of child abuse, and 1.38 percent more reports on child sexual violence (Niñez Ya 2021). According to Red PaPaz, a national parents’ association that manages a hotline that advocates for child protection, this was likely underestimated, since prior to school closures, many of these reports were made to teachers and schools. As the majority of respondents noted, including personnel from the MoE, the school closures not only meant that many students stopped having access to their teachers, learning, and interactions with their friends, but also to key social services such as meal plans, social-emotional support, and protection from teachers.<sup>17</sup>

As it will be detailed later, online education had many challenges that limited equitable access to education: in Colombia, many people lack Internet access, devices, or technological skills, especially in rural areas. A July 2020 World Bank study estimated that the most vulnerable students in Colombia would lose 49 percent of basic learning gained in a school year because of this diminished capacity (World Bank 2020).

Although Colombia made an effort to open its doors to Venezuelan students, including before they were granted legal status, the education system became overstretched. The 2020 Colombia Rapid Education and Risk Analysis (RERA) identified numerous barriers for Venezuelans’ equitable access to education both in a classroom and in terms of access to key resources to enrich learning (e.g., Internet access and devices at home; access to national quality assessments [e.g., Prueba Saber 11], and securing diplomas) due to not having national ID cards (USAID 2020b). The RERA also found a perception that Venezuelan students entered Colombian schools with lower levels of education than their Colombian counterparts, a finding confirmed by interviews with *Secretaría* staff.

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<sup>16</sup> According to the MoE, the official enrollment and dropout numbers will be released in mid-2021.

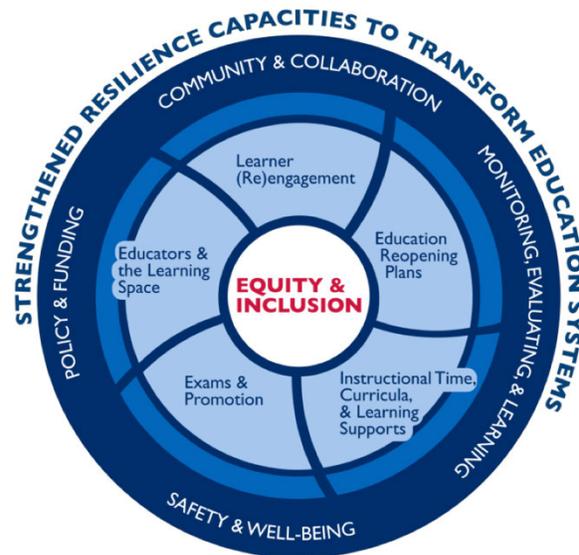
<sup>17</sup> Interviews 1, 4, 9, 14, 15, 16

### 3. COLOMBIA'S PLANS AND PROCESSES IN THE RETURN TO LEARNING

#### RETURN TO LEARNING FRAMEWORK PRIORITIES

This section tracks the Colombian education system's responses to COVID-19 against USAID's Return to Learning framework (Exhibit 4). The RtL policy brief proposes that a sufficiently resilient system would be able to address each of the priority areas within the RtL framework (outlined below) while keeping at the core these cross-cutting considerations: promoting equity and inclusion; ensuring the safety and well-being of learners, educators, and school personnel; actively communicating, consulting, and collaborating with educators, communities, and other stakeholders; planning to monitor, evaluate, and learn; revisiting policy and funding to benefit all learners; and planning for resilience (USAID 2020a). This section describes where and how the Colombian education system has or has not so far aligned with the five priorities and sub-priorities (see [Appendix C](#)) identified in the RtL framework both in terms of planning and actual implementation of those plans.

Exhibit 4. USAID's return to learning framework



An important dimension of the Colombian RtL context is that the MoE launched the national guidelines in June 2020 for allowing in-person academic activities in school, but decisions around the specifics of the RtL process were to be made by leadership of the local entities (health and education *Secretarías*), along with the participation of teaching directors, teachers, and families (MoE 2020a). Given the decentralization of the Colombian education system and, therefore, the wide variety of ways in which RtL was applied, each subsection will present any national guidelines prescribed for RtL, followed by examples of how those guidelines were applied (or, if no guidelines were provided, what was applied and why) as reported by respondents in three *Secretarías* (Barranquilla, Cúcuta, and Palmira).

#### RtL Priority I

**RtL Priority I: (Re)engage all learners, especially the most marginalized.** This priority emphasizes that not all learners are affected by crises in the same way or to the same degree, and that education planners “need to understand how learners, especially the most marginalized, have been affected, and strategize to re-engage them in education.”

**Assessments and monitoring systems to identify marginalized groups:** The MoE national guidelines mandated that the *Secretarías* conduct rapid assessments with communities to identify the specific needs of the population and how best to address them, in particular, those of marginalized learners (MoE 2020a). At the same time, proof of conducting these assessments was not required to be

submitted to the MoE to approve the re-opening plans. The three *Secretarías* interviewed for this case study, as well as various governmental entities (ICBF, MoE's office for early childhood education) and other organizations (Alianza Educativa, Primero lo Primero, Escuela Nueva, Enseña por Colombia), agreed that identifying the special needs of certain populations was important and said the assessments were conducted in each *Secretaría*. Each of the *Secretarías* mentioned the importance of children's access to Internet connection or devices that would have enabled them to access the virtual education resources. Barranquilla, for example, categorized its population in three groups regarding the type of access they had: students who were attending and advancing well, children who were intermittent in their responses and attendance to online classes, and those whom teachers hadn't been able to contact at all. A special effort was made with the two latter groups because it was evident that they were more marginalized and required special accommodations. In Palmira, *Secretaría* informants mentioned seeing that children were forgetting how to read during the pandemic because of the combined impact of parents not knowing how to support them and having insufficient follow-up from schools. In response, the *Secretaría* formed an alliance with Fundación Carvajal and its program Aula Global in to support lagging children in math and reading in the municipality's public schools.<sup>18</sup>

In an MoE circular describing the re-opening plans the *Secretarías* were expected to write (MoE 2020b), specifications around providing a monitoring and follow-up plan were included. This plan was to be oriented around identifying how to improve adherence to protocols, strengthen service provision, and effectively engage with stakeholders depending on the unique needs of that location. As with assessments, it was up to each *Secretaría* to define the specifics of this plan and follow through with it.

Of the twelve annexes in the national guidelines, one was dedicated to students from indigenous communities, one to students with physical, behavioral, or learning disabilities, one to gifted students, and one to early childhood from 2 to 5 years old. The guidelines did not specifically mention gender-related factors or economically or climate marginalized or vulnerable populations. While *Secretarías* and schools had the autonomy to work with these additional marginalized groups in the ways they saw most appropriate, it was notable that it was not mandated.

MoE guidelines also included no mention of Venezuelan students or specific policies or action routes designed for them in the return to learning process. During interviews with *Secretarías*, researchers put much effort into learning more about the specific challenges Venezuelan students might be facing, especially since the research was occurring at the same time that they were granted temporary citizenship status, and therefore stood to gain from the resources that entailed. However, most respondents were not willing (or able) to provide any such attributes; in most of the cases it was said that the return to learning challenges were faced by both Colombians and Venezuelans the same.<sup>19</sup>

## RtL Priority 2

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**Priority 2: Education reopening plans.** This priority encourages decision makers to develop comprehensive plans for reopening institutions, ensuring the physical safety for students, teachers,

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<sup>18</sup> Interviews 14, 15, 16.

<sup>19</sup> Interviews 14, 15, 16.

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and school administrators whether meeting in-person or remotely. The actions encourage regular monitoring to be able to adapt to the context, and to “transition between remote and in-person learning depending on the local risk factors.” To ensure equity and inclusion are built into actions taken, this priority encourages participation of a range of stakeholders in decision-making processes around reopening and contingency planning, and clear, consistent communication with all stakeholders across all processes.

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**Education reopening plan:** Included in the national guidelines to re-open schools was the *alternancia educativa* plan, a blended model in which schools would assess how to start allowing children to attend in-person classes while still offering spaces for distance learning. It was the responsibility of each *Secretaría* to build its own return plans that took into account its own contextual needs and strengths, including COVID-19 prevalence. With the MoE’s approval of the *Secretaría*’s plan, each school would have to present to the *Secretaría* its own protocols. When that was approved, they’d be ready to return to in-person classes under the *alternancia educativa* scheme.

To be considered, the *Secretaría*’s plan had to explain how it would formalize its relationship with the health sector and provide specific plans on how it would facilitate a physically safe return to learning in early, basic, and middle education.<sup>20</sup> The plan also had to articulate how the *Secretaría* would approach the blended learning (*alternancia educativa*) requirement (MoE 2020a):

#### **Components required in *Secretaría*’s plan for RtL**

- COVID-19 prevalence locally and nationally; associated health and safety protocols in schools including in event of cases/outbreaks
- Plans for implementing *alternancia educativa* per MoE guidance on the general model
- Information about how *Secretaría* leaders would be trained on how to apply the protocols
- A communication plan for disseminating technical information and updates on school reopening plans and processes to different stakeholders (children, teenagers, families, communities, teachers)
- Specification of the financial source(s) and budgets for implementation of the planned processes (including improvement of infrastructure, health and safety materials, meals, and transportation plans)
- Specifics on an intersectoral team, including how to include directors of different local government organizations, indigenous authorities, teacher directors, school principals, local health authorities, and others in the process

In addition, the plans had to include information about how they would involve students, adults, families, and communities in the process. One of the annexes from the MoE’s June 2020 guidelines makes reference to early childhood services, but it only includes children from 2 to 5 years old (MoE 2020a). It was only in March 2021 that the ICBF published specific technical guidelines for younger children, stipulating that Venezuelans and Colombians should have equal access to early childhood services, and

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<sup>20</sup> The *Secretarías* have no role in regulating higher education programs; these are out of their scope. However, some did publish guidelines for TVET programs, such as in Barranquilla.

could be enrolled with the different IDs approved by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. That said, one high ranking government official mentioned in an interview there was no real clarity as to how to enroll them if they did not have a national ID. This same barrier was reported regarding older children.<sup>21</sup>

**Outbreak response:** A plan for outbreak response was mandatory. Early detection had to be accomplished by putting in place practices such as temperature checks, COVID-19-related symptoms report, and families' risk report or diagnosis confirmation. Considering school closure for 24 hours for disinfection after a confirmed case, informing all school community members, home isolation for the infected student or teacher, and other actions were also suggested.

**Involve learners, educators, and communities in decision-making:** The national guidelines directed all *Secretarías* and schools to engage families in the process of returning to in-person classes, using the methods of their choice. This was done to understand learner and community needs, including identifying some of the unique needs of marginalized people. However, the research identified this as a key challenge; stakeholders were not always involved in the school's decision-making process, therefore, they didn't understand or support certain measures.

### RtL Priority 3

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**RtL Priority 3: Instructional time, curricula, learning support.** This priority is recommended to sequentially follow the previous priority and focuses on ensuring that modifications to educational programs are made with attention to, and prioritization of, core learning objectives. Consideration of various catch-up options—and the financial and human resources needed for these—is recommended, as is the importance of ensuring that learning objectives also take the psychosocial, social-emotional learning, and protection needs of learners into consideration.

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As mentioned, *Secretarías* were allowed to deliver in-person classes provided they adhered to certain biosafety protocols, which meant shifting to the *alternancia educativa* approach to allow adequate space for physical distancing in classrooms. The national strategy provided guidance on delivering both the at-home and the in-person classes.

The instructions given to schools and *Secretarías* regarding the at-home work (*juntos en casa lo lograremos muy bien!* strategy),<sup>22</sup> in line with their institutional autonomy, was to develop guides, support materials, and activities to enhance the educational processes for their students. The guidance recommended working with families to identify the most useful ways to communicate and transmit information (e.g., on paper, text message, audio), revise the curricula, revise instructional time and practices, prioritize content that could enrich healthy life habits and social-emotional skills, and plan how to conduct remote follow-up with families and students.

Similarly, for the in-person classes, each of the schools with the support of the *Secretarías* was to determine the specifics on instructional time, curricula, and learning support. According to the national

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<sup>21</sup> The 2020 Colombia RERA also reported this.

<sup>22</sup> The strategy's name translates to "Together at home we'll make it!"

standards, the teacher directors at each school were to analyze their school's particular situation in order to decide whether the academic calendar needed to be adjusted, how student and teacher groups should be organized and scheduled, and where to fit in extracurricular activities.

While the national guidelines were an important starting point, key informant interviews with high-level officials from the MoE, the *Secretarías*, and NGOs highlighted a major challenge this presented for equitable education in Colombia: not all *Secretarías* or schools had the same technical, financial, and personnel capacity to respond to and adapt the national guidelines in a way that best served the school and learners. Therefore, leaving them to adjust these components themselves ran the risk of deepening this existing gap.<sup>23</sup>

Some examples highlight the variety of ways *Secretarías* approached these components of the return to learning process. In Barranquilla, as soon as the pandemic started, *Secretaría* personnel started thinking about how to return to in-person classes. They described how the InterAmerican Development Bank supported the process and helped them formulate questions regarding communities' willingness to return to schools. Members of the *Secretaría* explained that they spent the first months of school closures reading about COVID-19 in children, and when the MoE published the national guidelines for returning to learning, they had already formulated their biosafety and academic protocols. In particular, they had included in their academic protocols a strong emphasis on social-emotional wellbeing, and had already surveyed families and teachers about their needs, fears, access to Internet and devices and willingness to return. In September and October 2020, they launched pilot reopening programs in two schools and published their plan for alternating schedules. They organized their RtL planning document around the challenges each school would go through when facing the reopening phase, including biosafety, student emotional well-being, teachers and parents, and adapting the curriculum to more efficiently cover multiple subjects at once (Alcaldía de Barranquilla, MoE). Once it was published, they scheduled meetings with all the school principals to sensitize schools to the content and methodology. After these meetings, each school created an *alternancia educativa* committee whose mission was to revise the plan as needed. For example, after publishing the initial document, they realized that most schools had put too much emphasis on biosafety. In response, they incorporated two additional pillars that gave more attention to academic and socio-emotional matters. The *Secretaría* informants made clear that they had collectively decided that the in-person components of learning should be focused on strengthening the work done at home and supporting students on a socio-emotional level, as opposed to simply teaching subject matter content as one would in a normal, full in-person class.<sup>24</sup>

In another example, personnel at the *Secretaría* in Cúcuta started to plan the RtL process once the MoE published the guidelines; as they mentioned in the interview, since the beginning of that process, the *Secretaría* had a very clear vision of giving schools and families autonomy in their decisions. After a pilot in 65 schools, the *Secretaría* published its guidelines, concluding that it should be the decision of each school, together with their school government, to decide how and when to return. Informants identified this autonomy as a “double-edged sword,” because while the diversity of the region was best suited for contextualized and customized *alternancia educativa* learning plans, much support was needed for schools to design and implement feasible *alternancia educativa* protocols.<sup>25</sup> In an attempt to provide schools with

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<sup>23</sup> Interviews 1, 9, 4, 5, 9, 14, 15, 16, 22

<sup>24</sup> Interview 14

<sup>25</sup> Interviews 15, 17.

guidance on preparing school-level RtL plans, the MoE published a toolkit with seven resources on: conducting a COVID-19 diagnosis of the city, mapping teacher characteristics, logging the physical capacity and inventory of the schools, assessing the impact of the pandemic on the learning processes, essential protocols for biosafety, *alternancia educativa* guide, and guidance on school signage (Alcaldía de San José Cucuta n.d.). Each of these tools included content from UNICEF and other entities, along with the national protocols. Even though the MoE said all schools' protocols should be approved by March 2021, the *Secretaría* informants said that a more realistic date was September 2021.<sup>26</sup> The *Secretaría* also gave extra attention to social-emotional well-being of students and teachers on top of approaches to deal with learning loss as a result of the closures.

In the third example, when the pandemic started, the Palmira *Secretaría*'s main concern was to avoid pausing education service delivery. It bought 8,000 SIM cards to ensure that most children would have internet access; principals from 27 schools got computers through the government's "*Computadores para Educar*" program, along with other funds, and sent them to children's houses. For the Palmira *Secretaría*, the return to in-person learning was a priority because distance learning was not sustainable in its conditions. When the MoE published the guidelines, the *Secretaría* started to put together a budget that included funds from the government (FOME), schools, and other sources while also trying to obtain data about its population. In September 2020, it launched an in-person learning pilot program in rural areas where COVID-19 cases were low and where families, teachers, and principals had agreed, reaching 1,500–2,000 of 45,000 rural students. At the same time, private schools were getting ready with their own funds while protocols were monitored by the *Secretaría*. Between December 2020 and January 2021, with the alert of a second COVID-19 peak, the *Secretaría* decided to postpone the reopening until February 2021, but by April 2021, Palmira had 27 schools and 118 venues fully open. Fourteen schools had opened some of their venues (one had opened all of them) and 5 percent of the enrolled students were attending in-person classes under the *alternancia educativa* model; 40 out of 112 private schools had reopened.

## RtL Priority 4

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**RtL Priority 4: Exams and promotion.** This priority encourages education planners and decision makers to be strategic and methodical when considering if, how, and when to promote which learners, and to consider carefully how to communicate changes to examination processes and procedures, and justifications for these.

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Despite the decentralization of the education sector in Colombia, there is a national assessment for graduating high school, the Instituto Colombiano para el Fomento de la Educación Superior (Colombian Institute for the Promotion of Higher Education) (ICFES), or Saber 11, examination. During 2020, the ICFES and the MoE announced a change in the examination schedule and biosafety protocols for administration of the examination because of the pandemic, but otherwise, these examinations remained the same in content and structure (MoE 2020c). Before the pandemic, this exam was used as a requirement to enter undergraduate programs, but as a result of the postponement, a national decree allowed for students to be admitted to programs without taking the exam, though they

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<sup>26</sup> Interview 15.

would be expected to take it once they were able (MoE 2020d). This situation forced universities to build their own entry requirements that were, at the time of writing, considered to be a temporary change given the degree to which the ICFES examination has been institutionalized into the system.

In terms of grade-level promotions, the decision on whether or not to modify exams and learner promotion criteria happened at a regional level with guidance from the *Secretarías*, but ultimately, the decisions took place at the schools, leading to a variety of approaches. For example, in Barranquilla, the *Secretaría* mentioned that it had been making a huge effort to encourage schools to understand assessments and exams as more of a formative than a summative tool as part of RtL. Its members also reflected on the importance of beginning in-person classes with an assessment of the socio-emotional state of students rather than academic assessments. However, since schools had autonomy to decide these aspects of operation, some schools within the *Secretaría* that had been top scorers in the national assessments were not willing to adapt their curricula or exams and were anticipating that some students would fail, a situation that materialized, according to one report, when 200 students in one *Secretaría* failed (El Espectador 2021).

## RtL Priority 5

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**RtL Priority 5: Educators and the learning space.** This priority reminds education planners and decision makers of the essential role of educators and other personnel, and their needs, preparation, and mobilization in planning to “welcome learners back safely.” Workforce (including recruitment, deployment, certification) and capacity development (including both the professional and psycho-social needs of personnel) requirements are highlighted, as is the need to ensure that learning environments are safe. This priority also reminds education planners to ensure that adequate policy and finance are available to support the above.

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**Teacher training:** The MoE rolled out online tools such as *Aprende en Casa* and the *Conéctate con el MEN* along with pedagogical workshops in 96 *Secretarías*. At the *Secretaría* level, assessments were conducted with the teachers to understand their capacity to engage with the online technology platforms, and *Secretarías* in turn provided the necessary tools and support to help fill the identified gaps. Initiatives were developed by Fundación Escuela Nueva, in partnership with the MoE, to provide widespread online teacher training for those in the program catchment areas, planned through 2021. Personnel from the MoE also mentioned the importance of their teacher training model (Programa Todos a Aprender) during the pandemic: this cascade model program had been providing resources to teachers since 2011, and during the pandemic, the content delivered was focused on teachers’ technology skills and online teaching practices along with other needs identified during the process.

In the three *Secretaría* interviews, as well as those performed with MoE personnel and NGOs, there was a huge concern regarding teachers’ exhaustion: they had been teaching both distance and in-person students; therefore, their work had effectively doubled, and there seemed to be no national guideline on how to solve this blended learning challenge.<sup>27</sup> Rather, it was left to the schools to solve.

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<sup>27</sup> Interviews 1, 9, 14, 15, 16, 22,

**Financial resources:** To mobilize financial resources to fill the gaps identified at the school and *Secretaría* level, the MoE assigned 400 billion Colombian pesos (COP) to the 96 *Secretarías* from the emergency fund, FOME, to help finance the biosafety protocols' implementation in all public school venues. One transfer was made in August 2020 and a second one in November 2020, but by December 2020, only 16.1 percent of the funds had been used by the *Secretarías*. As one high ranking official from an international NGO mentioned, this low integration rate of the resources could be due to a number of reasons stemming from a lack of capacity at the *Secretaría* level, in particular, in terms of difficulty administratively managing the funds and a lack of regional assessment to understand what funds are needed where. MoE personnel also mentioned, in a 2020 meeting, that additional funds were delivered to public schools to support at-home learning scheme (187 billion COP) and another portion was designated to finance the implementation of the school meal plan at home (75 billion COP).

## 4. OUTCOMES OF THE RETURN TO LEARNING PROCESS

This section identifies assets displayed through the pandemic response that may be strengthened to institutionalize in the education system as a whole, particularly from an inclusion and equity standpoint. These may be leveraged to build more system-wide adaptive capacities, and help contribute to systemic resilience. This study calls these opportunities “pockets of promise.”

Given that the national guidance for return to learning largely left *Secretarías* and, in some cases, individual schools, to plan and implement their own strategies, the Colombia case study presents a variety of outcomes. These outcomes will be explored by looking at the different levels the RtL process affected: families, teachers and schools, national and local government, and communities. Following that, the study presents cross-cutting outcomes

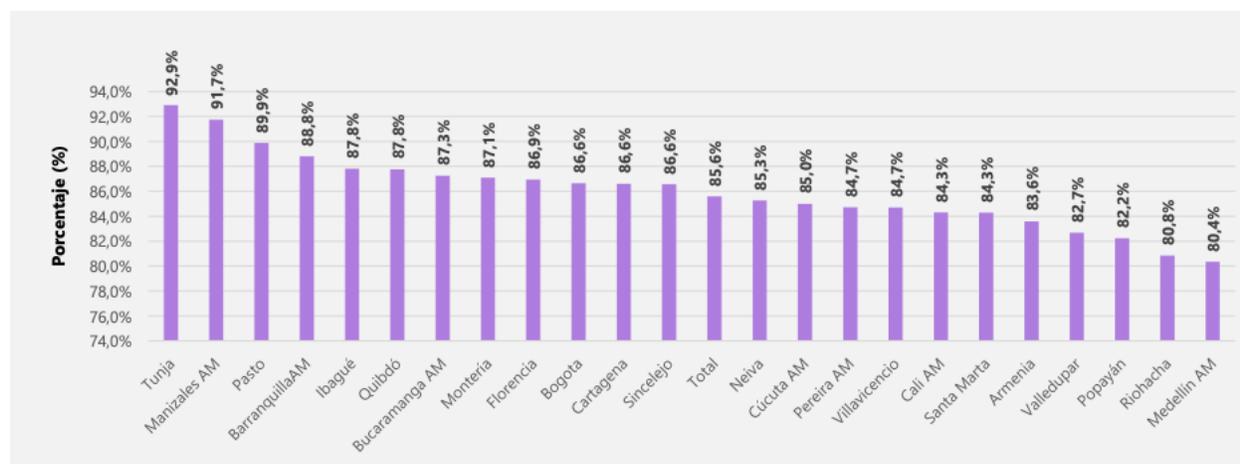
### LEARNERS AND FAMILIES

#### Challenges with distance education

Though the country instituted distance education nationally, Colombia's digital divide is enormous. As it was stated in the RERA, “while more than 60 percent of urban school students have Internet connections to engage in distance learning strategies, only 15 percent of rural school students have the same access. Furthermore, in nearly 96 percent of the country's municipalities, fewer than half of the students have access to technological resources for virtual education programs, and the southeast region of the country appears the worst off” (USAID 2020b).

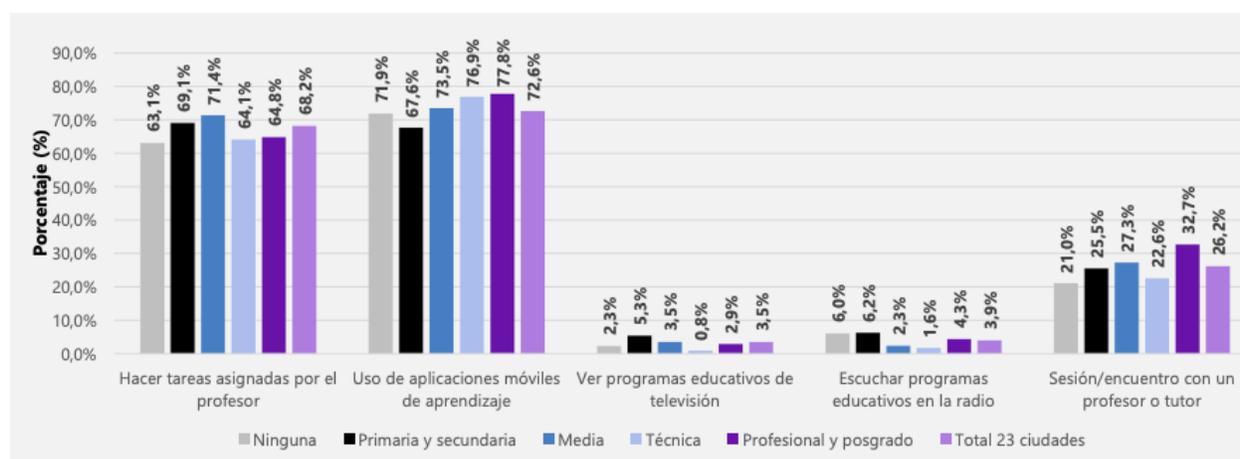
Different national and local, public and private strategies have been implemented to close the gap, but it is a challenge. According to a 2020 survey of 23 capital cities where 15,000 heads of household were interviewed, on average, 85.6 percent of students were reported to have continued with their learning processes once schools were closed in March 2020 (Exhibit 5), and of the students from primary and secondary education, 69.1 percent did the homework their teachers assigned, 67.6 percent used learning apps, 5.3 percent viewed the educational TV shows, 6.2 percent listened to the educational radio shows, and 25.5 percent attended a session with their teacher (Exhibit 6) (DANE 2020). It is important to note that these results are not disaggregated by rural/urban or public/private, nor do they include smaller cities or towns, where major differences may be found.

**Exhibit 5. Students who continued with learning activities since schools' closure, select cities, November 2020**



Fuente: DANE - EPS

**Exhibit 6. Type of educational activities performed by students during schools' closure across 23 cities, November 2020**



Fuente: DANE - EPS

A 2018 national survey reported that 56.3 percent of the inhabitants of rural areas used radio in their home compared to 48.9 percent in the urban areas and 50.5 percent nationally. The same survey reported that only 30.4 percent of the households in rural areas used television, compared to 79.9 percent in urban settings and 69.9 percent nationally (DANE 2018).

All of the interviewed informants agreed that nobody was prepared for COVID-19's contingency that relied on virtual learning. Mere access to virtual platforms was one challenge, but beyond that, teachers, students, and parents being able to utilize those resources in a way that maximized learning brought about another level of difficulty.

Beyond access to learning materials and instruction, respondents reported that it was hard to gauge students' emotional and physical state and their access to the schools' social services after one year of

distance learning.<sup>28</sup> In addition to the fact that each child had a different experience (some with access to devices and pedagogical support; others without), there was a widespread concern regarding how to assess students (physically, psychologically, cognitively, and academically), and beyond that, the degree to which students were even interested in continuing their education. This knowledge was essential to offering educational services tailored to their needs. The common claim was that in a country with such a low connectivity rate and so many security- and well-being-related student needs, schools should reopen quickly because online education simply was not taking place in many of these communities. With reference to the Venezuelan population, the *Secretaría*, NGO, and MoE personnel interviewed mentioned that some of these students had been very hard to re-engage, since they had moved to other cities or homes, changed contact numbers frequently, or had no access to devices to be contacted. Regarding early childhood, “there’s even less information, which is even more worrisome,” said a high-level advocate of quality early childhood services in Colombia.

Families advocated for a more diligent reopening of schools and early childhood development centers. Red PaPaz, a national organization of parents, also urged caregivers to take the reopening process into their own hands, for example, using social media and nudging local governments, schools, or even the MoE to reopen schools as quickly as possible.<sup>29</sup> They pursued legal action against the MoE, some *Secretarías*, and the ICBF to accelerate the reopening of both schools and centers for early childhood development. They also advocated for good practices of parents getting together with the mayors, school principals, or *Secretarías* to ask for fast action, for example, in Antioquia. Parent groups also got together to share thoughts about reopening, their own fears, and fears of others in their communities, and debunking misinformation and “fake news.” These groups, Red PaPaz shared during the interviews, helped more parents to gain confidence to send their children to school upon reopening.

### **Fear of COVID-19 in school**

Red PaPaz explained that a major challenge in the RtL process was the lack of clear and correct information for parents on risk and reward of sending kids back to school as it related to COVID-19. There were some schools and early childhood care centers that had already opened their doors to in-person classes, under the *alternancia educativa* scheme, but not all parents were sending their children to class because they were afraid of children contracting the virus and felt that the risk was unnecessary. As Red PaPaz explained, this indicates some families’ lack of awareness of the importance of these safe and stimulating spaces for their children’s whole development, weighed against the risks of COVID-19. Across *Secretarías*, families were given the autonomy to decide if they wanted to send their children back to in-person school. If they chose to, they would be required to sign a statement of informed consent that showed they understood the risks, a move that was criticized by some (e.g., Red PaPaz) because it was thought to discourage some families.

In 2020, one of the issues that held the education system back from reopening, according to NGO and *Secretaría* respondents, was families’ uncertainty that children would be able to follow masking, sanitation, and distancing measures.<sup>30</sup> Still, an inspiring pocket of promise highlighted in *Secretaría* and some NGO and private sector interviews was that after the *Secretarías*’ pilots, both in schools and in

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<sup>28</sup> Interviews 14, 15, 16, 17

<sup>29</sup> This social media movement has been very vocal under the #LaEducaciónPresencialEsVital and #ExijoElDerechoAlRecreoYa hashtags.

<sup>30</sup> Interviews 1, 2, 15, 16, 22, 23, 30

early childhood care centers, families started to trust their children more: children were able to maintain distance, wear their masks without supervision, and wash their hands when told to do so. Further, schools and early childhood care centers started to notice that children could also help train and transmit valuable information to their families. Children were now seen as part of the solution by both the system and their families and this further encouraged support to move forward with in-person learning.

## TEACHERS AND SCHOOLS

By December 2020, according to the MoE, 51 out of 96 *Secretarías* had their plans approved by the MoE and by January 2021, 17.5 percent of the schools had their protocols approved. By April 9, 2021, 18 percent of school venues had reopened (9,851 venues) under the blended scheme (representing 93 of the 96 *Secretarías*, of which 77 had opened both public and private schools, 16 had opened only private schools, and the remaining three had not opened any at all).<sup>31</sup> On April 13, 2021, María Victoria Angulo, the Minister of Education, announced that by May 2021, 100 percent of schools should reopen under the *alternancia educativa* scheme, although it was not clear if she was referring to schools or venues (Marín 2021).

### COVID-19 fears

As explained above, while many had urged the MoE, *Secretarías*, and schools to reopen (and, accordingly, for teachers to follow suit and parents to agree to send their children), there was pushback at the teacher and school level. In particular, concerns remained that opening schools in person, even with biosafety measures in place, could increase COVID-19 transmission and risk the health of teachers, students, and those in the school community. Some indicated that the biosafety measures of schools would not be able to be appropriately applied, given some schools' limited capacity in this regard.

Around 270,000 of 330,000 public school teachers were affiliated with the national teacher union La Federación Colombiana de Trabajadores de la Educación (FECODE) or different local unions. Some of these factions were very vocal about how returning to in-person learning could be dangerous to their health, especially those older than 60. In response, there were calls to ensure all teachers were included in national vaccination plans (El Tiempo 2021), or to agree to return to school only when students age 10 and older were also vaccinated (Semana 2021a). Some also demanded that existing grievances (e.g., better health insurance, better provision of services in schools) be ameliorated.

Another concern reported by *Secretaría* respondents and some NGO respondents as a possible explanation for delaying in-person learning was the concern about who would be held responsible if a child or a teacher contracted the virus at school (MoE livestream 2021). Some suggested that this fear emanated from relatively widespread news coverage of schools when there were reported cases (Semana 2021b), which demotivated some schools and *Secretarías* from pushing through with their reopening plans because, for example, school principals, teachers, or parents were worried about being held responsible for an outbreak and/or the closure of a school that had worked so hard to open. On the other hand, some media coverage took a different approach, providing practical tools for a

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<sup>31</sup> Up until April 9th, 2021, 28 percent of the schools—5,363 out of 19,214—were functioning under the blended learning scheme, from 93 out of 96 *Secretarías*. Ministry of Education Colombia, <https://www.mineduccion.gov.co/portal/micrositios-preescolar-basica-y-media/Alternancia-2021/>.

community to manage situations of possible outbreaks (Numa 2021), or providing evidence-based and clear information about the minimal risks of transmission among children, and why principals, teachers, and others should not be concerned about blame being placed on them in a potential outbreak (equating this risk to other daily risks they had taken previously) (MoE livestream 2021).

## Teacher exhaustion

For teachers implementing *alternancia educativa*, teaching virtually plus in-person at the same time to two different groups of students was a significant challenge, according to Alianza Educativa, Enseña por Colombia, the *Secretarías*, and personnel from the MoE. Teachers struggled to figure out how to make the curriculum more flexible and prioritize content in order to cover in a shorter time the key lessons missed in 2020. Some schools opted to keep the same study plan, while others adjusted. Some schools, as reported by the *Secretaría* of Barranquilla and Alianza Educativa, decided to use the in-person time to follow up on the work students were doing at home, either with guides or through calls with the teachers; no new material was covered during the in-person sessions, rather, the material delivered during the virtual sessions was reviewed to ensure understanding. This helped the *Secretaría* and Alianza Educativa to be more aware of the situation of each student and provide more useful support and feedback.

### POCKETS OF PROMISE

*Secretaría*-level adaptation of curriculum to take load off teachers and support student well-being



In addition to having to figure out how to organize the curriculum, teachers faced a new role they didn't before: they had started to get involved in the personal lives of students. Working with students virtually and getting a glimpse into their home life, teachers witnessed some unfortunate realities (such as domestic violence, mental abuse, or bullying by family members), as reported by the *Secretarías*, Alianza Educativa, and Enseña por Colombia. Seeing this, some teachers and education leaders recognized the importance of focusing on the socioemotional realm of students and of themselves as teachers. Before assessing students' knowledge and learning gains, teachers saw a need to reconnect with their students on the emotional side and be certain they were handling their unique situations in the best way possible. The *Secretarías* and Alianza Educativa were very vocal about this point. This emotional support, together with the constant calls while in online/distance mode and meal plans<sup>32</sup> was, according to MoE respondents, a combination that helped maintain student interest in school and learning.<sup>33</sup>

In short, schools in Barranquilla and Alianza *Secretarías* shifted to prioritizing quality of learning even if it meant that not all topics would be covered as in a “normal” school year, recognizing this was a more practical approach, given not just the challenges with teacher exhaustion, but also with students' social-emotional well-being.

Finally, another challenge identified by respondents was the difficulty teachers faced with catching up to a year of in-person learning.<sup>34</sup> In response to this, the *Secretaría* of Barranquilla started to think in overarching themes for the curriculums: instead of a study plan divided by subjects (math, science), it developed cross-cutting, project-based learning methodologies in which students learned about different

<sup>32</sup> According to World Bank, “around 5.6 million minors received nutritional support at home as part of the adapted school feeding program.” World Bank 2021.

<sup>33</sup> Interviews 4, 5

<sup>34</sup> Interviews 14, 15, 16, 30.

areas in a more practical way. UNICEF had a similar approach in their Education in Emergencies strategy, La Aldea, which was implemented with 120,000 children and 460 teachers in several *Secretarías*.<sup>35</sup> This fable-based approach was, according to the informant, a helpful tool for teachers to provide cross-cutting instruction while strengthening socio-emotional skills in students, reflecting on the ongoing COVID-19 situation, and involving family.<sup>36</sup>

## Teacher and school capacity

Best practices for engaging communities in the RtL process were reported by multiple respondents to have occurred early on in the COVID-19 pandemic, even before the MoE announced national guidelines.<sup>37</sup> Some *Secretarías* launched surveys in their community, some had pilot programs, and some opened spaces in which parents, students, and teachers could discuss their fears. Some schools and teachers understood the importance of delivering clear and concrete information to the community, and therefore designed strategies in which they kept the community regularly informed of all the decisions that were being made, summarized and simplified the MoE decrees, launched campaigns via text messages or social media, and even involved the broader alumni networks in these efforts. An important pocket of promise is the work performed by the charter schools Alianza Educativa: they utilized a central unit that set minimum guidelines and each of the schools that were part of the organization adapted the guidelines to their specific context. The role of the central unit has been to follow up on each school to ensure technical capacity where there is little to none. As will be seen below, this is a model of work that was also implemented in the *Secretarías* that highlighted good practices in their work with schools: central guidelines with close follow-up for the schools to adapt and implement.

### POCKETS OF PROMISE

Engaging with communities early to identify and act on needs and capacity gaps



## NATIONAL AND LOCAL GOVERNMENTS

### Secretaría support for schools

Because of Colombia's decentralized education system, RtL plans and processes were distinct in each *Secretaría* and in each school. As mentioned, each school was required to submit a reopening protocol and, upon approval, implement it. One challenge that was identified by international and local NGO informants was that *Secretarías* were acting as supervisors instead of partners in the RtL process. For example, *Secretarías* may have required reports to show the number of students attending a class on a given day, but did nothing in terms of evaluating the quality of the education received, or evaluating the social-emotional well-being of teachers and learners.

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<sup>35</sup> <https://laaldea.co/en/home-en/>

<sup>36</sup> Interview 8.

<sup>37</sup> Interviews 4, 5, 9, 23

## Varying capacity of *Secretarías*

There was much variability in the planning and management capacity, technological resources, and budget across *Secretarías*, as explained in multiple interviews with *Secretaría*, MoE, and NGO staff. These interviewees explained that while decentralization could be considered a synonym with autonomy in writing and implementing an RtL plan, this was only the case when the capacity of the *Secretarías* was such that they could make informed decisions about what should go into the plan, and could implement it successfully. Otherwise, they would start to fall behind in schedule and quality of the actions based on their approved RtL plan. A respondent who worked in the early childhood world provided an example about the early childhood centers reopening, reporting with great concern that although the ICBF, the MoE, and the Ministry of Health had authorized the reopening of these spaces under the approved biosafety protocols, local governments were not adequately prepared to implement the plans, and some of the people responsible for implementing it were not even aware of their role in the procedure. This delayed the reopening of the centers and left children without care.

It was often difficult for schools to actually implement the plans they had written. As of December 2020, only 16 percent of the funds designated by the government for the educational crisis had been used (MoE presentation in January 2021). Informants also suggested that some schools were ultimately provided funds to open not necessarily because of their ability to implement the plans, but because of strong political influence coming from that location.<sup>38</sup>

The MoE designed a strategy during the COVID-19 pandemic to follow up with and provide customized implementation support to the 96 *Secretarías*. This strategy, the G20, organized a large group of personnel from the MoE into sections, each in charge of working closely with a number of *Secretarías*. Respondents considered the G20 an important source of support, generating spaces for co-creation and sharing between *Secretarías*, and creating a healthy competitive environment to see who opened first and could demonstrate good practices for others.<sup>39</sup> The G20 idea had existed before the pandemic but seeing it in practice led many to see its value in continuing beyond the pandemic.

### POCKETS OF PROMISE

G20 model to support *Secretarías* leveraged to help apply RtL plans



## INTER-ORGANIZATIONAL ALLIANCES

The MoE recognized that building alliances between the MoE, NGOs, the private sector, and international organizations allowed it to rearrange intervention priorities and the process through which it organized its work with external entities.<sup>40</sup> The NGO Escuela Nueva built alliances with the local and national governments to expand its services in rural areas. Some departmental *Secretarías* signed alliances with Escuela Nueva to provide full coverage materials to students in rural areas. The MoE signed an alliance with it to provide teacher training to those who worked in rural areas affected by armed conflict.

### POCKETS OF PROMISE

New alliances forming between education stakeholders to respond to challenges during the pandemic



<sup>38</sup> Interview 4.

<sup>39</sup> Interviews 4, 5, 14, 15, 30.

<sup>40</sup> Interview 4.

MoE and *Secretaría* respondents recognized that national or local governments might not have had the means or capacity for such actions on their own, but by partnering with local organizations, they could follow a path that others had already built.<sup>41</sup> The emergency made different sectors cooperate and see value in others' actions.

To assess students' learning loss in order to provide effective follow-up, new alliances were created between *Secretarías* or specific schools and NGOs. For example, the organization Fundación Carvajal, which had been providing tutoring to lagging students after baseline assessments of the Early Grade Mathematics Assessment and Early Grade Reading Assessment, adapted its tutoring to be applied online during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Another notable (though unofficial) alliance took place in the border between Colombia (Cúcuta) and Venezuela (Táchira). Although the relationship between the two countries had been tenuous, according to some high-level government officials interviewed for this study, bridges in those areas were opened certain times during the day to allow students to move from one country to another to attend school.<sup>42</sup>

## CROSS-CUTTING THEMES

### Equity and Inclusion

Across interviews and in documentation, there was a repeated emphasis that Colombian and Venezuelan students should be treated equally: the challenges they faced and therefore solutions that were most helpful for them were not distinguished. This was made evident in the school reopening guidance documents that had no mention of these distinct groups.

On a broader societal level, respondents from the *Secretarías* expressed their concern about how international cooperation entities seemed to be looking for the “gold mine” of the Venezuelan students, to only intervene in schools where there was a high rate of such students.<sup>43</sup> This, a high-level *Secretaría* respondent mentioned, was causing a lot of disdain in the population because Colombian students and families were starting to feel left out and feel that there was too much education programming for one same group of students. Meanwhile, according to this informant, there were other very vulnerable populations that could take more advantage of the projects but weren't receiving support because their percentage of Venezuelan students wasn't “high enough.”<sup>44</sup>

Still, the Colombian government's decision to grant legal status to the Venezuelan migrant population, as respondents from international and local NGO's and *Secretarías* mentioned, was an important step in helping to address the underlying and deep-rooted problems Venezuelans were facing, allowing them to access quality health, education, and other services and, of course, improve the livelihood of these families.

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<sup>41</sup> Interviews 4, 5, 14, 15, 16.

<sup>42</sup> Interviews 4, 5.

<sup>43</sup> Interviews, 14, 15, 16.

<sup>44</sup> Interview 15.

## Data

As mentioned in nearly all the interviews, part of what made the decision-making process for the *Secretarías* especially difficult was the lack of official data and information. This was partly solved with the rapid assessments and surveys they administered, but as a member of one international NGO mentioned, collecting information during the COVID-19 pandemic was a challenge. Additionally, during 2020, it was very difficult to get official information from the MoE unless a legal petition was sent. This encouraged civil society organizations to start publishing information on social media (such as the #LEPEV—La Educación Presencial es Vital—movement) to inform the general public of the percentage of children, schools, venues, and *Secretarías* that were returning to in-person classes. Afterwards, a private sector in education foundation (Fundación Empresarios por la Educación) started publishing official data on its education observatory website<sup>45</sup> and the MoE started to publish information on its website.<sup>46</sup> However, as a highly ranked MoE respondent mentioned, the official national data for school enrollment for 2021 wouldn't be published until mid-2021, meaning education stakeholders would be working for months without a clear picture of the pandemic's effects on school enrollment. While data had not always been rapidly available before the COVID-19 pandemic, the need for up-to-date data on a rapidly changing environment would have been helpful for contextualized school reopening plans.

International and local NGOs, the MoE, and *Secretarías* reported that not many dropouts had been seen in 2021 compared to 2020; however, the real analysis would not be available until it was too late to do something or re-engage the dropped-out students. Some schools and *Secretarías* reported that the enrollment processes had seemed slower than previous years, possibly because parents were still fearful or uncertain of what would happen in the short term, or possibly because of the lockdowns, as mentioned by the *Secretaría* of Cúcuta and an international NGO that works in that region.<sup>47</sup> Others, from both the MoE and the NGO sector, reported that it has been evident that there has been a decrease in private school enrollments because many children had been moved to public education, which might speak to the harsh economic conditions families have been facing during the pandemic.<sup>48</sup> Furthermore, as a respondent from an international NGO pointed out, because teachers were hired according to the number of enrolled students, lower enrollments could have difficult implications in the following school year.<sup>49</sup>

### POCKETS OF PROMISE

Appreciating importance of evidence-based decision-making



It was clear that school principals and *Secretarías* were increasingly aware of the importance of making decisions based on data, as explained by an international INGO and the *Secretarías*.<sup>50</sup> Although data were difficult to obtain, principals and *Secretarías* did use it when it was available and saw the importance of utilizing surveys and assessments in planning their return to learning processes. This nascent data culture could lead to better decision-making at different levels of leadership (*Secretarías*, school principals, teachers).

<sup>45</sup> Available at <https://www.obsgestioneducativa.com/reapertura-datos/>. Last accessed June 22, 2021.

<sup>46</sup> Available at <https://www.mineduacion.gov.co/portal/micrositios-preescolar-basica-y-media/Alternancia-2021/>

<sup>47</sup> Interviews 16, 31.

<sup>48</sup> Interviews 4, 5, 9, 23.

<sup>49</sup> Interview 31.

<sup>50</sup> Interviews 14, 15, 16, 31.

## PERCEPTION OF EDUCATION AS A NATIONAL PRIORITY

All respondents agreed that no single sector, including the education sector, was ready to handle a crisis this size: there was limited technological capacity, not all teachers had the skills to transform the curriculum into online content or even teach a class through a given platform, not all children had Internet access or electronic devices, not all parents had the financial security to deal with the situation, and families weren't prepared to deal with the stress the situation would bring to interpersonal relationships. The MoE and the *Secretarías* were trying to figure out how to address the situation in a timely manner and trying to deal with factions that pressed toward reopening or remaining closed.

### POCKETS OF PROMISE

Recognition that school is more than a place to educate children; it is also a supportive and protective environment for entire communities



Amid this, some respondents identified an important asset that, if leveraged, could help ensure that in-person education is prioritized in future: the belief that schools are an essential protective and supportive environment for children and communities. As one international NGO informant in Cúcuta said, “in rural areas the school has a value beyond the classes... the role of the teacher is that of a community leader who summons everyone in the community around the dynamics of the school.”<sup>51</sup> More than that, before COVID-19, schools were venues for teacher and parent training, community meetings, social services delivery (e.g., meal plans), vaccine distribution, networking events for members of the community who might otherwise not gather, and more. As the international NGO informant in Cúcuta also said, if national government had recognized this reality, then “they (schools) wouldn't have been the first to close and the last to reopen.” Further recognition across multiple sectors and levels that school closure has been more than a disruption of children's learning may serve to increase the degree to which stakeholders agree that education should be treated as a national priority.

## 5. DISCUSSION: USAID'S RESILIENCE FRAMEWORK AND THE RETURN TO LEARNING PROCESS IN COLOMBIA

### USAID RESILIENCE FRAMEWORK

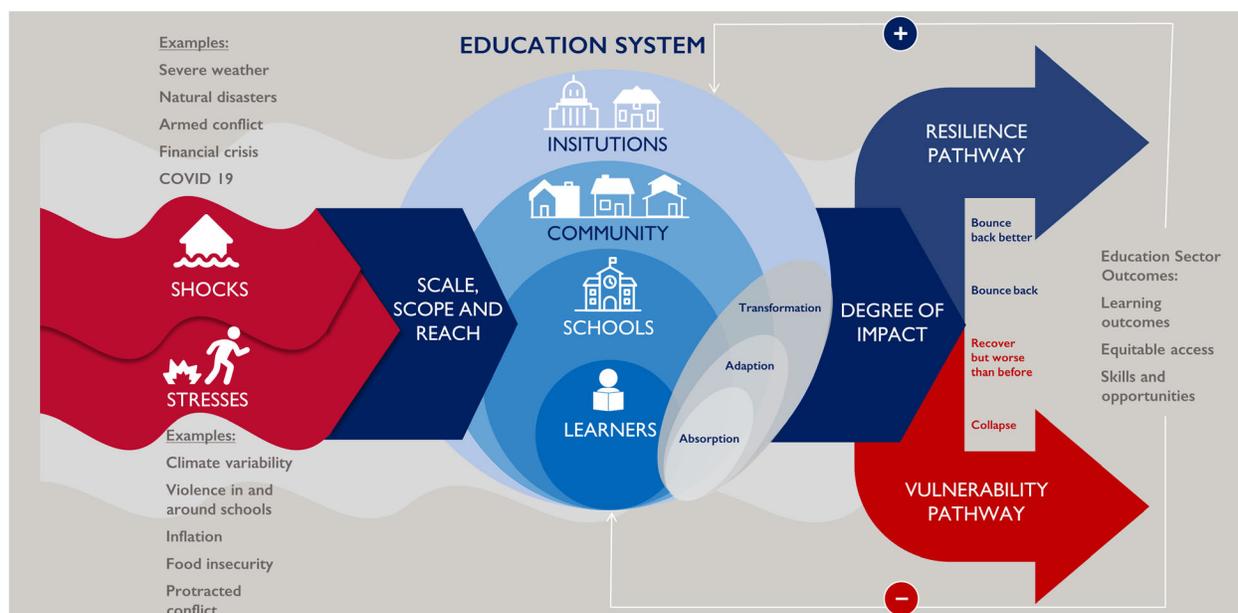
USAID defines resilience in education as the “ability of people, households, communities, countries, and systems to mitigate, adapt to, and recover from shocks and stresses in a manner that reduces chronic vulnerability and facilitates inclusive growth” (USAID 2012). USAID's Resilience Framework may be understood in relation to pathways of resilience and vulnerability during COVID-19, as indicated in Exhibit 7 (Shah 2019). This research set out to understand this framework in context in order to understand how it may be more effectively applied.

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<sup>51</sup> Interview 10.

## Exhibit 7. Pathways of resilience and vulnerability during COVID-19

### RESILIENCE + VULNERABILITY DURING COVID 19



Reconceptualizing COVID-19 from a *shock* to a *stressor* over the course of the pandemic (early 2020 to the time of writing in mid-2021) affected countries' responses and this research. According to the Resilience White Paper:

*Shocks are typically short-term, acute deviations from long-term trends that have substantial negative effects on people's current state of wellbeing, level of assets, livelihoods, and safety or their ability to withstand future shocks. Stressors, on the other hand, tend to be chronic, long-term trends, pressures, or protracted crisis that undermine the stability of a system and increase vulnerability within it (Shah 2019, 23).*

The terminology itself is less important than the underlying change in perception and, thus, response to the COVID-19 crisis. Our research trajectory, in fact, serves as a microcosm of sorts in terms of adapting questions, methods, ideas, and assumptions as the duration and, thus, nature of the pandemic evolved. In each country context, COVID-19 interacted with other shocks and stressors in unique ways, with both similar and contrasting impacts on the education system. While scale, scope, and reach of the pandemic differed, so too did the ways in which each country's education system responded in attempts to mitigate impact. Ultimately, the relationships and interactions between COVID-19 impact and the underlying political, economic, and social norms, structures, and processes of response are illuminated in unique ways, with each case study demonstrating specific characteristics and qualities of resilience. The accompanying synthesis report (Heaner et al. 2021) offers in-depth analysis of resilience across these contexts.

## RESILIENCE IN COLOMBIA

### Pre-COVID-19 capacities that were leveraged

**Parent and family advocacy and mobilization.** One critical asset was the parents and families who recognized the critical and protective role of schools for young people and tapped into their existing capacities to mobilize and advocate for causes. These families were successful in pressuring *Secretarías* and individual schools to submit reopening plans that included in-person learning to at least some degree. These groups also mobilized to educate other parents and school personnel about the relative risks of COVID-19 and that it would be safe for children to return to in-person learning, given the biosafety provisions that had been included in reopening plans.

**School and *Secretaría* autonomy.** Because each *Secretaría* and each school had a large degree of autonomy, some were able to absorb the initial shock of closure and then adapt their RtL processes in a way that was appropriate for their context. Some had already institutionalized regular communication and assessment with their communities so that when the COVID-19 closures occurred, they were able to quickly determine how the communities needed them to act. Indeed, many acted quickly, even before the national guidelines were issued. In addition, some schools, upon receiving guidance for the *alternancia educativa*, recognized that any degree of online or distance learning would not be accessible to the majority of the population. Efforts were made, therefore, to either spend more time in-person or adapt the in-person time to be more focused on what learners and parents could get from the distance education component (e.g., utilizing in-person time to repeat lessons on the radio instead of introducing new lessons, or using in-person time to focus on social emotional well-being for students, which was impossible to transmit over radio). On the other hand, *Secretarías* and schools had differing capacity to implement their plans, so this school and *Secretaría* autonomy was also perceived as exacerbating an existing gap in equitable access to quality education.

**MoE technical support to *Secretarías*:** Prior to COVID-19, a strategy had been developed by the MoE to better support *Secretarías* that had gaps in capacity. This support was customized to the *Secretarías*, and envisioned a large degree of in-person technical support. At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, this strategy was adapted into the G20 model in which the MoE would provide support specifically around the planning and implementation of the *Secretarías*' RtL plans, with the intention of providing more equitable opportunities for schools to support teachers and learners.

### Key emerging resilience pockets of promise

**Schools as a national priority.** Though this sentiment was certainly recognized by many parents and others prior to the onset of COVID-19, informants suggested that the closure of schools for this extended period of time made it especially clear to others that schools served a role much larger than education: they provided a venue for safety, for social-emotional well-being, for food and nutrition, and more. The negative outcomes observed from students being away from school for so long was evidence enough for many that schools should be among the first services to reopen, for the betterment of society more broadly.

**Emerging inter-organizational partnerships.** New partnerships between the private sector, international NGOs, and civil society organizations were formed as an absorptive response to COVID-19.

**Assessments and data.** As part of these reopening plans, *Secretarías* were encouraged to utilize data in making decisions. While many administered surveys and conducted outreach to community members, this was not always feasible for some. However, in writing their reopening plans, some *Secretarías* and schools developed a newfound appreciation for data and evidence in making decisions, and may find ways to institutionalize such practice in future operations.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The Colombia case study offers insight into COVID-19 response by a decentralized education system. This study shows that the priorities of the RtL framework were clearly taken into account in Colombia's RtL guidance documents, but application of those priorities varied widely. The autonomy of *Secretarías* and schools made equitable and high-quality RtL highly effective for some, but impossible for others. The resilience of parents and community members, in combination with some degree of customized support from the MoE under the G20 model, helped *Secretarías* and schools better absorb the shocks and stressors associated with RtL in the face of the pandemic that continued to have significant impact on the country, and continued to push toward providing learning.

## APPENDICES

### APPENDIX A: REFERENCES

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## APPENDIX B: RESEARCH QUESTIONS

RESEARCH QUESTIONS	SUB-QUESTIONS
<p><b>1. Planned Process for RtL:</b> What was the process by which countries planned for/are planning for the return to learning during COVID-19?</p>	<p>a. What policies and plans exist or were developed to support the return to learning?</p> <p>b. What were key triggers/decision points when planning the return to learning, and what factors contributed to the decisions made?</p> <p>c. Who was involved in decision-making, and how were decisions made about the return to learning across the education continuum (pre-primary, primary, secondary, tertiary, non-formal, technical training)? What were the explicit (and implicit) priorities?</p> <p>d. Were the decision-making processes harmonious across different stakeholders?</p>
<p><b>2. Actual Process for RtL:</b> What was/is the actual process by which countries returned/are returning to learning (from an implementation perspective) during COVID-19?</p>	<p>a. How did countries reach and retain marginalized populations; adapt the academic calendar; adapt instructional time, curricula, and learning supports (including integrating distance learning); modify exams and learner promotion practices; and re-engage educators and prepare infrastructure?</p> <p>b. What were the key challenges and opportunities that emerged to ensuring a safe, equitable, and inclusive return to learning, especially regarding (but not limited to) safety and well-being; communication, consultation, collaboration; monitoring, evaluating, and learning; and policy and funding?</p> <p>c. Which learners became (further) marginalized by the actual return to learning process?</p> <p>d. What strategies were common across contexts; which strategies had particular relevance to specific countries? What contextual, political, or other factors seem to explain the differences between planned and actual RtL processes?</p> <p>e. How were strategies changed or adapted in response to contextual factors (e.g., insecurity, rising COVID-19 tests, political transitions, natural hazards)?</p>
<p><b>3. Appreciating Shock/Stress Context for RtL:</b> What are the ways in which COVID-19 intersects with ongoing shocks and stressors in context and do these additional shocks/stressors affect some populations more than others (i.e., are certain populations/ demographics/ locations more vulnerable due to additional shocks/stressors)?</p>	<p>a. How has this been identified and tracked through the return to learning period?</p> <p>b. How are response efforts recognizing and responding to the differential impacts of the pandemic on communities, educators/school personnel, and learners, and targeting action accordingly?</p>
<p><b>4. Identifying Pockets of Promise in RtL:</b> How are educational decision makers seeking to identify not only problems/issues with the COVID-19 response, but also where things went well and</p>	<p>a. This may include investigation of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>Local level autonomy vs. the need for centralized decision-making support</i></li> <li>- <i>Communication between teachers and parents</i></li> <li>- <i>Capacity of educators and policymakers to adapt quickly and nimbly; the functionality/local leadership of coordination mechanisms</i></li> </ul>

RESEARCH QUESTIONS	SUB-QUESTIONS
<p>seeking to build off of these pockets of promise?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>Focus and attention on student well-being, pre-existing contingency plans and structure, etc.</i></li> <li>- <i>Role of non-state actors and potentially the private sector or civil society in supporting educational continuity</i></li> <li>- <i>Coherence between education actors and health, humanitarian, protection, social protection or other actors</i></li> <li>- <i>The extent to which these pockets of promise are absorptive/adaptive vs. potentially transformative</i></li> </ul> <p>b. How can these pockets of promise be built on/strengthened to embed them as common practice in the education system as a whole, particularly from an inclusion/equity standpoint?</p>
<p><b>5. Outcomes of RtL Process:</b> Retrospectively, according to key stakeholders, what positive and negative intended and unintended consequences were observed as a result of decisions made when planning the return to learning?</p>	<p>a. What were the intended or unintended outcomes of the return to learning process on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>equitable and inclusive access to education?</i></li> <li>- <i>learners' well-being or ability to cope with adversity?</i></li> <li>- <i>promoting or inhibiting learners' resumption of learning?</i></li> <li>- <i>building resilience of learners, schools, families, communities, and the education system?</i></li> </ul> <p>b. What do key stakeholders identify as the most important lessons learned from the return-to-learning process?</p>
<p><b>6. Utility of USAID Frameworks:</b> To what extent are USAID's RtL and resilience and education frameworks useful for conceptualizing, planning, and carrying out the return to learning during and after an education disruption such as COVID-19?</p>	<p>a. How could the frameworks be amended, adapted, or contextualized in light of what has been learned in their application to examining educational responses in a range of country contexts (for example, by specifying in greater detail adaptive, absorptive, transformative capacities, or thinking about exposure and sensitivity to risk)?</p> <p>b. How are the two frameworks related/how do they inform one another? What can we say to the hypothesis that enhanced resilience capacities within entities engaged in the RtL process will enhance the potential that the RtL is equitable, minimizes learning loss, etc.?</p>
<p><b>7. Perception of Education as a National Priority:</b> How is/has education being/been positioned as a key driver for national COVID-19 response and recovery efforts?</p>	<p>a. How are/have cross-sectoral approaches and perspective affecting/affected this positioning, especially in regard to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>education as a site for strengthening lines of communication between health officials and communities about the pandemic</i></li> <li>- <i>use of education as a vehicle for workforce upskilling/redeployment</i></li> <li>- <i>balancing public trust in schools' health/safety measures with student demand/need for protection and return to learning and the need for equitable provision of learning (social capital)</i></li> <li>- <i>continuity of education as a part of a social protection strategy, portfolio, or package</i></li> </ul>

RESEARCH QUESTIONS	SUB-QUESTIONS
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- coherence of the national COVID-19 public health strategy and the education return to learning strategy (i.e., the prioritization of the education workforce for vaccinations as they become available)<sup>52</sup></li> </ul>

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<sup>52</sup> See: [https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/immunization/sage/covid/sage-prioritization-roadmap-covid19-vaccines.pdf?Status=Temp&sfvrsn=bf227443\\_2](https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/immunization/sage/covid/sage-prioritization-roadmap-covid19-vaccines.pdf?Status=Temp&sfvrsn=bf227443_2)

## APPENDIX C: CHECKLIST: RETURN TO LEARNING DURING CRISES PRIORITIES<sup>53</sup>

✓	<b>(RE)ENGAGE ALL LEARNERS, ESPECIALLY THE MOST MARGINALIZED</b>
	Conduct rapid assessments (either through existing data or primary data collection) to identify marginalized groups.
	Collaborate with communities to (re)engage all learners.
	Ensure education information and monitoring systems are functioning and capable of tracking (re)enrollment of all learners, especially marginalized populations, in real time.
	Promote alternative pathways back to education.
	Address policy barriers that exclude some learners from returning to education.
✓	<b>DEVELOP EDUCATION REOPENING PLANS</b>
	Involve learners, educators, parents, and communities in decision-making.
	Develop an education reopening plan, including safe operations guidance.
	Develop an outbreak response plan at the school-level.
	Communicate clearly and consistently.
	Monitor the situation regularly.
✓	<b>ADAPT INSTRUCTIONAL TIME, CURRICULA, AND LEARNING SUPPORTS</b>
	Understand the range of options for helping learners catch up.
	Revise the academic calendar and schedule.
	Adapt (or condense) the curriculum and teaching and learning materials.
	Identify learners' social-emotional, protection, and academic needs.
	Consider where distance learning should continue.
	Mobilize financial and human resources for planning for catch-up programming.
✓	<b>MODIFY EXAMS AND LEARNER PROMOTION PRACTICES</b>
	Identify how exams have been affected by the crisis.
	Identify which exams are a priority.
	Develop a learner promotion strategy.
	Communicate with learners, families, and educators.
	Ensure that monitoring systems to track access to exams and pass rates are in place.
	Mobilize resources needed to implement adapted exams.
✓	<b>RE-ENGAGE EDUCATORS AND PREPARE THE LEARNING SPACE</b>
	Revisit workforce needs.
	Address educator capacity development needs.
	Develop or revise policy to meet education workforce needs.
	Assess the need for repairs and creation of new learning spaces, additional furniture and materials, disinfection of learning spaces, and signage and floor markings.
	Mobilize financial resources to fill gaps.

<sup>53</sup> Boisvert K. and N. Weisenhorn, 2020