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RESILIENCE IN RETURN TO LEARNING DURING COVID-19

GEORGIA 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

EMIS	Education Management Information System
EQE	National Education Quality Enhancement Center
ERC	Education Resource Centre
Geostat	National Statistics Office of Georgia
GIZ	German Corporation for International Cooperation
HEI	Higher education institution
EWMI	East-West Management Institute
ICT	Information and communication technology
MoES	Ministry of Education and Science
MoHLA	Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons from Occupied Territories, Labor, Health, and Social Affairs
NAEC	National Examination and Assessment Center
NBCG	National Broadcasting Company of Georgia
NCDC	National Center for Disease Control and Public Health
NGO	Non-governmental organization
OECD	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
PIRLS	Progress in International Reading Literacy Study
PISA	Program for International Student Assessment
RtL	Return to Learning
TALIS	Teaching and Learning International Survey
TIMSS	Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study
TPDC	Teacher Professional Development Center
VET	Vocational education and training

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION TO RESEARCH

This case study examines the return to learning (RtL) processes and strategies of the education system in Georgia from March 2020–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 the COVID-19 pandemic in Colombia, Georgia, Lebanon, Nigeria, and Zambia. It documents the RtL processes and strategies of the education system in Georgia during the first fourteen months of the pandemic.

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, which framed the overall methods and analysis (Shah 2019).

METHODS

The research team was comprised of four international “core” team members and five local research consultants, one in each case study location. This case study included four waves of qualitative, primary data collection in Georgia, conducted by the team’s local research consultant over a six-month period. The researcher conducted 57 key informant interviews targeting education stakeholders that included ministry officials, donors, international and local NGO actors, civil society organization staff, researchers, district level administrators, principals, and teachers. Over the course of the research, the team conducted ongoing review of documents and literature that described the RtL processes, decision-making, policies, and strategies.

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, local consultants developed priorities, plans, and targeted interviews for the next wave. After four waves, the local consultant, in collaboration with the core team member overseeing the case study data for each location, transcribed and analyzed the data for each location. 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

Over the last 25 years, Georgia has made steady economic, social, and political progress through the introduction of policies to focus support to the poorest people and regions of the country. In 2015, Georgia moved from lower-middle to upper-middle income classification, and prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, levels of extreme poverty in the country had been reduced to 8 percent (World Bank 2018). Georgia has simultaneously made significant progress toward universal access to education. The net

enrollment rate at the primary level is 97 percent and is 96 percent at the secondary level. Still, despite high participation rates, student learning outcomes remain low, and by the end of compulsory schooling, approximately half of Georgian students fail to demonstrate basic competencies in reading, mathematics, and sciences.

The first case of COVID-19 in Georgia was confirmed on February 26, 2020 and the Government of Georgia (GoG) took immediate and significant action to prevent its spread. On March 23, massive restrictions were introduced across the country, including closure of all education institutions. Until September 2020, the Georgia Ministry of Education and Science (MoES) oversaw distance learning for all education levels, mainly based in the use of online platforms and television. From September 2020 to April 2021, some schools opened, some schools opened but had to close for periods, and still others continued distance learning. By May 2021, most schools and levels of education had returned to in-person learning.

FINDINGS

This report describes in detail 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. In particular, the Georgia case demonstrates that much of the RtL framework may be adopted in the initial stages of crisis response to better absorb shocks and ensure continued learning (and plan the return to school). Overall, all priority areas—learner reengagement, education reopening plans, instructional time, curricula and learning supports, exams and promotion, and educators and the learning space—were relevant to the MoES response planning for distance learning and subsequently return to learning during COVID-19.

Specific “pockets of promise” were identified during this research that highlighted capacities that were leveraged to respond to the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. These included: (a) empowerment of decentralized decision-making bodies with continued national support; (b) teacher collaboration practices and informally organized channels of support; (c) increased channels of feedback from the public to the government, including increased levels of public trust; and (d) the opportunity for new policy based on learning during COVID-19 exemplified by a new policy for hybrid/distance learning options for vocational education and training (VET) colleges.

Overall, in Georgia, the system was positioned with many resilience capacities that it was able to leverage during the pandemic to ensure continued learning. In addition, emergent practices, priorities, and institutional learning were observed that may contribute to longer term systematic changes that increase equity and inclusion and overall resilience. Still, the pandemic is not over, and the extent of many impacts (including at the learner level) will likely not be fully understood for some time. In addition, COVID-19 will continue to have significant and long-lasting impacts on global economies, which will challenge education systems everywhere in coming years. Georgia offers examples of emergent strategies in the face of a profound, global stressor and it is the intent of this case study for the documentation of such examples to be useful in the context of future crises.

I. INTRODUCTION

This case study sits within a compendium of five case studies plus an overarching synthesis report that examine the return to learning (RtL)¹ process during the COVID-19 pandemic in Colombia, Georgia, Lebanon, Nigeria, and Zambia. Learning regarding RtL processes and resilience in education systems more broadly is explored further in the synthesis report (Heaner et al., 2021). The purpose of the overall 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; 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, tracking responses to COVID-19 against 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 needed during crisis response to ensure that education authorities: (1) support all learners to return to/maintain a connection with learning; (2) mitigate learner dropout because of the crisis; and (3) facilitate return to learning both for learners who have dropped out during the crisis and learners who were outside the system prior to the crisis. When facilitating the 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 2020, 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 resilience capacities (defined in the box below), and 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.

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.

¹ 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.

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.

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.² 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/on the 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 through 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 also 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 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

² In the Nigeria case study, an additional local consultant was brought on to support outreach to the state-level government agencies.

5. Geographical diversity (aim to include one each from Latin America and the Caribbean, Sub-Saharan Africa, and the Middle East and North Africa)³

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.

The third phase focused on interviews with key informants in the education sector—from government agencies, donor agencies, university faculty, 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 convened to discuss emerging findings and recalibrate the research questions and sample set for subsequent waves. In the case of Georgia, a total of 57 interviews were conducted.

Exhibit I. Respondents in Georgia interviewed during research

INFORMANTS INTERVIEWED IN GEORGIA	NUMBER
Government officials	22
Donors	3
Multilateral organizations (e.g., United Nations, World Bank)	2
International and national NGOs	7
Civil society organizations	8
Principals, teachers, and school administrators (i.e., Education Resource Center heads)	14

³ A separate set of case studies had already been planned through the USAID Asia Bureau, so Asian countries were not considered in the set.

INFORMANTS INTERVIEWED IN GEORGIA	NUMBER
TOTAL	57

Limitations

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

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 build relationships with individuals and organizations over the course of the research, the team’s ability to access some individuals was limited, in particular at the government level. This was true both in terms of securing an interview at all as well as in hearing candid responses from that individual. As a result, in some cases, the government’s perspective is provided by just a few individuals who offered a particular perspective on successes or challenges; in some cases, these perspectives were in contrast to more critical descriptions offered by other respondents. In addition, in Georgia, it was often difficult to obtain published information/data from sources. Such data had often been collected but not yet published, and while much of this was shared with the researcher in interviews, more exact data will become available in the coming year.

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 each other 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 an 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.

2. CONTEXT

NATIONAL-LEVEL CONTEXT AND RESILIENCE

Over the last 25 years, Georgia has made steady economic, social, and political progress through the introduction of policies that support the poorest people and regions of the country. In 2015, Georgia moved from lower-middle to upper-middle income classification, and prior to COVID-19, levels of extreme poverty in the country had been reduced to 8 percent (World Bank 2018). Georgia has a well-functioning social protection system with 67 percent of households receiving at least one form of state assistance administered by the central government (e.g. old age pension or targeted social assistance) (UNICEF 2018). The country is a representative parliamentary democracy; despite recent reforms to build the capacity of localized, district authorities, it functions as a largely centralized state (UNICEF 2020a). In recent decades, Georgia has undertaken significant anti-corruption measures and, in 2020, was classified as low risk according to the global Corruption Perception Index (Transparency International 2020). According to UNICEF, Georgia is considered a medium disaster risk country, with risk for flood, earthquake, and civil unrest/ethnic conflict (UNICEF 2020).

Despite progress to reduce poverty, when the pandemic crisis hit, the country had an 18 percent unemployment rate and 19.5 percent of the population was living below the national poverty line (Geostat[a]). Forty-one percent of the population was living on less than \$5.50 per day (2011 PPP adjusted) including 15 percent living on less than \$3.20 per day (Geostat[a]).

Poverty is particularly pronounced in rural areas of Georgia. The share of the population living under the absolute poverty line is higher in rural (23.7 percent) versus urban (16.4 percent) areas (Geostat[a]). Forty-five percent of the country's rural population is self-employed in subsistence farming,⁴ which has been the leading cause of poverty and high reliance on targeted social assistance in these regions (Gugushvili and Nestour 2019). Twenty-four percent of children live below the poverty line. Additionally, prior to COVID-19, there was a significant “digital divide” in terms of access to information and communication technology (ICT).

OVERVIEW OF THE GEORGIAN EDUCATION SYSTEM

The Georgian education system consists of early childhood education (ECE), general education, vocational education and training (VET), and higher education.

ECE enrolls children between ages 2 and 6 and is offered by public ECE centers and authorized private institutions. Public ECE is free of charge (Parliament of Georgia 2016). In 2020, 1,647 ECE institutions enrolled 158,062 students and employed 16,234 teachers.⁵ Early childhood education and preschool participation has significantly increased during the last decade from 45 percent in 2005 to 78 percent in 2018. Decision-making for ECE institutions is governed by local municipalities. The central Ministry of Education and Science (MoES) supports these municipalities through development of standards, teacher training, and monitoring and evaluation.

⁴ National Statistics Office of Georgia, the database of the National Household Survey of 2019. Authors' calculation.

⁵ <https://www.geostat.ge/en/modules/categories/58/early-and-preschool-education>

General education starts at the age of 6, and both primary education (grade 1–6) and lower secondary education (7–9) are compulsory. Upper secondary education covers grades 10–12. The net enrollment rate at the primary level is 97 percent and 96 percent at the secondary level. 2,308 general educational schools enroll 609,095 students and employ around 63,000 teachers. Ten percent of these students are enrolled in private schools.⁶

General educational schools are governed by the MoES. Both public and private schools are required to follow the national curriculum developed by the Ministry. The MoES recruits school principals, who are then elected for a period of six years by school boards in each school. The National Teacher Professional Development Center (TPDC) is the centralized agency responsible for identifying teacher professional development needs and developing and offering teacher professional development.

Education Resource Centers (ERCs) at the local level act as intermediaries between the MoES and schools. ERCs were established after the dissolution of local education units in 2006 that occurred as a part of large-scale education system transformation reform, and they operate at the district level. Unlike the previous education units in Soviet Georgia, the ERCs do not have decision-making power over schools. Instead, their role is to “oversee, support and consult public general educational institutions” (MoES 2006). ERCs monitor and evaluate educational processes in public general educational schools and provide recommendations based on these reports to improve the quality of teaching and educational environment for schools and the Ministry (MoES 2006, Article 3).

The VET sector enrolls students of all ages in different types of programs. For some VET programs, students with lower secondary education diplomas can qualify to enroll while others require an upper secondary education diploma. VET programs are normally offered by authorized community colleges, professional colleges, higher education institutions (HEIs), and general educational schools. The VET programs enroll approximately 9,400 students across the country, and the sector is overseen by the MoES. The National Education Quality Enhancement Center (EQE) is responsible for authorizing the institutions and accrediting programs. Public VET colleges are tuition-free.

HEIs are autonomous from the state and regularly authorized by the EQE. Nineteen public universities enroll approximately 100,000 students, and 45 private universities enroll approximately 57,000 students. Gross enrollment ratio in tertiary education stands at 63.9 percent. Both public and private HEIs charge fees. Some students receive merit-based partial or full tuition waivers, and some programs are subsidized by the state. However, the share of government funding represents less than one third of revenue. Approximately 71 percent of the total revenue of HEIs comes from tuition fees (Ministry of Finance 2020).

Despite high participation rates, student learning outcomes in Georgia remain low. International and national assessments indicate that a large share of Georgian students fall behind in developing their reading, mathematics, and science competencies in early years of their schooling, which creates risks for their future educational career. Fourteen percent of the fourth graders in the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) reading comprehension assessment, 22 percent of the students in online reading comprehension (NAEC 2019b), 22 percent in Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) mathematics assessment, and 26 percent in TIMSS science assessment perform below low

⁶ <https://www.geostat.ge/en/modules/categories/59/general-education>

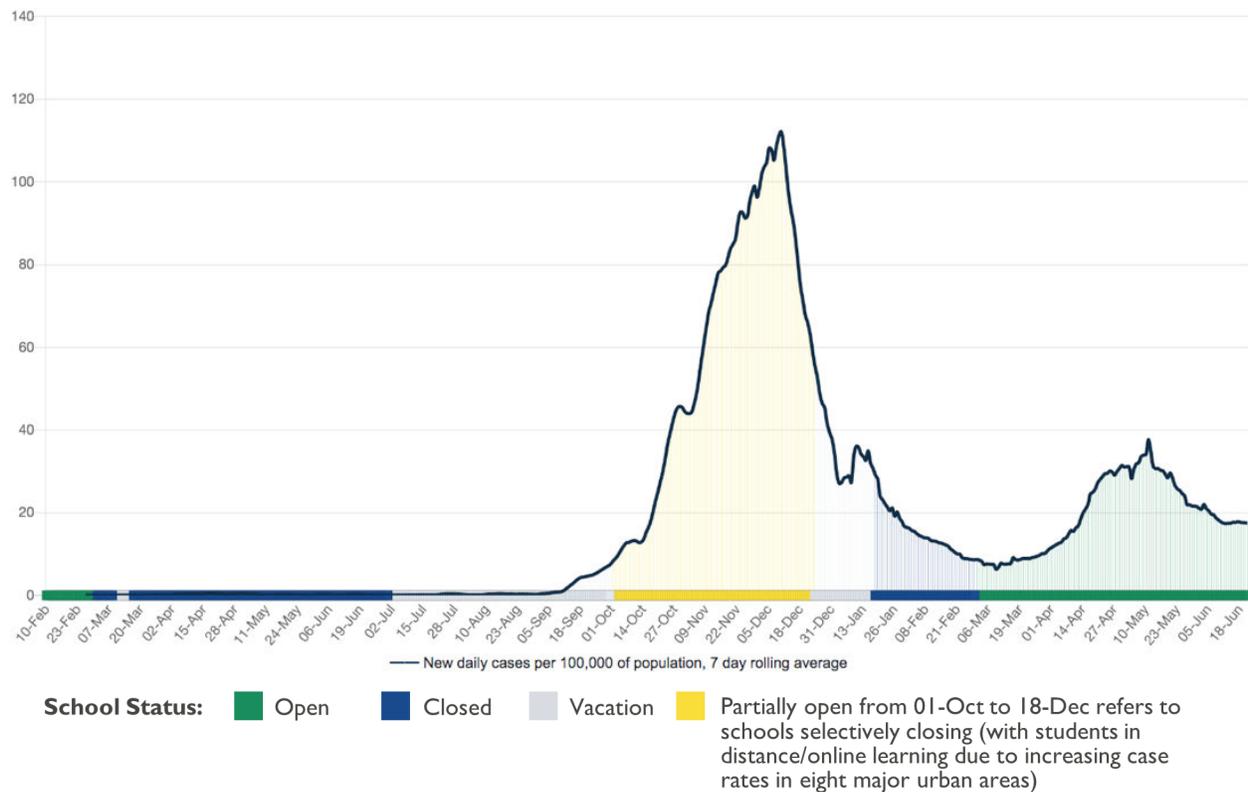
achievement level (NAEC 2020a). The majority of ethnic minority students finish primary education without acquiring basic communication skills in the state language (NAEC 2019a).

By the end of compulsory schooling, approximately half of Georgian students fail to demonstrate basic competencies in reading, mathematics, and sciences. Georgian students' performance in PISA indicates that the majority of students perform below baseline achievement level in reading, mathematics, and science assessment at which point, "students begin to demonstrate the reading, mathematics, and science competencies that will enable them to participate effectively and productively in life situations related to science and technology." There have been inconsistent indications of improvement in performance over the last few years, though the trends in large-scale assessment data indicate that the pace of improvement in learning has either stalled or slowed down (NAEC 2020b).

Students in ethnic minority language schools, students in remote rural areas, and students from lower socio-economic backgrounds have traditionally performed significantly lower compared to their peers with more privileged backgrounds. For example, according to the latest PISA assessment, the difference in the mean performance reading score between urban and rural schools is 45 points and the difference between the schools by the language of instruction (Georgian and non-Georgian) is 69 points (NAEC 2020b).

TIMELINE OF COVID-19 AND EDUCATION SYSTEM RESPONSE IN GEORGIA

Exhibit 2. School closure in relation to new COVID-19 cases in Georgia, per 100,000 of population (Insights for Education 2021)



Note: School closures in this figure indicate for general education (primary and secondary level). See Exhibit 3, below, for breakdown by level of education.

TIMELINE OF KEY EVENTS

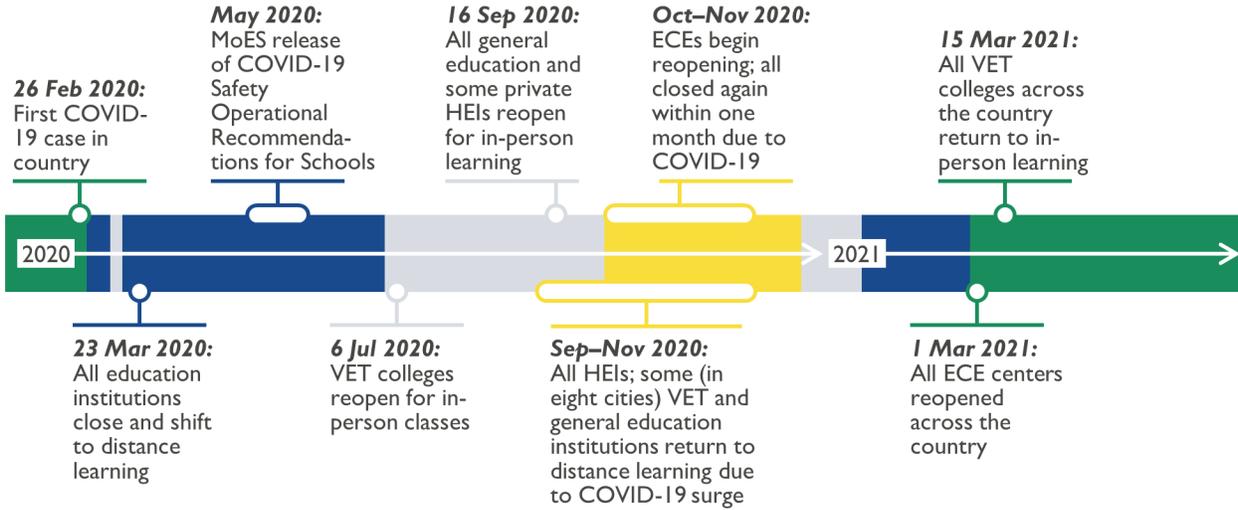


Exhibit 3. Teaching and learning modalities across levels of education, March 2020–April 2021

Year	2020										2021			
Month	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr
ECE	⊘	⊘	⊘	⊘	—	—	⊘	●	⊘	⊘	⊘	⊘	●	●
GE	○	○	○	○	—	—	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
VET	⊘	⊘	⊘	⊘	⊘	●	●	○	○	○	○	○	●	●
HE	○	○	○	○	—	—	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

Key

- ⊘ Complete closure without mandated distance learning
- Return to school/in-person learning, with mandated temporary closure if a COVID case is detected
- Online distance learning only
- Hybrid learning combining both distance learning and traditional in-person learning
- Institutions can choose to remain in distance learning or in-person learning
- Summer holiday break

* Boxes with two icons indicate that different locations in the country operated with different modalities

Narrative overview

The first case of COVID-19 in Georgia was confirmed on February 26, 2020 and the Government of Georgia (GoG) took immediate and significant action to prevent its spread. On March 21, President Zurabishvili declared a state of emergency, and two days later, massive restrictions were introduced across the country, including banning travel, gatherings over ten people, all retail business except for essentials, and all intercity bus travel. This included closure of all educational institutions. On March 31, the restrictions were further tightened by announcing a nightly curfew and prohibiting gatherings over three people both inside and outside public buildings; people over 70 were mandated to quarantine; entry controls were introduced in large cities; and distance work mode was mandated for all workers (with a few exceptions qualifying as essential) on April 1.

Throughout spring 2020, the spread was largely contained with weekly average new daily cases between 2 and 29. Starting in mid-May, the government began to gradually lift the restrictions. This low rate of COVID-19 was maintained throughout summer, but began to rise sharply in September 2020. Between August 30 and September 15, 2020, the weekly average new daily cases increased from 7 to 119. The pandemic spread peaked in December 2020, reaching 4,300 weekly average new daily cases that month.

The public attitude toward the government measures during the first wave of the pandemic was largely positive, with most restrictions perceived positively by the majority of Georgians.⁷ Indeed, the positive perception of public institutions was significantly *higher* during the first COVID-19 wave than the pre-COVID-19 period; from December 2019 to May 2020, the share of the population that perceived the prime minister to be performing “well” or “very well” increased from 21 percent to 63 percent. Public attitudes toward the GoG response to the pandemic remained positive through the spring and early summer.⁸ By February 2021, the National Democratic Institute’s survey of public attitudes showed public rating of the GoG’s pandemic response as “very good” (14 percent); “good” (54 percent); “bad” (21 percent); and “very bad” (7 percent) (CRRC[b]).

All educational institutions were closed on March 23, 2020. According to this order, general education schools and higher educational institutions (public and private) were mandated to move to distance learning until April 21. On April 21, 2020, the MoES announced that all education was to remain in distance learning mode for the duration of the emergency state. Throughout the spring, all educational institutions remained closed. Alternative learning modalities and reopening dates differed by education levels and locations. Exhibit 3 shows the schedule of opening/closing/partial opening by level of education; Exhibit 2 shows opening/closure by new cases per 100,000 of population from February 2020 to April 2021.

Both public and private ECE centers were closed in March 2020 by the GoG order.⁹ Starting in October 2020, ECEs were gradually reopened across the country. In Tbilisi, by October 21, one-third of the ECEs were closed again due to confirmed COVID-19 cases. Subsequently, all ECEs in the country were

⁷ In particular, wearing masks was approved almost unanimously (94 percent approval rate); 79 percent for extending the state of emergency from April 21 to May 22; 76 percent for restricting movement in and out of the country’s large cities, 75 percent for restricting movement by cars from April 17 to April 27, and 71 percent approved closing down large number of businesses.

⁸ Between April and June 2020, the share of the population assessing the Ministry’s response to coronavirus well and very well stood over 75 percent. CRRC(a).

⁹ Early childhood care and education institutions serve children up to entry into primary general education (Law on Early and Preschool Care and Education, 08/07/2006 <https://matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/download/3310237/0/ge/pdf>).

closed again by government order on November 9. On March 1, 2021, ECEs were reopened in all locations.

All general education schools remained in online distance mode throughout spring 2020. Schools reopened in September 2020, but for large cities this was short-lived. Due to rising cases of COVID-19 in major cities, the government introduced restrictions in eight major urban locations (Tbilisi, Rustavi, Gori, Kutaisi, Zugdidi, Poti, Kobuleti, and Batumi). Per these restrictions, in mid-September, lower and upper secondary grades moved to distance learning and, in October, primary grades followed suit. All students in these eight cities remained in online distance learning until February 2021. During this time, schools in smaller cities and rural areas remained open, and responded on a classroom- or school-level basis to confirmed cases of COVID-19 (i.e., a single school could shut down due to cases but not the entire district or city). After reopening schools in the eight urban locations, parents in larger cities were offered the choice to opt out from in-person teaching and learning and instead register their children for online classes. Registration for this option occurred weekly; on average, approximately 18,000 students partook in online learning only under this option.¹⁰

VET colleges closed with the March 2020 directive and did not move to distance learning at all. In July 2020, VET colleges reopened for in-person classes again. Due to the rising case rates in the eight urban locations, in October 2020, VET colleges in these locations were allowed to continue in distance learning mode only. For small cities and rural areas, VET colleges operated a hybrid distance/in-person mode until March 2021, when all VET colleges across the country were allowed to return to in-person learning.

HEIs moved to online distance learning with the March 2020 directive. In September 2020, some private universities reopened for in-person learning, but closed shortly afterwards due to increasing case rates. All HEIs remained in online distance learning until March 2021, when universities were offered the choice to remain online or return to in-person learning. Throughout the pandemic, medical education programs were allowed to offer some teaching and learning in person. By April 2021, some universities remained in distance learning mode with limited infrastructure (such as libraries or computer labs) open to students; others had returned entirely to in-person learning; and the rest offered a hybrid version or let students and academic staff choose between in-person or online distance learning.

Timeline summary of key events

Exhibit 4. Timeline summary of key events

DATE	EVENT
February 26, 2020	First COVID-19 case confirmed in country.
March 11, 2020	WHO declares COVID-19 a pandemic.
March 21, 2020	President of Georgia declares state of emergency.

¹⁰ Interview 36, 47

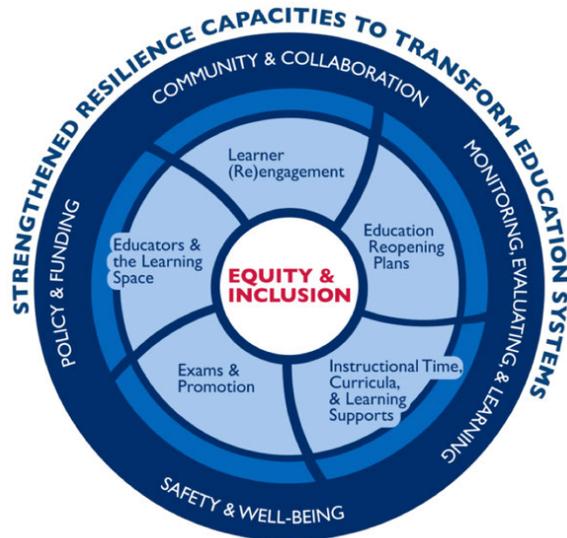
DATE	EVENT
March 23, 2020	Massive nation-wide restrictions are introduced, including the closing of schools alongside bans on travel, gatherings over ten people, all retail business except for essentials, and all intercity bus travel.
March 23, 2020	All education institutions in the country are closed and MoES mandates education to remain in distance learning mode until April 21.
March 30, 2020	Teleskola project is launched, offering television classes for all grades (1–12) and all subjects, as a collaboration between the National Broadcasting Company (NBCG) and MoES.
March 31, 2020	Restrictions are further tightened, including: nightly curfew; gatherings over three people (both inside and outside public buildings) prohibited; people over 70 mandated to quarantine; and entry control introduced in all main cities.
March 2020	EMIS creates Microsoft Office accounts for all public schools and sets up Microsoft Teams virtual classrooms for all classes.
March–April 2020	EQE implements two surveys (first in March, then in April) at university level to assess the quality of teaching and learning, student engagement, access, and quality measures implemented by HEIs.
April 1, 2020	Distance work mode mandated for both public and private sectors.
April 21, 2020	MoES announces that all education is to remain in distance learning mode for the duration of the emergency state.
May 2020	The National Curriculum Development Unit of the MoES develops national curricula adaptation options and alternative learning and teaching resources; these are communicated to schools for general education during online distance learning. The resources are developed following the principles of the new curriculum in collaboration with UNICEF and EFA.
May 2020	MoES releases COVID-19 Safety Operational Recommendations for Schools.
May–June	EMIS collects data on student access to digital devices and Internet; E-School used to survey schools on digital device and access. Regional ERCs are deployed to collect additional school-level data to report to MoES.
March 22	MoES and VET providers decide to not reopen schools for semester (i.e., no distance learning option).
June 2020	A survey is conducted by NAEC, EMIS in order to assess the quality of (and engagement in) online distance teaching and learning.
July 6, 2020	VET colleges reopen for in-person classes.
August 2020	Guidelines for school reopening is developed in collaboration with World Vision and the Association of School Administrators.
Summer 2020	800 schools are renovated across the country to be compliant with school reopening plans.

DATE	EVENT
September, 2020	MoH inspects all schools prior to opening. Some schools that are found to be non-compliant with health and safety guidance are inspected a second time.
September 16, 2020	All general education institutions reopen (including VET). Some private universities reopen for in-person learning.
September 30, 2020	Because of rising cases of COVID-19 in major cities, the GoG introduces restrictions in eight urban locations (Tbilisi, Rustavi, Gori, Kutaisi, Zugdidi, Poti, Kobuleti, and Batumi). Lower and upper secondary grades move to distance learning in these cities.
September, 2020	VET colleges in eight urban locations move to distance learning.
September, 2020	All HEIs move to online distance learning until March 2021.
September 8, 2020	Option to opt out from in-person learning and choose online distance learning is rolled out in Tbilisi, Zugdidi, Kutaisi, and Rustavi for grades 1–6.
November 4, 2020	Primary grades in the eight cities above also move to distance learning.
October 12, 2020	ECE begins to reopen.
October 21, 2020	Approximately one-third of all ECE centers close again due to confirmed COVID-19 cases.
November, 2020	MoES releases updated COVID-19 Safety Operational Recommendations for Schools.
November 9, 2020	MoES closes all ECE centers until March 2021.
November–December 2020	Geostat conducts a survey (commissioned by UNICEF) to assess the well-being of families and children.
December 2020	National discussions shift toward addressing learning loss, led by the NGO Education for All in Georgia.
December–June 2021	EFA and MoES begin conducting ongoing rapid assessments to estimate the scope and scale of learning loss.
February 2021	TPDC implements a survey to assess teacher and school principal attitudes about remedial and catch-up options.
February 2021	MoES announces a national COVID-19 testing program for general education schools that remains in place as of June 2021.
March, 2021	ERCs begin regular monitoring visits to schools to ensure safety conditions using an evaluation form provided by MoES.
March 1, 2021	All ECE centers reopen across the country.
March 15, 2021	All VET colleges across the country return to in-person learning.

3. USAID RETURN TO LEARNING (RTL) FRAMEWORK AND THE GEORGIA RESPONSE

This report tracks the Georgia education system’s response planning and implementation against USAID’s Return to Learning (RtL) framework, which proved to be a useful lens for an in-depth examination of the Government of Georgia’s plans and processes for returning to learning. The following sections describe in detail the alignment of response with the five priorities and sub-priorities identified in the framework, as well as challenges and opportunities for contributing to resilience during the responses. See [Appendix C](#) for this framework in full. In particular, the Georgia case demonstrates that much of the RtL framework may be adopted in the initial stages of crisis response to better absorb shocks and ensure continued learning (and plan the return to school). Much of this was due to resilience in the system pre-COVID-19 (e.g., the assets it contained to absorb such a shock), as well as the emergence of specific strategies, adaptation, and innovation that occurred as the pandemic continued into 2021.

Exhibit 5. USAID’s return to learning framework



In this section, description of the Georgia education system response to COVID-19 is organized by components of USAID’s RtL framework. For this case study, the decision was made to keep a broad focus across all levels of the education system to present a full picture of response decision-making. However, much of the state-led response to COVID-19 centered on general education, a fact that was found across all case study locations; thus, much of the description that follows relates mainly to this level. As shown in Exhibit 3, ECE was completely closed with no mandate for distance learning throughout most of 2020, first reopening was in October 2020, but immediately closing again until March 2021. HEIs’ decision-making was autonomous from the GoG; since response at this level was specific to each university, this was also not explored in depth (though general decisions and overarching trends are noted throughout this report). In later waves of data collection, the decision-making processes for VET colleges (overseen by the GoG) emerged as unique; thus, that line of inquiry was further pursued in order to highlight tertiary education considerations. Still, as this was not the specific focus for Georgia, VET-specific description is included throughout alongside the other levels of education. Overall, this report offers a general overview across all levels with emphasis on general education and VET.

The broader relevance of USAID’s RtL framework and its Resilience Framework (as collated across five case study locations but with further development in regard to Georgia) is further analyzed in the accompanying synthesis report and policy brief.

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” (Boisvert and Weisenhorn 2020).

Reengagement planning and processes in Georgia focused mainly on engaging students in online distance learning during the spring and summer of 2020. The MoES’s school reopening plans and processes (as opposed to the continued engagement during school closures) are elaborated on below, particularly under RtL Priority 2. As was true of many case study locations, these distinct categories (continued engagement with learning during school closures and reopening and return to in-person education) are important to understanding overall priorities, planning, and processes.

Overall, Georgia prioritized ensuring access to Internet and devices for learners throughout the school closures of 2020–2021. RtL Priority I notes an emphasis on outreach to those most marginalized. In Georgia, “marginalized learners” were considered broadly to be all those with barriers to accessing distance learning options. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, there were distinct urban/rural disparities in terms of education outcomes, reflecting socioeconomic inequity across the country (NAEC 2020b). Thus, as education systems around the world turned toward online options for education during school closures, Georgia made efforts to understand the specifics of this digital access that would be most challenging for those already more vulnerable.

Conduct rapid assessments (either through existing data or primary data collection) to identify marginalized groups. Efforts to ensure that the most marginalized could be continuously engaged was accomplished by ensuring their access to the distance learning platforms. For assessments conducted by education actors during this time (Geostat, UNICEF), access to devices and Internet were the primary indicator of concern. These assessments attempted to identify specific groups (by place of residence, i.e., settlement type and region, language of instruction, number of siblings in household, and family socioeconomic status) that were more likely to lack access.¹¹ Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the only indicator collected by the Education Management Information System (EMIS) regarding marginalized learners was for children with special education needs. According to an EMIS respondent, while it is possible to integrate social ranking scores (a measure of socioeconomic status that determines eligibility for social assistance, established by the Agency of Social Services of the Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons from Occupied Territories, Labor, Health, and Social Affairs [MoHLA]) with the EMIS database, this has not been normal practice since 2013 (Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons 2021).

Throughout 2020, EMIS collected data on students’ access to digital devices and the Internet. E-School, the school management system, was used to survey schools on the availability of digital devices and the type of Internet access. The data, broken down by school level, was made available to the MoES.¹²

¹¹ For the purposes of this research, it was difficult to obtain specific data about access to distance learning; this information will likely become more readily available in the future.

¹² Interview 1, 8

Simultaneously, the regional ERC networks were deployed to collect information on access to Internet and digital devices. ERCs requested the information from schools and then reported to the MoES.¹³ Overall, the effort to identify marginalized learners occurred at the more localized levels, with MoES working toward overarching solutions to the issue of Internet/device access. Reengaging learners without Internet access was challenging; therefore, the MoES adjusted its response over the course of 2020 to allow schools to make specific decisions regarding partial or strategic reopening for students without Internet. In addition, specific arrangements were made for students with special learning needs.

Actively communicate, consult, and collaborate with educators, communities, and other stakeholders. In general education, the decentralized ERC infrastructure played an important role in communicating with schools. In addition to traditional channels of communications (i.e., online updates via circulars from MoES to schools and ERCs), the ERC staff communicated information directly to school principals. According to respondents (MoES staff, ERC heads, and school principals), ERC staff would first discuss issues on the ground with schools (as well as potential options or solutions) and then bring this information directly to meetings with MoES leadership.¹⁴

Consultations with educational institutions were a significant part of the planning process. Respondents described how, at different points during the pandemic, the MoES response strategies were modified after consulting with education communities. For example, in general education, the initial plan was to mandate Microsoft Teams as the only means for offering online distance learning. After consulting with schools, it became clear that Microsoft Teams could not be used on the digital devices available to some students. Subsequently, the MoES shifted to allow schools to use other communications means of their choice (e.g., Facebook Messenger, Google Classroom, or Zoom).¹⁵ According to school and ERC respondents, while the MoES was initially less successful at listening to school community needs, this improved significantly as the pandemic progressed. The MoES quickly adapted communication channels and became more proactive in modifying its strategies to accommodate the needs of parents, teachers, and students.¹⁶

For VET colleges, the MoES held regular meetings with VET providers to discuss options and make coordinated decisions about response strategies. According to senior MoES respondents, the decision not to move to distance learning during the Spring 2020 semester was consensus-based across these consulting groups. Subsequent response measures were also made in close consultation with VET providers after a network of expert educators was organized in summer 2020. At first, the role of the network was to develop response strategies, but this then expanded to redesigning programs to hybrid learning mode.¹⁷

The MoES Facebook page was used to communicate with parents, teachers, and students throughout the pandemic. Three members of the Ministry Public Relations department staff were assigned to identify public interest topics and respond by posts and in Facebook Messenger.¹⁸ Sections [Cross-cutting outcomes: Communication and public trust](#) and [Resilience in Georgia](#) elaborate on these communication

¹³ Interview 1, 8, 21, 28, 43

¹⁴ *ibid*

¹⁵ *ibid*

¹⁶ Interview 30, 38, 43

¹⁷ Interview 2, 7, 17

¹⁸ Interview 13, 20

channels. The MoES also actively collaborated with local and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in developing and implementing support measures. For example, teaching and learning resources were developed in collaboration with UNICEF and the Education for All Coalition (iskola).¹⁹ See the [RtL Priority 5 section](#) for a more detailed description of NGO collaboration.

Ensure education information and monitoring systems are functioning and capable of tracking (re)enrollment of all learners, especially marginalized populations, in real time. In general education, EMIS initially tracked data on student use of various Microsoft Teams learning platforms across the country.²⁰ Simultaneously, the MoES acknowledged that not all schools were using Microsoft Teams; throughout 2020 efforts were made to allow autonomy to schools for contextually relevant decision-making, which posed challenges for consistent and comparable monitoring. Ongoing assessments and regional level monitoring (conducted by ERCs) allowed for the most accurate picture of student engagement.

In June 2020, NAEC (in collaboration with EMIS) conducted a survey of students, parents, and teachers and focus group discussions with school principals. The survey included questions about the communication tools (e.g., Zoom, Facebook Messenger) that schools used to engage students in online distance learning; student and parent satisfaction with the quality of online distance learning; and bullying and emotional well-being of students (NAEC 2020c). The survey report aggregated the information by school location (urban, rural), language of instruction, and school legal status (public or private). At the beginning of September 2020, the MoES again surveyed schools to collect data on Internet and computer access among students and teachers.

Since September, EMIS data collection and reporting shifted its monitoring focus toward the new online distance learning option registration.²¹ At the district level, ERCs continued to monitor learning engagement at schools to be delivered to MoES.²² According to MoES and ERC respondents, many of the ERCs had highly detailed data on access to online distance learning down to the student level. The ERCs also informed the MoES about specific challenges described by students, parents, teachers, and principals, as well as the measures and efforts undertaken at school level.²³

For higher education, EQE implemented a survey with universities to learn about access to and potential modalities of distance learning in March 2020. According to EQE respondents, the resulting survey data were too broad to inform decision-making. Therefore, in April, EQE circulated a questionnaire to better understand student access to and potential engagement in distance learning options, as well as barriers.²⁴ Particular efforts were made to identify students most at risk of not accessing distance options. This included using the National Social Security Database, which was used to identify students below a certain income level, and the EMIS higher education database, which reports student explanation for

¹⁹ Interview 1, 3, 4

²⁰ As state previously, EMIS did not include specific indicators related to vulnerability except for disability status.

²¹ Interview 1, 8, 13, 47

²² Interview 1, 8, 13, 21, 28, 47

²³ Interview 1

²⁴ Interview 41

taking temporary leave. These two sources of data were used to identify students most at risk of leaving their higher education studies because of financial vulnerability.²⁵

There was no data collection effort undertaken at the VET level. To understand the situation on the ground, the MoES VET leadership team met with VET providers regularly to discuss issues and potential solutions.²⁶

Promote alternative pathways back to education. In general education, two alternative modalities of learning were offered in the weeks after the first school closure in March 2020. First, EMIS created Microsoft Office 365 accounts for all public schools (including 600,000 students and 55,000 teachers and school administrators) and set up Microsoft Teams virtual classrooms for each class. Simultaneously, EMIS began the process of translation/localization of Microsoft Teams. As a respondent (Ministry) explained, “the pace of this process was unprecedented; EMIS created 300,000 accounts in just two weeks.”²⁷

According to the June 2020 NAEC/EMIS survey, 73 percent of students engaged in online distance learning in April and 90 percent in May. The survey estimated that 10 percent of students lacked access to online learning entirely and 27 percent of students communicated with teachers using telephone calls and personal contacts only. Accordingly, it is likely that at least one-third of students did not have access to online distance learning throughout spring 2020 (NAEC 2020c). According to the National Statistics Office of Georgia (Geostat), online distance learning was offered to 97 percent of urban and 95 percent of rural students ages 6–17. Additionally, 5 percent of respondents report being “very satisfied,” 43 percent “relatively satisfied,” 25 percent “neither satisfied nor dissatisfied,” 13 percent “relatively dissatisfied,” and 12 percent “very dissatisfied” with the quality of online distance learning (Geostat[b]).

The second alternative modality of education was the Teleskola project, which was comprised of television lessons for all grades (1–12) and subjects initiated by the National Broadcasting Company of Georgia (NBCG) in collaboration with the MoES. An NBCG respondent explained the motivation to start the project: “We knew there were many children who didn’t have access to [Internet] devices. We cover children mostly from remote areas, and occasionally we meet these children and we know about the conditions they live in. We wanted to contribute. Besides, we wanted to bring something positive into these hard times. We were right. The project had an effect... it gave people hope.”

The NBCG and Ministry partnership was officialized in March 2020 based on findings from early assessments that identified lack of access to Internet and devices for online learning among students, especially in rural areas. Subject matter experts from the MoES collaborated with NBCG actors, who ultimately determined the schedule and duration of programs: “We knew from research that a lesson shouldn’t last more than 15 minutes. So we kept the duration strictly under control... The Ministry subject experts were instrumental in planning objectives, content, and methodology. We decided each lesson would include an assignment for students. The Ministry staff helped recruit teachers which was a difficult task because it was not only about being a good teacher but also [presenting the information in a way that worked for television]. We worked until midnight for several days and on March 30 we

²⁵ Interview 11

²⁶ Interview 2, 17

²⁷ Interview 1, 47; MoES Report Card, 2020.

launched Teleskola.”²⁸ The Teleskola project developed and broadcasted classes throughout spring 2020 and winter 2020/2021 semesters. The classes covered the entire curriculum across all academic subjects.²⁹ According to the Geostat survey of households commissioned by UNICEF (administered in November–December 2020 to approximately 2,100 households), 57 percent of children and adolescents (aged 6–17) reported watching or having watched Teleskola. The rates were higher among rural populations (61 percent) and younger children (62 percent) (Geostat[b]).

In VET colleges, all classes were canceled for the spring 2020 semester. However, active measures were taken to offer hybrid learning (mix of online and in-person) in summer 2020 to support students to “catch up” and ensure they could graduate on time.³⁰ In higher education, the MoES’s role was to facilitate communication and collaboration, but not hold decision-making authority. Respondents (Ministry, HEIs) reported that the Ministry encouraged increased collaboration among universities during COVID. As a result, universities shared learning management systems (LMSs) and teaching and learning resources with each other. For example, Batumi State University had a strong LMS in place and shared it with other universities in the Adjara Region; Kutaisi State University was supporting Telavi State University; and the National Science Library opened up its resources to all universities.³¹

Address policy barriers that exclude some learners from returning to education. In general education, enrolment of students with special needs was simplified as part of the COVID-19 response. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, a student with special needs was enrolled after an official, in-person assessment. During the pandemic, the MoES adapted this assessment to an online format; additionally, the MoES waived the assessment requirement entirely in cases where the online mode was not feasible.

RtL Priority 2

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

Involve learners, educators, parents, and communities in decision-making. The MoES engaged closely with schools and ERCs in decision-making over school reopening plans. Based on the recommended options (see [Develop an education reopening plan, including safe operations guidance](#) below), schools determined their own, contextualized solutions with distance, hybrid (e.g., by levels—primary, lower secondary, secondary) or fully in-person learning modalities. The planning began early in

²⁸ Interview 47

²⁹ Interview 1, 12, 47

³⁰ Interview 2

³¹ Interview 11

the summer to ensure that schools had sufficient time for consultations with stakeholders.³² In addition to ERCs, schools, and communities, the MoES actively communicated response needs and plans with international agencies. Guidelines for school reopening were developed in collaboration with World Vision and the Association of School Administrators.³³

Develop an education reopening plan, including safe operations guidance. In May 2020, the COVID-19 Safety Operational Recommendations for Schools were first released by the MoES and the MoHLA (and were then updated in November 2020). The recommendations covered school cleaning and hygiene practices, mask-wearing, screening and post-screening procedures, organization of space, catering, library services, movement within school buildings, and the role of the school doctor and clinic (Georgian Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons 2020).

School reopening plans were developed in collaboration with local municipalities, the Ministry of Infrastructure Development, and the MoHLA. To prepare physical space in schools for the reopening, the MoES identified schools without running water or fully functioning toilets based on data provided by ERCs. Local municipalities and the Ministry of Infrastructure Development were involved in rapid infrastructure renovation projects wherein approximately 800 schools were renovated throughout the 2020 summer holiday break.

The MoES simultaneously developed recommended options for schools reopening, which would then be considered and selected at school level. These options included school shifting, blended or hybrid in-person and online learning, and options for diversifying approaches by levels of education (i.e., different levels may employ different approaches). Schools were to choose their options so that they could ensure compliance with current MoHLA recommendations, as specified in the COVID-19 Safety Operational Recommendations for Schools.

According to Geostat and UNICEF, 57.4 percent of children aged 2–17 (who had physically attended school prior to closures in March 2020) returned to in-person learning upon school reopening in September 2020 (Geostat[b]).

Ensure the safety and wellbeing of learners, educators, and school personnel. In addition to the safety guidelines and school infrastructural development outlined above, the MoES continued to monitor and adjust COVID-19 safety precautions into 2021. In February 2021, the MoES announced a national COVID-19 testing program for general education schools that remained in place as of June 2021. For each school, there is a mandatory 20 percent minimum PCR testing target, with rapid testing for all other staff members. Teachers are tested on a biweekly basis, and testing for teachers is provided free of charge for both public and private schools. All schools must register their staff online, in a process coordinated by the Labor Conditions Inspection Department.³⁴ A school principal respondent confirmed that, “the labor inspection does not let us work if at least 20 percent of staff is not tested.”³⁵

³² Interview 1, Interview 21, 28, 43

³³ Interview 1, 4, 6

³⁴ Interview 35

³⁵ Interview 30

Additionally, schools were allowed to move “high risk group” teachers to online distance teaching only.³⁶

Develop an outbreak response plan at the school level. Outbreak management planning is planned and overseen by the MoHLA. When a COVID case is confirmed at a school, the school contacts local NCDC to receive approval for closing either a classroom, a shift (i.e., day or afternoon), or an entire school. Initially, the school was required to receive approval from the MoES. In order to ensure that the procedures were followed without delay, the MoES delegated the power of classroom closure approval to ERCs.³⁷

Communicate clearly and consistently. The MoES uses several communication channels. The most consistent communication channel with the wider public includes government media briefings and the Ministry website. Throughout the pandemic, several key government officials reported to the public on a weekly basis or more. School reopening and closing were communicated through these channels following the decisions made by the Interagency Coordination Council.³⁸ The media briefings addressed the pandemic situation and the measures the government was currently employing to manage the crisis.³⁹ Additionally, all events, decisions, and news were posted on the official Ministry website and the Ministry Facebook page. The Facebook page was managed by the MoES public relations team.⁴⁰

Schools receive all communication through the MoES’s electronic communication system developed in 2013. All correspondence and communications go through the portal (eflow.emis.ge). All public school principals receive the MoES circulars directly to their accounts.

A primary role of the ERCs is to communicate directly with schools. This channel was particularly critical for gathering feedback from the school community and communicating it up to the MoES, where it could feed into MoES response strategies and actions. As respondents from ERCs noted, throughout the pandemic, the deputy minister met with ERCs at least every week to discuss concerns and response actions. Department heads and deputies met virtually with ERCs twice a week. As one ERC head reported, “the meetings were so frequent, we would be discussing individual school cases in depth. At some point we would meet [the deputy minister] every 3 or 4 days. There was no weekend or evening for us.”⁴¹

Monitor the situation regularly. The MoHLA inspected all schools in September 2020 prior to opening. Some schools received a notice that they were not compliant with health and safety guidance, and had to be inspected again before reopening.⁴² The MoES tracked school opening/closing data using EMIS and the ERCs.⁴³ Starting in February 2021, ERCs conducted regular monitoring visits to schools to ensure school safety conditions (e.g., temperature taking each day; proper use of facemasks; access to

³⁶ Interview 28

³⁷ Interview 1, 43

³⁸ The Interagency Coordination Council was founded on January 28, 2020 in order to ensure an effective and coordinated response to COVID. The Council was founded as the main decision-making platform and consists of members of government, members of Parliament, the Administration of the President of Georgia, and key medical representatives.

³⁹ Interview 1, 8, 20

⁴⁰ Interview 1, 20

⁴¹ Interview 28

⁴² Interview 1

⁴³ Interview 8

proper hygiene facilities; classroom set up for physical distancing and ventilation) using an evaluation form provided by the MoES.⁴⁴

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 learners’ psychosocial, social-emotional learning, and protection needs into consideration.

Understand the range of options for helping learners catch up. By December 2020, the education sector in Georgia began to turn toward discussion of learning loss suffered by students during COVID-19, initiated by a local NGO, Education for All in Georgia. In collaboration with the MoES, the organization conducted an assessment to estimate the scope and scale of learning loss at general education level, as well as proposed actionable and relevant strategies to respond, ongoing at the time of writing. Simultaneously, TPDC implemented a short survey to assess teachers’ and school principals’ attitudes toward potential interventions. This survey included: asking teachers to evaluate the potential interventions (as relevant, more or less relevant, not relevant) including “summer schools, extracurricular activities, extending the length of academic year, longer lessons, modifications in the curriculum to build in into existing classes,” as well as the potential usefulness of programs including “computer-based interventions, remediation centers, individual tutoring, targeted assistance to schools with learning loss, targeted assistance to classes with learning loss, targeted assistance to individual students with learning loss.”⁴⁵

In VET, the need for catch-up measures was clear since VET colleges did not establish distance learning at all during school closures (unlike general and higher education). In September 2020, the MoES chose a hybrid mode that moved some parts of teaching and learning online, while offering in-person coursework for specific work and skill-based programs/courses.⁴⁶

Revise the academic calendar and schedule. During distance learning, instructional time was cut for general education. The national curriculum leadership recommended that the duration of a lesson at primary level should not exceed 20 minutes for lower grades and 30 minutes for higher grades. The number of classes was also cut to three per day. If offered asynchronously, schools had the freedom to add more classes, but the amount of time a student could spend in synchronous online classes was regulated by the MoES. In addition, some schools returned in shifts; specific calendar and schedule decisions were based on the size of the school and the size of the school building as well as pre-pandemic shift numbers.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Interview 13; MoES, 2021.

⁴⁵ Interview 39; TPDC, 2021.

⁴⁶ Interview 2

⁴⁷ Due to high demand, some schools in urban areas operated in shifts even before the pandemic.

In VET colleges, calendar and scheduling adaptations were made to help students regain lost learning during lockdown. The VET colleges were to make necessary adjustments in the calendar and schedule to accommodate the hybrid mode.⁴⁸ This included redesigning programs to cover more material and be relevant to a distance delivery mode.

In higher education, curriculum adaptations were left to universities to decide. There are no national data available on specific curriculum adaptation efforts by higher education institutions.⁴⁹

Adapt (or condense) the curriculum and teaching and learning materials. In general education, after moving to online distance learning, the national curricula adaptation options were communicated together with alternative teaching and learning resources by the National Curriculum Development Unit of the MoES. The resources were developed following the principles of the new curriculum in collaboration with UNICEF and EFA. Fifty teachers recruited by the project developed 260 academic lessons using project-based learning, and the materials were posted online and promoted by EFA and the MoES through social media. The resources were evaluated using a survey and series of focus group interviews with teachers. Specific curricula adaptation decisions were left to schools. Also, recommendations on assessment modalities were offered, which included options for schools based on their context, resources, and individual students' circumstances.

Major rescheduling and adaptations were implemented to adjust VET program curricula to hybrid learning and help students catch up the time lost during the lockdown. In the summer, the MoES established working groups of field-specific experts whose task was to identify aspects of the programs that could be offered online. As a respondent explained: "The deputy minister had the idea of field-specific teacher networks for VET before COVID... this time it had an urgency and clear purpose."⁵⁰

Identify learners' social-emotional, protection, and academic needs. In general education, the NAEC conducted a study on the quality of distance online teaching and learning during COVID-19. The survey was implemented in June 2020 using online surveys for teachers, students, and parents. The report describes many aspects of the distance learning experience relevant to learner needs, including: (a) access to online learning by ethnic background (students in ethnic minority language schools) and location (urban/rural); (b) teaching methods used by teachers; (3) student satisfaction with the quality of teaching; (4) student engagement in online distance learning; and (5) negative implications on students emotional state (e.g., stress, exhaustion, sense of loneliness) (NAEC 2020c). The survey identified cyberbullying as an issue; therefore, EMIS offered webinars on the topic for teachers and students.⁵¹ Other general mental health and psychosocial support services were provided remotely through the Psychosocial Service Center of the Resource Officer Service, which also offered a 24-hour hotline specifically for children and their parents (MoES 2020a).

Consider where distance learning should continue. Starting in September 2020, schools moved to online distance learning when and if a COVID-19 case was confirmed among the school staff or students.⁵² As noted previously, in certain large urban areas, parents were allowed to choose to keep

⁴⁸ Interview 2

⁴⁹ Interview 11

⁵⁰ Interview 7

⁵¹ Interview 1

⁵² Interview 1, 8, All resource center interviewees.

their children in online distance learning only. These online classes were offered by the schools the students attend. Schools made decisions on how to allocate in-person and online classes to teachers. In some cases, teachers only taught online or in-person. In other schools, teachers taught both online and in-person.⁵³ Each Wednesday, students may be registered via an online portal.⁵⁴ A school principal respondent explained: “We have 14 online classes from grades 1 through 12. These are families who have someone in the high-risk group at home. You see many children live in multigenerational households and don’t trust that schools can ensure safety.”⁵⁵ The online option was made available in order to ensure that these students could return to learning safely.

Mobilize financial and human resources for planning for catch-up programming. At present, the MoES is not optimistic about the opportunities for mobilizing the necessary resources for remedial programs.

Overall, approaches taken to mitigate learning loss are an area of the RtL Framework that may have more limited application at this point in time in the Georgian response. This is partly because the education system has been overloaded in planning and implementation of measures to date. Simply put, there is little extra capacity to be utilized at this moment in time. Schools currently operate multiple shifts, both online and in person, which has put a considerable burden on schools, administrators, and teachers. A school principal explained that “Just today we had to send 36 students home to self-isolation [due to possible COVID exposure] ...managing these kinds of situations is a part of our job now. In addition, we are working in two shifts [online and in-person]. It is like managing two schools. It is exhausting and does not leave much time for working on the quality of teaching.”⁵⁶

This has implications for implementing catch-up or remedial programming, which will require further capacity and support to those same teachers and administrators. An administrator noted that “teachers currently have in-person classes until 3pm and then online classes... then trainings after 6pm... The Ministry told us to identify remedial teachers they can train. We simply don’t have time for more classes or training at present.”⁵⁷ Ultimately, such scheduling does not represent a sustainable option for the functioning of the education system. But in the midst of an ongoing COVID-19 crisis, such acute (and largely absorptive) measures continue to ensure some form of continued learning across the country.

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.

⁵³ Interview 35

⁵⁴ Ibid, 46

⁵⁵ Interview 30

⁵⁶ Interview 27

⁵⁷ Interview 35

In Georgia, there are no national exams to advance between grades for compulsory education. Student transition decisions (primary-basic-secondary) is based only on grades and is usually automatic. The only exam students take is at the transition to another level of education (i.e., to VET or higher education). After finishing secondary school, students take the Unified National Exam (UNE) to enroll in higher education and the VET exam to enroll in VET programs. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the UNE did not include the content covered in the second semester of grade 12; this was the only accommodation made. The UNE and VET exams normally take place each summer in-person; in the summer of 2020, the pandemic spread was under control in most of the country and thus exams took place as usual. The government allocated relevant resources to ensure that the administration of the examinations strictly followed the NCDC guidelines. A separate guideline was prepared specifically for the administration of examinations, which emphasized safety measures such as physical distancing in alignment with the measures for schools. For 2021, the exams will follow the same safety protocols.

Formative assessment of student learning was a priority area for the MoES both before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. Before COVID-19, formative assessments were mandatory, but schedules and processes for these assessments differed at the school level. In 2020, the MoES modified the formative assessment guidelines in the national curriculum to accommodate distance learning and, in particular, the existing digital divide. These modifications centered on providing schools with three options for student assessment; schools were to decide among the following options for defining the final grade in a subject: (1) the mean of the final grade for the first semester of 2019-2020 academic year, the first six weeks of the second semester, and student performance during distance learning; (2) the final grade of the first semester of the 2019-2020 academic year; or (3) a mean of the six weeks of the second semester of 2019-2020 and performance during distance learning. Schools could choose to follow one of the options across the entire school or to choose assessment options to specific student circumstances. Student performance during distance learning was assessed based on the students' performance throughout the semester or on a single final assessment exercise. The MoES provided schools with "comprehensive tasks" or projects in an online format to use as a final project assignment.⁵⁸

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."⁵⁹ Workforce (including recruitment, deployment, certification) and capacity development (including both the professional and psychosocial 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.

Revisit workforce needs. No new teachers were hired during the COVID-19 pandemic because of the changes in education schedules. Instead, the existing teacher workforce was paid for additional teaching hours.⁶⁰ When parents in large cities were given the weekly option of in-person or online

⁵⁸ Interview 1, 21, 28, 30; <https://mes.gov.ge/content.php?lang=geo&id=10326>

⁵⁹ Ibid

⁶⁰ Interview 47

learning (in September 2020), the existing teacher workforce was paid for the extra hours worked.⁶¹ In contrast to many other countries during COVID-19, it is likely that Georgia did not need to hire additional teachers or paraprofessionals because of the teacher workload pre-pandemic. According to the OECD's 2018 Teaching and Learning International Survey, Georgia's student/teacher ratio was one of the lowest in the world, at seven students per teacher. Also, only 51 percent of teachers worked full-time (90 percent of the 18 teaching hours per week) (NAEC 2020d). On average, teachers in Georgia spent 18 hours per week on teaching (compared to 28 hours in the United States) (OECD 2018). Because of this, there was capacity for teachers to significantly increase their workload when needed during COVID-19. Still, as noted in RtL Priority 3, the capacity of the current workforce to expand to include remedial or other alternative education options was limited. Thus, the need to revisit workforce needs has become increasingly relevant since December 2020, when efforts began to shift toward mitigating learning loss.

Address educator capacity development needs. Teacher training efforts to support teachers' move to online teaching were focused on the use of Microsoft Teams. The training was offered by three government programs/centers:

- EMIS developed webinars and online tutorials on Microsoft Teams use and cyberbullying.⁶²
- New School Model Program ICT coaches offered regular online workshops to teachers and school administrators. Pre-COVID-19, the coaches worked with only two or three schools; during COVID-19, the MoES leadership requested that coaches expand these networks. In response, 100 coaches volunteered to hold additional sessions for schools that requested guidance on the transition to online learning.⁶³
- The TPDC surveyed schools regarding their teachers' professional development needs and organized online webinars. Examples of such webinars included: Distance Learning in Biology; Using Teams in Geography Lessons; How to Develop Communication Skills Online; Project-Based Learning Online; Group Work Online; How to Use Virtual Libraries in Teaching Chemistry; How to Use Digital Resources in Arts Classes; How to Develop Assignments in Teams; How to Use Online Resources in German Language Classes; Web 2:0 – How to Make Online Learning Fun; Digital Activism in Teaching Geography; and Online Communication and Management in Distance Mode.⁶⁴

Assess the need for repairs and creation of new learning spaces, additional furniture and materials, disinfection of learning spaces, and signage and floor markings. As previously described (RtL Priority 3), the MoES implemented a country-wide school infrastructure intervention rehabilitating school toilets and water supply systems. In summer 2020, to prepare schools for reopening, 800 schools (mostly rural) benefited from the school infrastructure program.⁶⁵

⁶¹ Interview 36, 37

⁶² Interview 1, 43

⁶³ *ibid*

⁶⁴ Interview 39

⁶⁵ Interview 8

Mobilize financial resources to fill gaps. As noted above, resources from the COVID-19 response fund were allocated to teacher salaries for those who added additional online teaching hours.⁶⁶

Across the RtL priority areas, NGOs were involved in many response actions to support the MoES, generating additional resources to fill gaps. Education for All in Georgia partnered with UNICEF to develop online teaching and learning resources, which were approved by MoES but not implemented or funded by the state.⁶⁷ World Vision developed—with a team of experts and MoES staff—the school operation guidelines for COVID-19, which the Ministry then disseminated among schools.⁶⁸ The guidelines cover recommendations on health, children’s rights, organizing educational process, curriculum, teaching and learning resources, supporting teachers and staff, management and monitoring and evaluation, well-being during the pandemic, and organizing education processes for special needs students (World Vision 2020). UNICEF and World Vision equipped schools (where they implemented programs) with tablets and laptops during online distance learning and with materials for school reopening.⁶⁹

While the government diverted some of the planned VET budget funds to COVID-19 crisis management, GIZ provided funding to programs in VET that were implemented as planned. GIZ also purchased sanitation supplies and thermal screening equipment for public VETs.⁷⁰ The USAID-funded East-West Management Institute’s (EWMI) PRoLOG project supported EQE in its effort to develop the Evaluation Criteria and Guidelines on Online and/or Blended Teaching and Learning.⁷¹ Another EWMI project is currently supporting EFA efforts to examine learning loss.⁷² International organizations were instrumental in evaluation efforts in collaboration with the MoES. UNICEF, in collaboration with the Georgian Statistics Office, conducted an assessment of COVID-19’s impact on children and families.⁷³ The COVID-19 Georgia High Frequency Survey, implemented by the Caucasus Research Resource Center, also provided valuable information about distance learning and access to the Internet and devices.⁷⁴

4. OUTCOMES OF THE RETURN TO LEARNING PROCESS

Building on the descriptions above, this section outlines outcomes that were observed as a result of decisions made when planning and implementing the return to learning process in Georgia. There were similarities between the initial COVID-19 responses in Georgia and those in the four other case study contexts,⁷⁵ with all five seeking, first, to absorb the shock of COVID-19 by closing schools and resorting to distance learning strategies to protect the physical health and safety of teachers and learners and subsequently seeking to institute longer term adaptive response strategies.

⁶⁶ Interview 36, 37

⁶⁷ Interview 4

⁶⁸ Interview 6, Interview 1

⁶⁹ Interview 3, 6, 40, 45

⁷⁰ Interview 7

⁷¹ Interview 46

⁷² Interview 39

⁷³ Interview 45

⁷⁴ Email communication with the CRRC Deputy Research Director; World Bank 2020.

⁷⁵ The findings of the five case studies are synthesized in the associated RtL synthesis report.

This section examines in more detail the outcomes of these responses in Georgia at various levels of the education system, primarily: (1) national government/Ministry; (2) teacher and school; and (3) learner.⁷⁶ There is an additional category for cross-cutting outcomes. Throughout this section, opportunities are identified that have presented through the pandemic response in Georgia which may, in future, be leveraged to build more system-wide adaptive capacities, contributing to systemic resilience moving forward. This study calls these opportunities “pockets of promise.”

GOG AND MOES-LEVEL OUTCOMES

At the MoES level, perhaps the most notable change has been the revision of existing policies for VET. Namely, at the time of writing, the Ministry is currently working on a strategy for integrating online distance learning into VET programs.⁷⁷ As mentioned above, the VET sector (in contrast to general and higher education) did not move to online distance learning during the spring of 2020. This decision was made in collaboration with VET providers and was based on two assumptions: one, there was a lower level of teacher ICT competency compared to other education levels at the start of the pandemic. Unlike general education, ICT training had never been included in VET reform and, thus, teaching capacity for distance learning was assumed to be lower. Two, the content of VET would be less conducive to online teaching since, as the deputy minister explained, “online distance learning can only be used to transmit knowledge which contradicts the principles of work-based and skills-based training which we have been working so hard to introduce in the system.”⁷⁸ This impetus was still strong in the first wave of the interviews conducted for this research. However, in subsequent waves, MoES respondents began describing online distance learning as a potential option for VET, and noted that COVID-19 has presented opportunity for change regarding this level of education (in particular in relation to the assumptions above). Respondents explained that officials in the sector have arrived at the realization that online distance learning is not only possible in VET, but also necessary to address existing access issues in the system. Therefore, new strategy and policy is currently being considered.



A second key outcome of the return to learning process was the shift toward increased, independent decision-making at the school level. Throughout the pandemic, there were many instances where the MoES consulted directly with schools regarding certain decisions, provided schools a choice of response strategies, or left decisions to schools entirely. For example, options for schedule and modalities (shifts, online, hybrid) were crafted by MoES, which then mandated schools to choose the option most appropriate to their context. Similarly, when teachers and parents expressed increasing concern about student formative assessment, the MoES developed



⁷⁶ In considering the following as “outcomes,” remember that the return to learning process for COVID-19 was far from over. Therefore, many of the research questions and objectives evolved, with documentation and description of decision-making and planning a key point of focus for the research activities. The following section reflects notable changes at various levels of the system that were described by key stakeholders throughout the duration of this research, but with acknowledgement of the still unpredictable and changing nature of the pandemic at the time of writing.

⁷⁷ Interview 17

⁷⁸ Interview 2, 7

assessment policy options that schools could choose from to apply across the entire school or to individual students. These cases were positively mentioned by virtually all respondents from ERCs and schools. In some cases, the MoES delegated powers and responsibilities to schools and, specifically, principals. As one school principal described: “I have never felt so much professional freedom in my career as a school principal.”⁷⁹ Respondents from the MoES described the increased decision-making and leadership initiative among school principals as extremely positive.⁸⁰ In contrast, some respondents did reflect that not all schools had equal capacity to make many of these independent decisions. These respondents noted that in regard to decisions about safety and health, it was perceived less as school autonomy and more about “dumping responsibilities on schools.”⁸¹ Overall, however, the decentralized decision-making to the school level was framed by respondents as mostly positive.

TEACHER AND SCHOOL-LEVEL OUTCOMES

Respondents from the MoES, ERCs, and schools described the experience of online distance learning as an opportunity for facilitating improvement in teaching practices. This included two distinct categories of highlighted outcomes: (a) the acceleration of reforms in teaching and learning at school levels and improved and expanded teacher skills; and (b) increased and innovative teacher collaboration practices.

First, as a result of the quick shift to distance learning, many teachers became less reliant on textbooks and standard, traditional lesson planning. An MoES respondent noted that prior to the pandemic, “Teachers tended to follow textbooks from paragraph to paragraph... [relying on] textbooks to tell them what to teach... Now increasing numbers of teachers realize that they can create teaching resources themselves or use the ones developed by other teachers. The online modality forced them to focus on objectives and choose resources according to the objectives among the resources developed by the New School Model Project or by other teachers.”⁸² The MoES Curriculum Development Unit saw the crisis as a positive facilitator of the ongoing curriculum reform, which urges teachers not to follow textbooks from page to page but to prioritize by learning objectives.

Respondents across all levels agreed that the majority of teachers improved and acquired new skills, especially, but not limited to, ICT skills.⁸³ During the pandemic, teachers’ confidence in developing learning resources grew. According to respondents, “If not for the pandemic, teachers would not have created so many resources [during this time]. They were so motivated to learn and create. They felt more confident”⁸⁴ and “teachers... had to learn so much and they were absorbing everything.”⁸⁵ School principals and other respondents noted the unexpected outcomes among older teachers: “One 70-year-old teacher... at first we had trouble familiarizing him with Facebook and getting him to say hello to students in Teams. But then he adapted quickly and now can use most of Microsoft Teams functions proficiently.”⁸⁶

⁷⁹ Interview 35

⁸⁰ Interview 1, 8

⁸¹ Interview 16, 40

⁸² Interview 1

⁸³ Interview 22, 24, 25, 37, 38, 44

⁸⁴ Interview 22

⁸⁵ Interview 25

⁸⁶ Interview 35

Secondly, according to the MoES, ERC, and school principal respondents, teachers demonstrated significant skills and motivation in self-organizing to support one another during the pandemic.⁸⁷ As a respondent explained: “[Before the pandemic] it was very uncommon for teachers to share something of their own with other teachers. They seemed to be afraid of feedback...this was a clear sign of the lack of trust among teachers; they would hide their own findings from each other. Now the space has opened; if a teacher finds something that works, they want others to use it too.”⁸⁸

New channels of professional learning communities also emerged. The number of Facebook groups and their activity was intensified throughout the pandemic, and interviews with six Facebook group administrators were included in the second and third waves of the field work. These groups fell into three general categories: (a) to explain and host discussions on policies and issues, (b) to offer support for teachers to work in line with policies and regulations (including by representatives from TPDC staff members), and (c) to share pedagogical ideas and solutions. The size of the groups varied; some had approximately 6,000 members and limited membership, while others exceeded 30,000).

During the pandemic, the increase in the number of members and activity was highest for groups sharing practices and learning; the teachers administering these saw dramatic increases in the number of members (one group increased from 300 members from a common graduate school to 30,000 members,⁸⁹ another from 8,700 to 15,000.)⁹⁰ One Facebook group administrator explained the reason for the increase: “In other countries teachers have had many sources of technical or methodological material. But there are very few resources for Georgian teachers. ...EMIS started their group but could not deal with the number of questions.... This is why teachers were drawn to groups such as mine.”⁹¹



The administrators began by responding to teachers’ need to understand the technical aspect of online distance learning. This was first concentrated on the use of Microsoft Teams, as well as other platforms: “When I saw the same questions recurring, I started recording video instructions. I have 5,500 subscribers on YouTube now. I got so used to recording the videos that now it takes me just a few minutes to record a video tutorial. We learned to respond to teachers’ requests. Now I have a huge library and tutorials for Teams, Office, whiteboard and virtual board, all about how to use these applications well.”⁹²

The groups eventually evolved to begin sharing methodological resources for online teaching and learning, with respondents saying: “Georgian language classes are every day, so we needed resources every day... most resources were just PowerPoint presentations in literature, grammar, theory. But others were more creative. I created a series of resources using the concept of Mario game from our childhood; there were a series of tasks for students with elements of game. My friend created Mister Kit, which explains grammar to kids. I would upload the resources to YouTube and then share in the

⁸⁷ Interview 1, 8, 21, 44, etc. [nearly all interviews]

⁸⁸ Interview 30

⁸⁹ Interview 24

⁹⁰ Interview 22

⁹¹ Interview 25

⁹² Interview 25

group. I think there are over 100 resources there”⁹³ and “The resources are arranged by topics. I group [them] by grammar, physics, chemistry; my group is very organized this way. If a teacher needs a resource, they will find it easily through the search function.”⁹⁴

Another Facebook group administrator explained “One teacher had 90 resources shared in the group... so then I began to prepare instructions on posting a resource using tags and search functions. We wouldn’t have created so many resources if not for the pandemic. Teachers are now motivated to learn and create.”⁹⁵ The group administrators also stressed the importance of creating a culture of trust: “I would post my live classes or class recordings. I would intentionally post the ones that I considered flawed and would then explain in my post the mistakes that I made. This was helpful in terms of showing vulnerability and openness, showing that it is ok to make mistakes. I think teachers are afraid to be judged... So we really focused on creating a friendly environment ... This is why we have 60–65 teachers who post something at least once every two weeks.”⁹⁶

PARENTS AND LEARNER-LEVEL OUTCOMES

School principals and other stakeholders described changes in parents’ behavior during the pandemic, and saw potential in transforming communication practices between schools and parents beyond COVID-19. According to school administrators, new technologies have allowed the schools to adapt to parents’ circumstances: “Teachers work until late now, so we can hold online meetings in the evenings. This can ensure higher parental participation in the future, too. I expect that we will retain a higher level of parental engagement.”⁹⁷ In addition to convenience, parents have gained a better understanding of their children’s learning environment. Respondents noted that during distance learning, parents would often listen in to classes, which offered the opportunity to become more engaged in the coursework and grow or improve relationships with teachers.⁹⁸

Much of the impact of the pandemic on student learning will likely not be fully understood for some time. According to respondents (Ministry officials, school principals, and ERCs), the extent of learning loss is still unclear. The standard monitoring systems in place in Georgia (e.g., NAEC’s National and International Assessments) will allow for the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on students to be better understood and addressed in time.

Interestingly, Geostat/UNICEF surveys indicate that over half of students (in grades 2–4 and grades 5–12, who were surveyed separately) described that their performance in school remained more or less the same compared to the previous school year. Sixteen percent of second to fourth graders and 21 percent of fifth to twelve graders responded that their performance improved, and 26 percent of second to fourth graders and 22 percent of fifth to twelve graders responded that their performance worsened (UNICEF 2020b).

⁹³ Interview 24

⁹⁴ Interview 22

⁹⁵ Interview 22

⁹⁶ Interview 25

⁹⁷ Interview 28

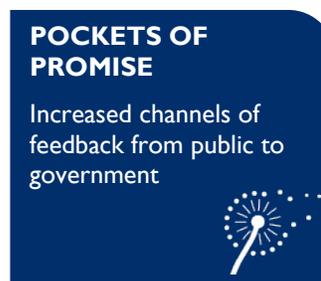
⁹⁸ Interview 35

Respondents (principals, administrators) also noted that there were students who were excluded from online distance learning, and the inequity of impact on students is also not yet fully understood. This included those without access to Internet/devices, but also students with less supportive home environments that were not conducive to continued learning throughout the pandemic. One school principal respondent explained that: “the biggest challenge was children whose parents could not ensure that their children were engaged. There are unstable families, parents working abroad, single parents, unemployed parents, parents who are waiting for the money to come from a family member working in another country, extremely poor families, or parents who are at work day and night.”⁹⁹ Exclusion of these students is not isolated to the pandemic, as the majority of these students were already disengaged from academic processes during in-person learning. Currently, the EMIS database does not include information on family social ranking score, which may capture some of these factors, though this information is available via MoHLA. Another school principal explained, “The engagement in online distance learning was a reflection of engagement in general [prior to the pandemic]. To be pragmatic, the alienation from the school community is a bigger issue for these students than the loss of academic skills.”¹⁰⁰

CROSS-CUTTING OUTCOMES: COMMUNICATION AND PUBLIC TRUST

As noted previously, the GoG’s response to the pandemic—from the closures of schools and businesses to official strategies for reopening—were perceived in positive ways by the majority of the public throughout the crisis. One feature of the official response was prompt, regular, and clear communication with the public regarding COVID-19 and government decision-making.

In the education sector, the MoES strategically used tools to communicate to parents and the public and to offer channels for receiving feedback. In particular, MoES used social media effectively to communicate with the education community, in addition to its more traditional channels. On these channels, parents, students, and teachers were active in asking questions and posting their concerns. The MoES’ public relations department had three full-time staff members assigned to the ministry’s Facebook page during COVID-19. According to these staff: “We used Facebook before [COVID-19] but now we have no day off. This is where parents spend most of their time, it is more convenient for them. We don’t respond after midnight but other than that we are online responding to the posts and questions in the inbox. We try not to refer them to other agencies. We contact other departments and agencies to get answers and then respond to the questions ourselves. We have a hotline too, but Facebook is our spine and power.”¹⁰¹ These communications provided a pathway for the public to voice concerns that could affect response efforts. The above respondent offered an example: “A parent wrote that she was afraid of sending her child to school because she had an 80-year-old mother at home. We communicated such new issues to the department. Then the [Ministry] decided to allow for choice between online and in-



⁹⁹ Interview 46
¹⁰⁰ Interview 38
¹⁰¹ Interview 20

person. We would gather these kinds of issues, group them by topics, and send them to relevant departments or deputies.”¹⁰²

Overall, the Ministry exhibited both an increased focus on prompt and clear communication and efforts to establish effective channels for feedback. Throughout this research, numerous examples were offered of such feedback reflected in subsequent response strategies. The general public support for the GoG’s actions throughout the COVID-19 crisis may reflect the impact of such strategies.

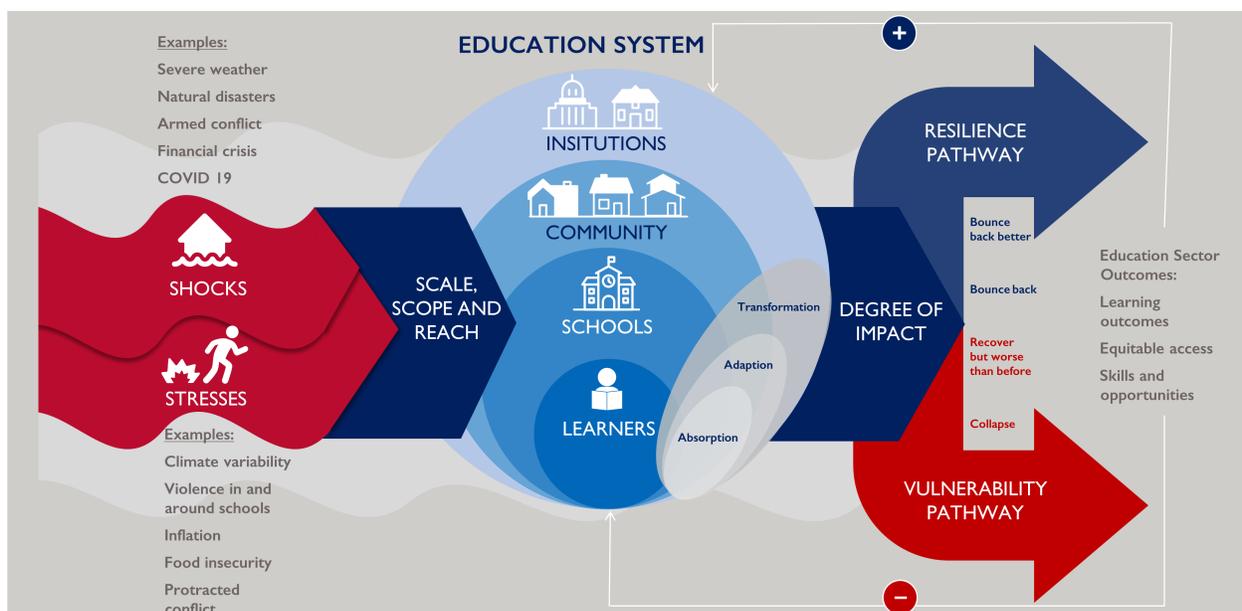
¹⁰² Interview 20

5. DISCUSSION: USAID’S RESILIENCE FRAMEWORK AND THE RETURN TO LEARNING PROCESS IN GEORGIA

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 6 (Shah 2019). This research set out to understand this framework in context in order to understand how it may be more effectively applied.

Exhibit 6. Pathways of resilience and 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).

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 were illuminated in unique ways in each of the five case studies and each case demonstrated specific characteristics and qualities of resilience. The accompanying synthesis report (Heaner et al. 2021) offers in-depth analysis of resilience across these contexts. The section below underlines some reflections on resilience in Georgia.

RESILIENCE IN GEORGIA

Prior to COVID-19, Georgia had seen consistent economic growth (an average 5 percent increase in GDP per annum between 2005 and 2019) and significant reduction in poverty levels (national poverty measure of 19.5 percent, almost half its 2007 rate) (World Bank 2021). In the education sector, there had been significant improvements in educational outcomes and enrollment rates. As in other countries, COVID-19 has threatened to reverse many of Georgia’s recent gains.

The examples of resilience capacities uncovered in this research fall largely into two categories: (a) capacities that were present in the Georgian education system prior to the onset of the pandemic that ultimately positioned the country to move swiftly and effectively in many of its response efforts, and (b) capacities that emerged as “pockets of promise” wherein actors maneuvered and adapted to ongoing shocks/stresses in innovative ways. While these examples have been highlighted throughout the description of the RtL processes, they are summarized below to underline how they reflect resilience in Georgia’s education response.

Pre-COVID capacities to be leveraged

Strong school leadership. In Georgia, there had been investment in strengthening and engaging school leaders prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Throughout the pandemic, that investment was an important strength to be leveraged, and it ultimately differentiated how quickly and effectively schools could pivot to online learning, support teachers and students in this transition, collect and communicate data, and ensure equity and inclusion in response measures. This was demonstrated by leaders who “delegated power to other teachers,” “came up with initiatives and projects,”¹⁰³ “adapted to the specific needs of teachers,”¹⁰⁴ “are respected in the school community and have relevant skills,”¹⁰⁵ “have the ability to build an inclusive school community,”¹⁰⁶ “are innovative,”¹⁰⁷ “understand the capacity and potential of staff and choose relevant objectives and strategies,”¹⁰⁸ and “the ability to navigate the system’s regulations.”¹⁰⁹ Such school leadership reflected both absorptive and adaptive capacity in the transition first to distance learning and then during school reopening. Strong leadership was reflected in previous investments in ICT, capacity-building, and new methods such as project-based learning.¹¹⁰ These investments further equipped those schools with capacities to move quickly and effectively to

¹⁰³ Interview 1

¹⁰⁴ Interview 21

¹⁰⁵ Interview 33

¹⁰⁶ Interview 33

¹⁰⁷ Interview 1, 21

¹⁰⁸ Interview 29

¹⁰⁹ Interview 1

¹¹⁰ Interview 29, 32

distance learning and to adjust management and assessment practices.¹¹¹ The integral role of school leadership—both in the resilience of the school itself and, thus, the resilience of the education system broadly—was emphasized in all interviews with Ministry leadership.¹¹²

Decentralized role of ERCs. In addition, prior to COVID-19 there had been investment and concerted effort toward decentralized decision-making and strengthening the role of ERCs. The role of ERCs has been elaborated throughout this report, highlighting their contributions to management of the crisis at a local level in both absorptive and adaptive ways. For example, ERCs: (a) initiated data collection efforts, some beginning data collection prior to instruction from the MoES;¹¹³ (b) communicated schools’ concerns and ideas to the Ministry; (c) facilitated school leadership meetings regularly to help exchange ideas between schools; (d) researched and innovated potential solutions from other countries’ COVID-19 responses, which would then be offered to schools and the MoES for consideration;¹¹⁴ and (e) collaborated with the local municipalities to mobilize and use local resources to support schools or individual students. Beginning in September, the MoES delegated school closure decisions to ERCs and local epidemiological units, which could differentiate by municipalities, schools, and even classrooms.

This local-level and context-driven response allowed for greater focus on equity and inclusion, which was primarily understood in terms of access to distance learning options. For students without access to Internet and/or computers, the associated response was often specific to region (especially in rural areas) and schools. These responses included: (a) identifying access issues early by surveying students and teachers on the availability of computers and access to the Internet; (b) lending computers to students and teachers;¹¹⁵ (c) cooperating with schools to buy digital devices for students and/or teachers; and (d) raising money from private companies to buy computers.¹¹⁶ Many ERCs, formal and informal networks of schools served as sources of social capital and provided information and support that school principals needed throughout the crisis. This included connections with NGOs for projects, resources, and other support.

Some ERCs, however, did none of the above. According to ERC and school principal respondents, some ERCs even obstructed the process of communicating to schools. A school principal explained that in some cases, “teachers had information about Ministry decisions that school principals did not have,” which were obtained via the informal networks described above.¹¹⁷ In these cases, the advantages of locally initiated and led responses could not be leveraged.

Multiple complementary data sources. The MoES used multiple complementary data sources for planning response. This included the EMIS school data collection tool, which was used to assess access to the Internet and devices. Data were available for the MoES at the onset of the school closure and EMIS tracked the use of Microsoft Teams regularly.¹¹⁸ In addition, the MoES used the ERC infrastructure to collect information on access, other issues and challenges to online distance learning, and school

¹¹¹ Interviews 27, 37

¹¹² Interview 1, 8, 13, 36

¹¹³ Interview 42

¹¹⁴ Interview 42

¹¹⁵ Interview 41

¹¹⁶ Interview 32

¹¹⁷ Interview 42

¹¹⁸ Interview 1, 8, 47

infrastructure renovation needs.¹¹⁹ MoES worked closely with ERCs to identify solutions that were most relevant to the specific context. ERC infrastructure collected feedback on response strategies and possible solutions from schools, which then fed up to the Ministry. Respondents from the Ministry and ERCs emphasized the importance of the increase in communication, especially the exchange of information and ideas via virtual channels.¹²⁰ The communication with ERCs (and thus, from schools through the ERCs) helped the MoES promptly adjust strategies and actions. Specific examples—lending computers to students without access and allowing gathering in computer labs—both originated at school level and were communicated from ERCs to the MoES.¹²¹ According to one ERC head: “I felt like the Ministry was responding to our ideas...some of the initiatives proposed by us were actually reflected in the Ministry’s strategies.”¹²²

Key emerging resilience pockets of promise

Informal teacher support networks. Informal teacher support networks exemplified teachers’ power to self-organize and support one another and were an important example of resilience during the pandemic. These networks—largely on social media platforms such as Facebook—were critical in helping guide teachers through the crisis. They additionally supported teachers in moving beyond textbook-centered teaching and into more creative and collaborative lesson planning and pedagogy. The informal networks represent a critical resource for resilience in the Georgian education system, wherein informal self-organizing efforts were powerful enough to respond to many of the challenges of the transition to teaching online. While many existed prior to the pandemic (as far back as 2010), they saw tremendous growth in membership, activity, and resources throughout 2021.¹²³

Distance learning in VET policy. The MoES shift in VET policy to embrace distance learning in VET institutions was perhaps the most dramatic policy shift in Georgia during the COVID-19 pandemic. After the full closure of VET institutions (because of the assumption that many classes and skills could not be effectively taught online), Georgia ultimately reconsidered this approach. The MoES facilitated opportunities for VET leaders and teachers to reflect on the potential of a distance learning hybrid option, and subsequently engaged with stakeholders (such as EFT, the World Bank, and the Asian Development Bank) to learn about practices in other countries and evidence from research. An international conference was held, which included participation from government agencies, administrators, and teachers from VET providers, and the Georgian Chamber of Trade. The MoES VET team is now planning to introduce a reform program for accommodating online distance learning in VET programs moving forward. The respondents from the team perceive the reform as a means for making VET more accessible across Georgia.¹²⁴

6. CONCLUSION

Overall, the Georgia case study offers insight into COVID-19 pandemic response by an education system that had made significant investment and advances in recent decades to improve access to quality

¹¹⁹ Interview 1, 8, 21, 43

¹²⁰ Interview 1, 13, 21, 28, 36, 43

¹²¹ Interview 40, 43

¹²² Interview 43

¹²³ Interview 24, 25, 26

¹²⁴ Interview 2, 17

education for all learners. As such, the system itself was already positioned with many resilience capacities that it was able to leverage during the pandemic to ensure continued learning. In addition, emergent practices, priorities, and institutional learning were observed that may contribute to longer-term systematic changes that increase equity and inclusion and overall resilience. Still, the pandemic is not over, and the extent of many impacts (including, importantly, at the learner level) will likely not be fully understood for some time. In addition, COVID-19 will continue to have significant and long-lasting impacts on global economies, which will challenge education systems everywhere in coming years. Georgia offers examples of emergent strategies in the face of a profound, global stressor and it is the intent of this report that the documentation of such examples be useful in the context of future crisis.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: REFERENCES

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APPENDIX B: RESEARCH QUESTIONS

RESEARCH QUESTIONS	SUB-QUESTIONS
<p>1. Planned Process for RtL: 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>2. Actual Process for RtL: 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 wellbeing; communication, consultation, and 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 tests, political transitions, natural hazards)?</p>
<p>3. Appreciating Shock / Stress Context for RtL: 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>4. Identifying Pockets of Promise in RtL: How are educational decision-makers seeking to identify not only problems/ issues with the COVID response, but also where things went well and</p>	<p>a. This may include investigation of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Local level autonomy vs. The need for centralized decision-making support - Communication between teachers and parents; - Capacity of educators and policymakers to adapt quickly and nimbly; the functionality/local leadership of coordination mechanisms;

RESEARCH QUESTIONS	SUB-QUESTIONS
<p>seeking to build off of these “pockets of promise”?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Focus and attention on student well-being, pre-existing contingency plans and structure, etc.</i> - <i>Role of non-state actors and potentially the private sector or civil society in supporting educational continuity</i> - <i>Coherence between education actors and health, humanitarian, protection, social protection or other actors</i> - <i>The extent to which these ‘pockets of promise’ are absorptive/adaptive vs potentially transformative</i> <p>b. How can these “pockets of promise” be built upon / strengthened so as to embed as common practice in the education system as a whole? And particularly, from an inclusion/equity standpoint?</p>
<p>5. Outcomes of RtL Process: 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"> - <i>equitable and inclusive access to education?</i> - <i>learner’s well-being or ability to cope with adversity?</i> - <i>promoting or inhibiting learners’ resumption of learning?</i> - <i>building resilience of learners, schools, families, communities, and the education system?</i> <p>b. What do key stakeholders identify as the most important lessons learned from the return-to-learning process?</p>
<p>6. Utility of USAID Frameworks: 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 the application of them 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>7. Perception of Education as a National Priority: How is / has education being / been positioned as a key driver for national COVID response and recovery efforts?</p>	<p>a. How is/has cross-sectoral approaches and perspective affecting / affected this positioning, especially in regard to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>education as a site for strengthening lines of communication between health officials and communities about the pandemic</i> - <i>use of education as a vehicle for workforce upskilling/ redeployment;</i> - <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> - <i>continuity of education as a part of a social protection strategy, portfolio, or package</i>

RESEARCH QUESTIONS	SUB-QUESTIONS
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 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 available¹²⁵)

¹²⁵ See: 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 PRIORITIES¹²⁶

✓	(RE)ENGAGE ALL LEARNERS, ESPECIALLY THE MOST MARGINALIZED
	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.
✓	DEVELOP EDUCATION REOPENING PLANS
	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.
✓	ADAPT INSTRUCTIONAL TIME, CURRICULA, AND LEARNING SUPPORTS
	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.
✓	MODIFY EXAMS AND LEARNER PROMOTION PRACTICES
	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.
✓	RE-ENGAGE EDUCATORS AND PREPARE THE LEARNING SPACE
	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.

¹²⁶ Boisvert K. and N. Weisenhorn, 2020