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# COVID-19 EDUCATION RESPONSE MAPPING STUDY

*Building Resilience in Lao PDR: Readiness,  
Response, and Recovery*

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ACER	Australian Council for Educational Research
BEQUAL	Basic Education Quality and Access in Lao PDR
COVID-19	Coronavirus disease 2019
CSIS	Center for Strategic and International Studies
ECDI	Early Child Development Index
ECE	Early Childhood Education
ESSDP	Education and Sports Sector Development Plan
ESTV	Education and Sport TV
GPE	Global Partnership for Education
ICT	Information and Communications Technology
ICT-CST	Information and Communications Technologies Competency Standards for Teachers
ILO	International Labour Organization
INEE	Inter-agency Network for Education and Emergencies
JICA	Japan International Cooperation Agency
Lao PDR	Lao People's Democratic Republic
MOES	Ministry of Education and Sports
MoFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
MPI	Ministry of Planning and Investment
NSEDP	National Socioeconomic Development Plan
OECD	Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development
SEA-PLM	Southeast Asia Primary Learning Metrics
UIS	UNICEF Institute of Statistics
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
USAID	United States Agency for International Development

# 1 OVERVIEW

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) crisis has caused unprecedented levels of disruption to education systems worldwide. Across the Asia region, it is estimated that around 760 million children were impacted by school closures at the height of the pandemic. Government response strategies have varied across the region, with some countries imposing prolonged school lockdowns while others have had short, repeated closure periods. As countries begin to reopen schools and continue to prepare for subsequent waves of COVID-19 infection, there is a need to develop the greater capability of education systems to safeguard learning and address persistent barriers to learning equality by harnessing the opportunities for systemic change. However, school-based practices and responses that have been effective in supporting the continuity of learning during the COVID-19 pandemic have yet to be well examined, particularly in Asia. While the system and school structures are a crucial component of educational quality, understanding what happens in a school setting can offer meaningful insights into overcoming barriers to educational quality as education systems recover and rebuild from the pandemic.

This report presents the findings of a document review focused on the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR). This report forms part of a broader study that aims to explore the system and school-level practices that have supported learning continuity in Asia during the pandemic. The report will focus on the practices of policymakers that have the potential to support teaching and learning. Rather than comparing the responses of countries in Asia, this study will identify areas of opportunity and innovations in the system and school policies and programs in Lao PDR and make recommendations for those working to support Lao PDR's education system.

## 2 METHODOLOGY

In order to understand the ways in which the education sector of the Lao PDR has responded to COVID-19, evidence has been drawn from research, policy, and examples of practice, wherever possible. The scope covers policies and practices focused on supporting teaching and learning, with emphasis on the conditions that support students in the early years.

### 2.1 Research Questions

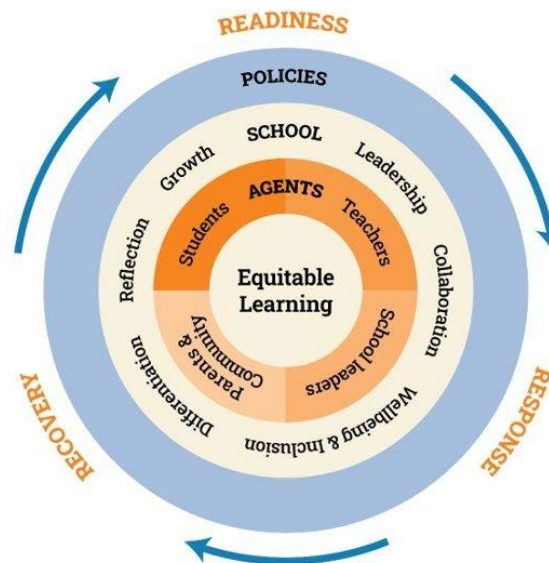
The study was guided by four sets of research questions:

1. How are countries' planned responses aligned with available evidence and frameworks on how to safeguard children's learning progress and social and emotional development, as well as address learning inequalities during the COVID-19 emergency and its aftermath? Do planned responses consider the needs of learners in the early grades?
2. What was the evolution of each country's basic education response to COVID-19, from the initial crisis response to measures they took as the situation stabilized into the "new normal" to their long-term plan for recovery and transformation following the pandemic?
  - a. To what extent was the country prepared to respond? What structures and processes were in place that promoted responsiveness and resilience to the pandemic?
  - b. What was the country's initial planned response in 2020? Was this a temporary measure or part of a plan for longer-term system strengthening moving forward?
  - c. Where is the country currently in its response? Is this an extension of temporary measures or part of a plan for longer-term system strengthening moving forward?

- d. What plans are in place to strengthen the responsiveness and resilience of the system moving forward?
3. At response timepoints (b) and (c), how successful have select countries been in implementing the proposed solutions?
4. What are the gaps, challenges, and risks for reaching the most disadvantaged schools and learners through technology-based remote learning solutions in response to COVID-19? How could opportunities be leveraged to allow these interventions to be successful into the future, including policy-enabling factors and promising classroom-based practices?

The review presented in this report is supported by an analytical framework that considers policy, school, and stakeholder-level indicators that contribute to a resilient education system. The framework is informed by the extensive literature on effective teaching and learning and draws from the emerging evidence base on COVID-19 impacts on education systems worldwide (Figure 1).

**Figure 1. Analytical Framework**



In the context of COVID-19, the three phases—Readiness, Response, and Recovery—provide the operational context that influences how education systems plan for and manage their strategies for improvement and resilience<sup>1</sup>.

**Readiness:** The knowledge and capacity to anticipate areas of need.

**Response:** The process of identifying needs, responding to those needs, and evaluating the impact of the response.

<sup>1</sup> This framework draws on USAID’s Reigniting Learning: Strategies for Accelerating Learning Post-Crisis evidence review and Return to Learning during Crises toolkit and the work of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development on promising policy responses to support greater education system resilience and responsiveness. Each phase is underpinned by the central notion of resilience, in which change is embraced by educators during periods of disruption, and moving forward, rather than returning to what has always been done, is recognized and rewarded. Both share similar elements in defining a path forward that prioritizes the policies and practices to promote: (1) equity and inclusion, (2) flexibility in learning interventions and assessments, and (3) building the capacity of educators. However, this framework also seeks to broaden the ways in which we recognize system readiness and quality, by focusing on the interplay between policy, practice, and equitable learning.

**Recovery:** An emphasis on moving forward to improve the effectiveness of educational practices and equity of learning.

## 2.2 Document Analysis

Drawing upon the above analytical framework, this report considers ways in which policymakers and schools have responded to the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. With a focus on collating insights that have not yet been highlighted in previous research, the report is based on a **Desktop Review** of relevant documents on the COVID-19 education response.

This rapid review was undertaken to collate evidence on the COVID-19 responses and re-opening strategies in Lao PDR. The inclusion criteria for the document review focused on both gray literature from the period 2012–2022. Documents relating to education research, policies, programs, news articles, and blog posts are sourced from the government of Lao PDR websites, development partner portals (including United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], United Nations Children’s Fund [UNICEF], Global Partnership for Education [GPE], and the World Bank), implementing organizations, bilateral donors, and the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) repository. These include national education sector plans, education laws, disaster risk response plans, sub-sector policies, and policies relating to early childhood education, indigenous education, gender, curricula, pedagogical documents, and teaching standards.

Stakeholders in Lao PDR were also consulted for additional support in identifying resources. However, there is the limited publicly available information on policy and practice at this time. For this reason, any relevant literature in the fields of education, health, economics, and policy responses was collected and reviewed. Although academic literature was outside the original scope of the review, academic studies were also included to fill gaps in understanding educational responses during the pandemic. Documents collected as part of the desk review were analyzed against the analytical framework to understand levels of readiness to respond to COVID-19 in Lao PDR. Documents were collected and analyzed in English and Lao languages with the support of in-country research teams.

## 2.3 Limitations

This report forms part of a broader study that aims to investigate the ways in which schools and education systems in Asia adapted to changes and challenges brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. This report is based on an analysis of documents that provides insights into Lao PDR, a context where education preparedness and responses during the pandemic remain under-researched.

To date, there has been little publicly available research examining the ways in which the education sector of Lao PDR has responded to the ongoing challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. Accordingly, this report provides more detail into the ways in which education policies currently support schools, staff, and students across Lao PDR. The report also considers how educational policies and practices have evolved during the pandemic and reflects on the lessons learned that can promote recovery and resilience in Lao PDR.



### **3 READINESS: PREPAREDNESS TO SUPPORT STUDENTS IN LAO PDR**

Over the past two decades, Lao PDR has made significant gains in halving the poverty rate, reducing malnutrition, and improving health and education outcomes (World Bank, 2021). However, after decades of rapid expansion of the education sector, the quality of education remains a concern. As it has in other countries in the Asia region, the pandemic has exacerbated the challenges facing Lao PDR. Understanding where the education system was at the onset of the pandemic provides important context for understanding the country's readiness to respond to the needs of students, parents and communities, teachers, and schools, during the pandemic and into the future.

Lao PDR provides education to approximately 6.5 million students across 9,000 primary schools and 1,000 secondary schools. Schooling is offered only in the Lao language, although only around half the population speaks Lao as a first language (Lao Statistics Bureau, 2018). Before the pandemic, Lao PDR was already facing a learning crisis with low-level attainment, low transition rates, and high drop-out rates. Many of the education challenges in Lao PDR have strong poverty, ethnicity, and gender dimensions, which impede access to quality education for many children. Almost one in four households live in poverty, and the costs of attending school (such as contributions to school fees and uniforms) can make school unaffordable for some families (World Bank, 2015a).

Lao children attend school for an average of 10.8 years but only attain skills equivalent to approximately six years of education (World Bank, 2021). A recent Southeast Asia Primary Learning Metrics (SEA-PLM, 2019) report shows that 50 percent of Lao students in Grade 5 were in the lowest Band (2) and are still at the stage of matching single words to an image of a familiar object or concept. In the early grades, the Multiyear Teacher Development study found that 50 percent of teachers reported students not being ready to start school and would require intensive support in early language and cognitive development skills to succeed in the classroom (Wong et al., 2021). Access to early childhood education remains low, with only 15 percent of students who enter Grade 1 attending an early childhood education (ECE) program (UNICEF, 2015). Lack of school readiness and low quality also contribute to high drop-out rates among students, which has shown a backward trend in recent years, with the Grade 1 dropout rate increasing to 6 percent in the 2018–2019 school year. Primary completion rates have remained stagnant at 86 percent (UIS, 2022). The physical barriers to school access and a lack of demand for education contribute to low attendance rates and poor performance. A World Bank study found that out-of-school children are more likely to live in villages with 'incomplete' schools that do not offer Grade 4 and Grade 5, low parent perception of the quality and relevance of education, and an insufficient supply of teachers (World Bank, 2016).

Within this context, Lao PDR has embarked on a series of education reforms focused on policies expanding access to schools, enhancing teacher quality, and promoting inclusive education. Under the Education and Sports Sector Development Plan 2021–2025 (ESSDP), priorities in the basic education sector include curriculum reform, content knowledge, and pedagogical skills of primary teachers. Specifically, there is a strong emphasis on improved student learning outcomes through greater access to ECE, improved curricula, and assessment. The ESSDP also targets interventions in the 40 most disadvantaged districts in Lao PDR to mitigate the risk of vulnerable students falling further behind and dropping out of the education system. Importantly, the ESSDP recognizes the need to develop and expand support mechanisms for students and teachers in rural and remote areas who were not able to access online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. This includes the promotion of digital learning and a strengthened disaster contingency plan for better monitoring and planning of emergency responses.

At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in Lao PDR, 14,000 schools were closed to most students from March until May 2020, affecting over 1.7 million learners. Schools gradually reopened in May and fully opened in June 2020, with the school term extended into the summer break to make up for lost instruction time (MOES, 2021). School closures across all Lao provinces occurred again in April 2021 due to increasing case numbers. During these periods, an estimated 1,900 schools were also used as COVID-19 testing centers and quarantine centers for returning migrant workers (MOES, 2021). School closures disrupted original reading periods, final examinations, and graduation (**Table 1**).

**Table 1. School Calendar During COVID-19 Pandemic**

	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug
Normal Year	1 <sup>st</sup> term				Exam	2 <sup>nd</sup> term				Exam	Break	Break
2019-2020					Exam		School closure	School closure	Partial open	Fully open		
2020-2021								School closure	School closure	School closure	School closure	Partial open
2021-2022	1 <sup>st</sup> term				Pilot Open	Fully open	Recess	2 <sup>nd</sup> term				

Consistent with findings across other centralized education systems in Asia, such as Nepal and China, Lao PDR was prepared to coordinate and mobilize resources more readily to respond to crises (Joyne, Gibbs, & Sims, 2020). This is due to high-level leadership at the central level to coordinate government policy responses, such as the rapid communication of government directives and channeling of resources to the education sector from the central to the district education offices. At the onset of the pandemic, education guidelines included policies to support remote learning and the establishment of a centralized online learning platform (Kang Panya Lao) with resources to help teachers plan and deliver lessons to suit their local context. Other features of government readiness to support educational responses included having national plans and strategies in place (such as the ESSDP and the national disaster risk management plan), existing monitoring systems to track student learning pre- and post-pandemic (such as national and regional assessments), and a focus on support for vulnerable populations (through the government’s commitment to prioritize the 40 most disadvantaged districts).

These efforts helped to maintain the continuity of learning across Lao PDR in the early and ongoing phases of the pandemic through face-to-face, blended, and remote delivery of lessons (MOES, 2021). However, a rapid monitoring phone survey of households by the World Bank found that over the past 12 months, 42 percent of children (based on data gathered from 1,610 household interviews) stopped attending classes temporarily or permanently, with the proportions higher among rural households, mainly due to unavailability of online classes during school closures (World Bank, 2022).

For rural students, 72 percent of rural households reported the unavailability of online classes as the primary reason for not attending classes. Concerns about learning loss were cited by most respondents, with the bottom 40 percent (based on consumption distribution) more likely to be concerned about learning loss. Urban households were more able to invest in remedial strategies to safeguard against learning loss, including tutoring (29 percent), improved Internet connection (21 percent), and purchasing devices (17 percent). The bottom 40 percent were less likely to have out-of-pocket expenses for remedial education compared to the top 60 percent, despite reporting deeper concerns about learning loss.

## **4 RESPONSE: SYSTEM AND SCHOOL RESPONSES IN LAO PDR**

This chapter presents the findings of a document review focused on readiness and response in Laos. The data are presented with consideration given to the six key themes outlined in the analytical framework (for more details, see **Annex A**):

### **Leadership**

Leadership focuses on improving student learning, supporting ongoing teacher professional learning and collaboration, engaging all members of the school community, and promoting the well-being and growth of the school community. Leadership can occur at various levels, including at policy, school, or classroom level.

### **Collaboration**

Quality collaboration can occur between systems and schools, schools and families, and school staff. Collaboration supports learning and well-being, engagement, motivation, and student outcomes.

### **Well-Being and Inclusion**

Well-being is a valued outcome of schools, structures, processes, and programs that support the inclusion of all members of the school community (students, teachers, school leaders, and families). A sense of well-being can support staff and student engagement and participation.

### **Differentiation**

Differentiation relates to multiple pathways for learning, flexible options for engaging in learning, responsiveness to individual needs, using evidence to inform decision-making and planning, teacher autonomy to adjust and respond to the needs of their students and the context for teaching and learning, and support for teachers to enable a differentiated approach (training, resources, mentoring).

### **Reflection**

A culture of reflection looks for pathways to improvement and growth, uses evidence to evaluate impact, and chances to identify areas for improvement, involving all members of the school community in the process of reflection. Feedback is also an integral part of the reflective process.

### **Growth**

Growth is an emphasis on making progress, change, and improvement, and other structures and processes that support teachers, students, and families to contribute to improvement within their school community.

#### **4.1 Leadership**

The Lao government, with support from development partners, made a concerted effort to respond early to the COVID-19 pandemic. A coordinated approach across several line ministries helped ensure that government priorities and policy responses were implemented more efficiently to reach all levels of government and the community. This included strategies for increased funding provision, technology, public health messaging, and data collection (UNICEF & UNESCO, 2021). Despite challenges facing the country, efforts by the Lao government to contain the spread of COVID-19 appear to have been largely successful due to the early implementation of a coordinated response strategy led by the National Taskforce

Committee for COVID-19 Prevention and Control. The Ministry of Education and Sports (MOES) (MOES, 2020) created its own response framework for the education sector, which prioritizes: (1) the prevention and spread of COVID-19, (2) continuity of learning, and (3) safe re-opening of schools.

### ***Support for Remote Learning***

The Lao PDR COVID-19 Response Plan identified continuity of learning as a priority during periods of school closures. As a response, the government introduced different learning modalities to support the needs of different learners, including children with special needs, ethnic children, and those in rural and remote areas. Key remote learning interventions included a mix of high-tech, low-tech, and no-tech solutions, such as the development of an online learning platform, educational content for broadcasting through a dedicated TV channel, and the printing of educational resources. However, there is limited evidence of students accessing remote learning through these different modalities during school disruptions.

In remote areas where access to online and TV learning is limited, there were provisions for small groups of children to meet with their teachers on a regular basis, following strict social distancing protocols. Due to Lao PDR's mountainous geography and lack of rural infrastructure, rural communities lag in access to technology; just 0.3 percent of rural households have fixed broadband, 2 percent have computers, 49 percent have television, and 15 percent have radios, according to a report by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) (CSIS, 2022). Given the technology gap in rural communities, it is expected that children in rural and remote areas will have limited access to remote learning during the pandemic. According to the 2017 Lao Social Indicator Survey, across Lao PDR, 79 percent of households have access to TV, while 92 percent have access to a mobile phone (Lao Statistics Bureau, 2018). Despite a high mobile usage rate, there was limited evidence of the use of mobile technology to support remote learning during the pandemic. This suggests an opportunity to leverage mobile technology more fully as part of the Lao government's plan for the digital transformation of the education system in line with the National Digital Economy Plan (UNICEF, 2022a).

Local education authorities such as provincial and district education officers and pedagogical advisors also led school-level remote learning practices through support for teachers and regular communication with parents. Recognizing that vulnerable children are at higher risk during crises, the MOES collaborated with other government ministries and agencies, such as the Lao Women's Union and Lao Youth Union, to set up psychosocial support hotlines for students and teachers.

### ***Prioritizing School Reopening***

Under the Lao PDR Education COVID-19 Response Plan, MOES also introduced several key interventions. The first initiative identified was to adhere to the 'Framework for School Reopening strictly,' a strategy that included six key dimensions stakeholders could use to access and prepare for the situation prior to reopening. The second approach was to adopt the Safe Schools Guidance for 'COVID-19 Prevention and Control in Schools' policy, which denotes common practices of safety to prevent infection as well as avoid the spread of the virus.

In May 2020, the Lao government announced that some schools could open at a limited capacity. Priority was given to students in Grade 5 (primary school), Grade 9 (lower secondary school), and Grade 12 (upper secondary school), while all other students continued to learn remotely (MOES, 2021). Community-based ECE centers that operated under the support of development partners were handed over to the MOES, and identified grades of the most vulnerable groups of students were prioritized. To facilitate this transition, MOES worked

collaboratively with local and international partners to plan a safe and effective transition back to school.

In 2021, due to the rising number of COVID-19 infections, full school reopening dates were postponed to October 4. However, return to school was actively encouraged by the government through the promotion of multiple modalities and campaigns targeting parents and the community to encourage children to return to school. The government saw the return of students to school as critical to long-term human capital development and economic growth in Lao PDR to support the country's graduation from Least Developed Country Status by 2025 (MOES, 2020). This is highlighted in one of the pillars of the 9th National Socioeconomic Development Plan (NSED) (Ministry of Planning and Investment, 2016).

## **4.2 Collaboration**

### ***Cross-Sector Coordination***

Evidence of collaboration during the response phase was observed at multiple levels. Cross-sector coordination was an effective mechanism used by the Lao government to channel support to the education sector. For example, many line ministries (such as the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare) diverted funding to the education sector, including the provision of top-up school grants to all public schools for the procurement of hygiene supplies as part of the COVID-19 prevention measures, along with communication packages relating to Safe Operations School Guidance (MOES, 2021). Video conferencing equipment and information and communications technology (ICT) packages were also made available to the MOES central and provincial offices to support coordination between education stakeholders.

In collaboration with the Ministry of Information, Culture, and Tourism, a first-ever channel dedicated to providing learning content was also successfully launched for students called LAO ESTV (Education and Sports TV) on Channel 8 from 6 am to 10 pm daily (Monday to Sunday) in response to the pandemic. Existing content from educational TV programs such as "My Village TV" and "Learn Together Laos" was initially used, and further content was gradually developed and broadcast. To ensure broader access to remote learning, additional tablets and satellite TVs were provided to select schools in the 40 priority districts. The government also shared lifesaving COVID-19 prevention messages through the LAO ESTV platform, community radio, and WhatsApp messaging (UNICEF, 2021a, b).

### ***Collaboration with Development Partners***

Collaboration with development partners allowed the Lao government to continue and scale up the delivery of remote education services during the pandemic, particularly to the most disadvantaged students. For example, through a \$2.6 million grant from USAID, the Lao government was able to bridge the gap in education, including the learning-teaching curriculum for both face-to-face classrooms and remote settings. This support will also extend to contribute to enhancing the inclusiveness of vulnerable groups such as children with disabilities and minorities who do not speak the Lao language to allow them to have access to quality education (USAID, 2022). In particular, the partnership will address the disparity in access to ECE by providing expanded ECE support and transition to and completion of primary school for children in remote areas. Teachers, school leaders, and parents will be supported with knowledge and skills to support the learning needs of all children (UNICEF, 2022b).

Other bilateral partners, such as the Australian Government, through the Basic Education Quality and Access in Lao PDR (BEQUAL) Program, scaled up its support for teacher training in digital and online learning. Led by the Department of Teacher Education, a blended learning pilot was conducted across three provinces with master and provincial teacher trainers, with plans to cascade the training to all provinces in the future (BEQUAL, 2020). The purpose of

the training was to introduce a flexible mode to support teacher professional learning during and post COVID-19. The workshops provided trainers with the opportunity to practice ICT skills and deliver workshops using a blended approach.

The Lao government also received a GPE grant of \$70,000 to support the implementation of its Education COVID-19 Response Plan (GPE, 2020). The funding was used to develop and distribute learning materials, including textbooks, TVs, and satellite sets to support the continuity of learning for children in remote areas. Support also includes the development of online and broadcast learning resources, such as the “My House” series targeted at early learners. The series aims to promote the physical, cognitive, social, and emotional development of young Lao children.

### ***Khang Panya Lao Online Learning Platform***

In collaboration with UNICEF, the Lao PDR government developed a teaching and learning platform (Khang Panya Lao) to support online learning as well as an application for offline access (**Figure 2**). The application acts as a medium for learning but has also become a tool in which teachers can advance their academic skills. It has raised the opportunity for teachers from only utilizing the traditional platforms of teaching such as pen, paper, and blackboard to an advanced digital interface of smart mobile phones, tablets, and online websites. In addition to national curriculums and textbooks being converted from physical books into the PDF files in Khang Panya Lao for convenience, the teachers are also able to access more teaching resources such as interactive games, story books, instruction videos. Apart from supporting students to study at home, Khang Panya Lao is also being implemented in the classroom. It functions as a supplementary asset for teachers to optimize their teaching methods further and to engage with students. The platform has a function that tracks the records of students and what they have been previously learning, so that teachers are able to monitor and evaluate the progress of their students and support their learning journey. The number of registered users of the Khang Panya Lao online learning platform has grown from 700 in mid-April 2021 to over 20,000 by the end of June 2021.

**Figure 2. Khang Panya Lao e-Flyer**



## ***Collaboration with the Community***

Active engagement with local education departments, teachers, and parents was also important in the initial response period to build support and trust within the school community. Clear lines of communication were established to broadcast the directives from the MOES to support the continuity of learning. This included public health information to parents and school communities to prevent the transmission and spread of COVID-19, tips for parents to support learning at home, and messages to promote the return to school. To ensure public health information and other communication reached a wider audience, including at the village level, nearly 5,000 USB sticks were distributed containing public speaking announcements for use on community loudspeaker systems (UNICEF & UNESCO, 2021), one of the most widespread means of communication in villages across the country. Teachers were given a directive through the district education offices to continue delivering lessons through TV, radio, or online platforms and take-home packs. Communication between education stakeholders, including district officials, school leaders, teachers, and village education development committees, was facilitated using WhatsApp, Skype, and Facebook to ensure effective coordination of the Education Response Plan.

Prior to the pandemic, many households across Lao PDR had limited resources at home (such as textbooks and storybooks) to support learning. At the onset of the pandemic, when schools were closed abruptly, the lack of existing learning materials at home impeded the continuity of learning for many students, particularly those in the most disadvantaged districts. According to a survey of parents in the Learn to Read program, lack of learning materials, digital devices, and cost of Internet/mobile data had the greatest impact on student learning during school disruptions (USAID, 2021). In response, the MOES printed learning materials and take-home packs to support students who could not access online learning or broadcast media (MOES, 2021). Textbooks and learning materials for preschool, primary, and secondary students were printed and distributed to more than 750,000 households during the pandemic (UNICEF & UNESCO, 2021). In some schools, teachers were able to complete the curriculum on time by distributing home learning packs to students and monitoring student learning through regular assessments of their work (USAID, 2021).

For the most hard-to-reach schools with no electricity, face-to-face learning was allowed with small groups of children, including those with disabilities (MOES, 2021). Where parents were not able to support learning due to work commitments or lack of literacy skills, there were examples of older siblings who could read Lao assisting pre-primary and Grade 1 students with reading and learning during school disruptions (USAID, 2021).

## **4.3 Well-Being and Inclusion**

Protecting the health and well-being of students appeared to be a priority for Lao PDR. Five approaches were established to promote continuity of learning while ensuring the safety of staff and students. These included (1) learning face-to-face in class; (2) home or distance learning; (3) studying through television, websites, or the radio; (4) studying online via Internet connection and application; and (5) mixed methods delivery. School areas marked as *green* (referring to locations without positive COVID-19 cases) were allowed to conduct the teaching and study using both face-to-face and blended modes of delivery. Schools located in red zones (areas of infected cases) continued to study and deliver lessons remotely.

The Education COVID-19 Response Plan recognizes and prioritizes the needs of all learners by ensuring that education responses are more inclusive, particularly to address the needs of children with disabilities. This is in line with the NSEDP, which aims to support a more inclusive education system by promoting the right to education for children with disabilities, improving teacher training to understand inclusive education practices, and ensuring children with disabilities have the foundational competencies and skills from early childhood education to secondary school (Ministry of Planning and Investment, 2016). While there is limited information on the status of children with disability in Lao PDR, the 2017 Lao Social Indicator

Survey indicates that 2 percent of children aged 2 to 4 years have a functional disability (UNICEF & Government of Lao PDR, 2020). In 2007–2008, it was reported that only 4 percent of school-aged children with disabilities attended an educational program or school (UNICEF, n.d.).

During the pandemic, the MOES provided tablets with accessibility options for children with disabilities to access online learning through Kang Panya Lao. Videos available on the platform included subtitles as well as sign language interpretation. For children who cannot access online learning, 100 children’s books have been translated into the Lao language and adapted to accessible electronic formats for learners with disabilities (MOES, 2020). In addition, an online teacher training course was developed to build the capacity of teachers to support children with disabilities in emergency contexts. All new teacher training videos developed for primary teachers are more accessible through the inclusion of sign language (UNESCO, 2022a).

### ***Mental Health Support***

Building on previous work recognizing the importance of children’s well-being in Lao PDR (UNICEF, 2019; UNICEF & Ministry of Planning and Investment, 2018), UNICEF disseminated television and radio programs on child protection, mental health psychosocial support services, online protection, and prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse (UNICEF, 2021a). The Lao Women’s Union and Lao Youth Union also developed hotlines aimed at young people to provide professional counseling to support mental health issues among children and adolescents and case management support for girls who experience violence in any setting (MOES, 2021). UNICEF also re-ran the “My Village” program on Ministry-supported television, a program that supports the physical, cognitive, social, and emotional development of all children, including children with disabilities (UNICEF, 2021a, b).

### ***Health and Hygiene***

UNICEF also broadcasted the early childhood development television series “My House,” which focused on raising awareness of hygiene practices among young children and their families. Storybooks based on the series were also distributed to families. Additional UNICEF programs on education, child protection, health, water, sanitation, and hygiene were also developed in sign language and with Lao subtitles to raise awareness among children with different abilities (UNICEF, 2021a). UNICEF distributed Safe School Operation Guidelines along with posters to all ECE centers. All ECE centers and pre-primary and primary schools across the country received additional top-up grants for the purchase of soap, cleaning materials, and other hygiene kits as part of the COVID-19 prevention efforts. Schools also organized for their local communities to assist in providing water to schools that were required to enable handwashing and hygiene practices (UNICEF, 2021a).

## **4.4 Differentiation**

While new modalities for learning have been introduced or scaled up during the pandemic, there needs to be more evidence of how these modalities have supported the different needs of children in Lao PDR. Students who were able to continue learning from home did so through radio, television, or online resources. However, due to the lack of broadcast and digital infrastructure in many rural and remote areas across Lao PDR, many students did not access learning during school closures. According to the World Bank household survey, almost half of all students surveyed did not participate in remote learning during school closures (World Bank, 2022). While local education authorities and schools provided standardized take-home packs for these students, there needs to be more data on how effective the materials were in meeting the needs of all students or whether they were used at all.



## 4.5 Growth

Monitoring student outcomes is important to understand the impact of the pandemic on learning. For example, data on potential student learning gaps during and after post-pandemic can help inform government policies and teaching practices relating to remediation and catch-up programs. Interviews conducted for this study with officials from the local Department of Education across 18 provinces in Lao PDR found that assessment policies were varied and appeared to be set at the discretion of each provincial education office. Of the 18 provinces, only two reported that they assessed students when they returned to school at the beginning of the new academic year. This could reflect concerns that children would fail or not achieve the minimum standards to advance to the next grade and is also consistent with reports from the Learn to Read evaluation (USAID, 2021). In the two provinces where exams were conducted, students who scored below five were required to revisit the exam before the end of the semester.

There needs to be more information about student learning outcomes during remote learning. However, most teachers interviewed from the Multiyear Teacher Development Study reported that students did not retain previously taught content, and upon returning to school, teachers had to repeat lessons to catch up with pre-pandemic learning (Huang, 2022). Further, only one in five teachers interviewed reported assessing their students when school resumed. Teachers from the Learn to Read program reported using formative assessment based on learning achievement to date to provide final grades (USAID, 2021). This suggests that many teachers may need more support on how to transition students back to school and provide remedial support where it was needed.

## 4.6 Reflection

As in many contexts in the Asia region, there is still limited evidence in Lao PDR on the practices at the classroom level to support student learning during the pandemic. There is an opportunity to learn from the experiences of teachers, parents, and students who lived through the pandemic to inform system recovery and reform. There is also increased attention on the role that teachers and academic leaders play in mitigating impacts on learning caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Noting the challenges and weaknesses in the Lao education system to respond adequately to the COVID-19 pandemic, the government has made a commitment to transform the education system to be more resilient to future disruptions. This includes sustainable financing of the education sector to expand the teaching workforce, improve the quality of teachers, ensure all schools meet fundamental quality standards, and increase access to digital and flexible learning approaches (MOFA, 2022). The National Digital Economy Development Plan provides a road map for the digitalization of education in Lao PDR, which will expand access to ICT infrastructure to support multiple learning modalities, especially in rural areas.

The government is committed to strengthening the effectiveness of teachers over the medium to long term with support for teacher development in areas such as inclusive education, content knowledge, digital literacy and pedagogy, formative assessment, and multi-grade teaching (MOFA, 2022). As part of the review of the Teacher Education Curriculum, the first Information and Communications Technologies Competency Standards for Teachers (ICT-CST) were launched in April 2022, with 11 standards and 47 performance indicators under six domains (UNESCO, 2022b). The Lao government is also working with development partners to support teachers to continue to deliver blended approaches to learning after the pandemic. In July 2022, Lao PDR received \$621,000 as part of a partnership with UNICEF and the Government of Japan, with intentions to support the education sector—especially the academic learning of both teachers and students. The grant includes the provision of physical and digital learning materials, laptops, and tablets to access digital platforms and participation in training courses in collaboration with the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) to improve the digital literacy of teachers. Teachers and academic staff have begun to participate

in training courses so they can continue to reflect on ways to teach students effectively into the future (UNICEF, 2022).

## 5 CHALLENGES TO EDUCATION RESPONSES

This review identified three significant challenges that were prevalent across reports from school and policy leaders in Lao PDR in adapting education systems to respond to COVID-19: (1) access to resourcing, (2) participation in schooling, and (3) teacher quality.

### 5.1 Access to Resourcing

In the last five years, Lao PDR has experienced a surge in natural disasters that have destroyed school facilities, educational equipment, and teaching and learning materials, particularly textbooks and teacher guidebooks. This further exacerbated the lack of provision of materials, particularly in rural areas (MOES, 2021). A limited government budget for education and education infrastructure has left an estimated 25 percent of schools with no clean water, making it a challenge to practice proper hygiene as part of pandemic control mechanisms. About half of schools do not have electricity. The use of modern technology in education as such is limited, and digital literacy remains low, including among teachers (GPE, 2020).

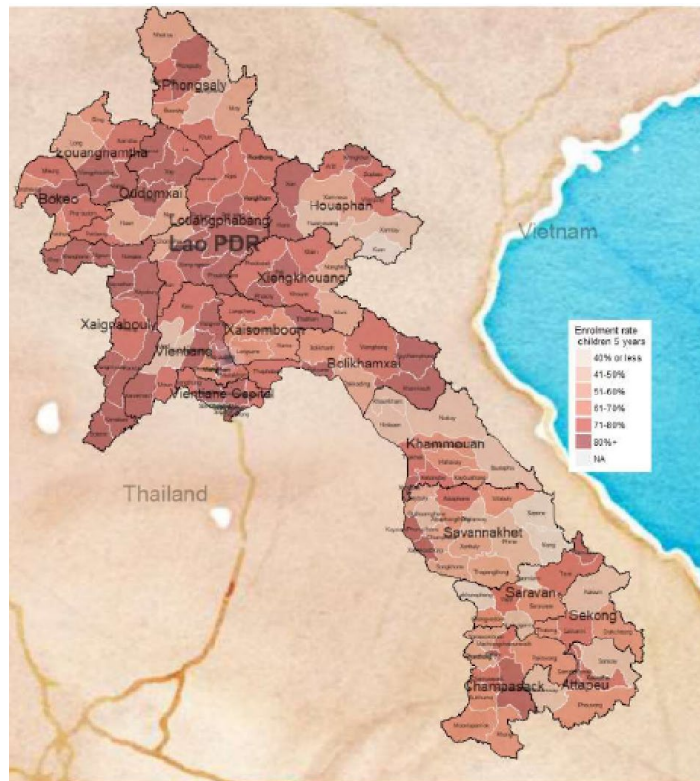
The COVID-19 pandemic has left Lao PDR in a vulnerable financial position. According to the World Bank (2021), predictions of very low or even negative economic growth are also expected to affect family incomes, which in turn will impact decisions affecting children's participation in school. According to estimates by the World Bank, the economic impact of COVID-19 has also pushed vulnerable households further into poverty due to disruptions to the labor market, loss of income, and increasing food insecurity (World Bank, 2021). Poverty was found to be a key contributing factor to low school completion rates and education inequality in Lao PDR.

### 5.2 School Preparedness and Participation in the Early Grades

Access to ECE has increased significantly in Lao PDR over the past decade. Lao PDR has seen a rise in the Early Child Development Index (ECDI) among young children across all groups over the past five years. While most 3–4-year-old children are developmentally 'on track' based on ECDI results, many fail to meet the expected level of competency for literacy and numeracy development. A World Bank study on ECE also found that poor nutrition, lack of access to health care services, and insufficient stimulation at home contribute to poor developmental outcomes and lack of readiness to enter school, especially for children from ethnic and poor households (World Bank, 2016). The pandemic placed additional barriers in front of early learners, including the ability to pivot to remote learning and potential implications for the ability of the teacher to connect students and curriculum in the early years and meet students at their point of need (UNICEF, 2017).

By the age of 6, 80 percent of children were enrolled in primary school (this is the statutory age for attending primary school), and 40 percent of 5-year-olds were enrolled in primary rather than ECE (UNICEF, 2017). This may be because school is generally free of charge, ECE may only be available in some areas, and some parents may prefer to start school earlier. The socioeconomic background is also a factor (World Bank, 2015). In general, access, enrollment, and school readiness are better in the northern provinces and worse in the south, and better in urban areas compared to rural areas (**Figure 3**).

**Figure 3. ECE Enrollment Rate at 5 Years of Age\***



\*Source: Dewees, A., & Loizillon, A., 2016.

Ninety-two percent of children who are primary-school age attend either ECE or school. This figure drops as they move through the school system, where only 60 percent are expected to attend lower secondary, 23 percent continue to attend primary school despite their age, and 17 percent are out of school (UNICEF, 2017). The Labour Force and Child Labour Survey (2010) also placed the rate of child labor at approximately 10 percent (International Labour Organization, 2010). While gender parity at the primary level has continued to improve, other disparities persist, with students from poor, rural, and ethnic households facing significant disadvantages (Lao Statistics Bureau, 2018). Support for students with diverse learning needs remains low.

School attendance was expected to drop because of COVID-19 due to the lack of capacity of poorer families to send their children to school. Reporting from the Learn to Read program suggests that during periods of school closure, some parents took their children to the fields, and as a result, some never returned to school due to being used to going to the fields and parents' fear of their children contracting COVID-19 when schools reopened (USAID, 2021). There is also increasing concern that these children may never return to school, which puts vulnerable children further at risk of low educational attainment, poor health, child labor, and early child marriage (UNICEF, 2019). The World Bank, in coordination with the Lao Bureau of Statistics, reports pressures on an already-weak job market, and the Poverty Assessment report estimates that poverty will increase by 1.4 percent to 3.1 percent in 2020, compared to the 0.6 percent decline that would have been expected without COVID-19 (World Bank, 2021).

### 5.3 Teacher Quality

The National Teaching Standards developed in 2017 have yet to be implemented, compounded by challenges relating to inefficient and inequitable distribution of the teaching workforce. Teaching quality in Lao PDR varies; many teachers are poorly remunerated, absenteeism rates are high, and many teachers need to engage in farming in addition to their teaching roles to feed themselves and their families. In 2017, MOES reported on a national teacher survey into the availability, deployment, and salary status of teachers. They indicated that 12,000 more teachers were required to fulfill national needs, with shortfalls being greatest in rural and remote areas. Furthermore, staff at the Education Management Information System Section of the Department of Planning indicated that out of 66,119 active teachers, over 12,000 were ‘voluntary,’ meaning they are government trained and working in government schools but not being paid state salaries (UNESCO & UNICEF, 2021). Poor learning outcomes are reflected in the low quality of teaching, which is represented by a combination of low content knowledge and pedagogical skills of teachers (UNICEF, 2017). These challenges were further exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic when teachers lacked the support and capacity to transition quickly to remote teaching. However, there is limited evidence of the impact of COVID-19 on teaching and learning practices at the classroom level and what teachers and school leaders did to adapt the curriculum or instruction during remote learning to support students.

## 6 RECOVERY: OPPORTUNITIES FOR EDUCATIONAL IMPROVEMENT IN LAO PDR

As this review has demonstrated, the education system of Lao PDR faced many challenges prior to the pandemic, including low levels of access to resources, low education levels among children, and teacher quality frameworks that remain in the early stages of implementation. These existing challenges position the children of Lao PDR as particularly vulnerable to learning shocks and losses. However, because of support from external agencies during the pandemic and renewed political commitment from the Lao government to transform the education sector, there are new opportunities to understand the innovative policies, programs, and educational practices that have recently been implemented. In particular, the high level of coordination across the Lao government and development partners has provided an opportunity for greater efficiency in responding to the pandemic, for example, through targeted funding for vulnerable populations, a focus on teacher quality, and the development of an online platform to support blended learning approaches.

There is also evidence of new policies that support ongoing adaptation to the curriculum and instruction time to cater to remediation and catch-up learning. Recognizing the need to mitigate potential learning gaps and promote effective learning when schools resumed, the Lao government has introduced the 80% Curriculum to guide teaching and learning across three focus areas: (1) to ensure modalities include offline, online, and self-practice; (2) to shorten instruction time; (3) to focus the curriculum on core subjects. According to interviews with provincial education authorities for this review, all 18 provinces have adopted the 80% Curriculum. It will be important for the Lao government to continue tracking student progress in the recovery period to determine if policies supporting curriculum adaptation have been effective in improving student learning and retention.

Understanding the practices of schools and families impacted by accessibility challenges also requires further research. Despite a coordinated effort to support the continuity of learning throughout school lockdown periods, there are concerns that many children remain unreachable and disengaged from learning due to a lack of access to digital learning, low level of digital literacy, including among teachers, and lack of support from parents and caregivers. A recent study conducted by ACER on the effectiveness of teachers in Lao PDR found that limited support was provided for teachers and students during school closures and that remote

learning was not feasible due to rural locations, limited access to the Internet, and low levels of parental literacy (Hollingsworth et al., 2022). However, there is little research on ways in which individual schools or teachers in Lao PDR have supported families of different need levels or how teachers have adapted teaching and learning practices to accommodate different levels of access, particularly during periods of disruption.

## 7 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The aim of this review was to explore the system and school-level practices that have supported learning continuity in Asia during the pandemic and explore the extent to which support mechanisms have been implemented during the pandemic.

Overall, the policies and programs reviewed provide emergent insight into the readiness of the Lao PDR education system. While some policies and practices have been developed to support learning in Lao PDR before and during the pandemic, resources remain scarce and inequitable across contexts, necessitating ongoing collaboration with external agencies to support response and recovery efforts. Because of a lack of research, it also remains to be seen which school-level practices have supported the continuity of learning and engagement, particularly in contexts with lower levels of access and differing needs, during the pandemic. Reflecting on the analytical framework presented in the main report, there are indicators of collaborative practices among government levels, leadership, and collaborative efforts to support students during periods of disruption. There is little information available on ways in which systems and schools have differentiated the delivery of curricular assessments; however, this does not necessarily mean these practices are not occurring.

There needs to be more evidence of policies focused on improving inclusion and mitigating the impacts of marginalization, though encouragingly, evidence of support for physical and mental health is increasing. Finally, a focus on growth at the system level still needs to be improved in publicly available documents in Lao PDR, and there needs to be more information as to how teachers have assessed students during the pandemic. The findings of this study, therefore, support several key recommendations that may support policymakers and government representatives in Lao PDR, which are outlined in **Table 2**:

**Table 2: Recommendations for Policymakers and Government Representatives**

Recommendations
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Invest in research focused on school-level needs and responses in Lao PDR</li> <li>• Integrate and improve digital infrastructure and capacity for blended learning delivery, including differentiated approaches to learning, especially for disadvantaged areas</li> <li>• Gain insights from teachers on what worked best and for which types of learners</li> <li>• Promote knowledge sharing among teachers and educators through peer learning networks</li> <li>• Strengthen parent and school partnerships to improve student learning, particularly in the early years, to support school readiness</li> <li>• Consider the role of mental health and well-being in broader learning agendas</li> </ul>

This study provides insights for system leaders to reflect on current levels of readiness to support learners in Lao PDR. More research is needed to understand what has worked and why before and during the pandemic. Insights from school leaders and teachers have not been widely shared in the literature on education responses in Lao PDR, particularly in marginalized or disadvantaged settings. There is also a paucity of information on the extent to which community support has been leveraged during the pandemic. These insights could support an understanding of ways in which Lao PDR can continue to work toward longer-term resilience, regardless of access to resources.

It is our hope that future research can focus on school-level insights into recovery and resilience in Lao PDR, building on the preliminary findings presented in this review. Reflecting on the insights presented in this report, consideration might therefore be given as to how those policymakers, representatives, and donors working in Lao PDR can best engage with the education sector through a combination of research, monitoring, and ongoing support.

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## ANNEX A: ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

This analytical framework underpins the design and implementation of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) mapping study across six countries in the Asia region. It will be used to guide data collection, analysis, and reporting to meet the objectives of the study: (1) to fill the gap in comparative analyses on countries in developing Asia, and (2) to focus on policies and actions countries have taken to mediate and remediate learning loss and learning inequalities during COVID-19.

The framework is informed by the extensive literature on effective teaching and learning and draws from the emerging evidence base on COVID-19 impacts on education systems worldwide. The figure below depicts the different interacting levels of the education system (policy, school, agents) that impact on equitable student learning. In the context of COVID-19, the three phases—Readiness, Response, and Recovery—provide the operational context that influences how education systems plan for and manage their strategies for improvement and resilience.

This framework draws on USAID’s Reigniting Learning: Strategies for Accelerating Learning Post-Crisis<sup>2</sup> evidence review and Return to Learning during Crises<sup>3</sup> toolkit and evidence review on strategies to accelerate learning and the work of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)<sup>4</sup> on promising policy responses to support greater education system resilience and responsiveness. Both share similar elements in defining a path forward that prioritizes the policies and practices to promote: (1) equity and inclusion, (2) flexibility in learning interventions and assessments, and (3) building the capacity of educators. However, this framework also seeks to broaden the ways in which we recognize system readiness and quality by focusing on the interplay between policy, practice, and equitable learning.

By exploring possibilities and opportunities rather than deficits, this framework will guide the investigation into how the different levels of the education system operate and interact at each phase of the COVID-19 planning and management cycle. Within each country’s context, evidence will be collected on which systematic levers and school-level practices education systems can mobilize in safeguarding equitable learning among educational agents during and after the pandemic. Examples of innovative, flexible, and responsive systems and school practices relevant to the context will be explored and presented against the framework, creating meaningful pathways for comparative education systems to learn and adapt into the future. Lessons will be drawn from each country’s response to COVID-19 to highlight the most promising approaches to address persistent quality and equity challenges in the education system.

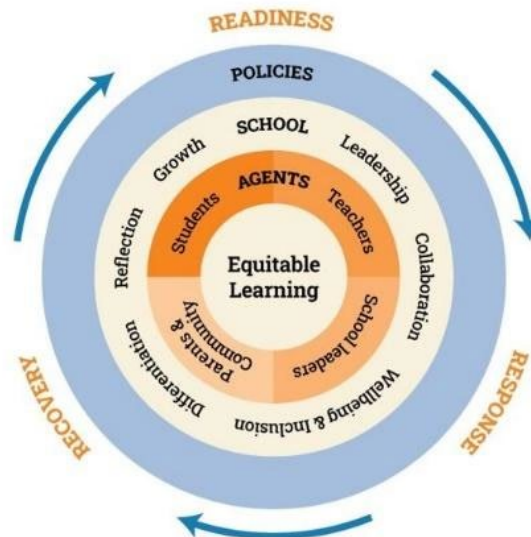
### Analytical Framework

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<sup>2</sup> Sarr, K.G., Tolani, N., Rodriguez Morales, I., Aghabozorg, R. & Mulcahy-Dunn, A. (2020). Reigniting learning: strategies accelerating learning post crisis. A review of evidence. United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Available online. [https://www.eccnetwork.net/sites/default/files/media/file/Technical\\_Report\\_Accelerating\\_Learning\\_Post-Crisis\\_Full\\_Report.pdf](https://www.eccnetwork.net/sites/default/files/media/file/Technical_Report_Accelerating_Learning_Post-Crisis_Full_Report.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Boisvert, K., Weisenhorn, N., & Bowen, J. (2021). *Returning to learning during crises: Decision-making and planning tools for education leaders*. United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Available online. <https://www.edu-links.org/sites/default/files/media/file/Returning%20to%20Learning%20During%20Crises.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). (2020). *Lesson for education from COVID-19: A policymaker’s handbook for more resilient systems*. Available online. <https://www.oecd.org/education/lessons-for-education-from-covid-19-0a530888-en.htm>.



## Equitable Learning

Drawing upon the USAID and OECD frameworks, we place equitable learning at the center of the framework, surrounded by those practices that can improve equitable learning opportunities among students, but also parents/caregivers, teachers, and school leaders. Equity is also highlighted as an area of interest in examining indicators of readiness, response, and recovery potential in the context of the pandemic. While research into the impacts of the pandemic on student learning has not yet demonstrated broad evidence of learning loss, there is convincing evidence of learning inequity in many contexts<sup>5</sup>, including low- to middle-income countries<sup>6</sup>.

## The COVID-19 Context

The COVID-19 crisis has caused unprecedented levels of disruption to education systems worldwide. Across the Asia region, it is estimated that around 760 million children were impacted by school closures at the height of the pandemic. Government response strategies have varied across the region, with some countries imposing prolonged school lockdowns while others have had short, repeated closure periods. As countries begin to reopen schools and continue to prepare for subsequent waves of COVID-19 infection, there is a need to develop the greater capability of education systems to: (1) safeguard learning in the early response phase, and (2) address persistent barriers to learning equality by harnessing the opportunities for systemic change.

The Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE) Minimum Standards for Education<sup>7</sup> provides a useful framework for understanding how systems can better respond to emergencies and how they can improve preparedness to build a more resilient education system. The Preparedness phase involves having plans and processes that document what should happen during and after an emergency, such as national disaster response plans. The Response phase refers to policies, plans, and actions to manage priority areas, such as the closing of schools. The Recovery phase focuses on returning students to pre-emergency

<sup>5</sup> Dorn, E., Hancock, B., Sarakatsannis, J., & Viruleg, H. (2020). *COVID-19 and Student Learning in the United States: The Hurt Could Last a Lifetime*. McKinsey and Co.

<sup>6</sup> Reimers, F.M. (Ed) (2022). Primary and secondary education during COVID-19: Disruptions to educational opportunities during a pandemic. Springer. Available online. <https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007%2F978-3-030-81500-4.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE). (2012). *Minimum standards for education: Preparedness, response, recovery*. Available online. <https://inee.org/resources/inee-minimum-standards>

learning. The three phases are represented in a cycle to reflect an iterative process, where data-driven monitoring and evaluation processes facilitate systems readiness and improvement. In our framework, we have adapted the INEE standards to consider **Readiness, Response, and Recovery** not only in the context of emergencies but in relation to system resilience during and beyond the pandemic.

## Policies

This framework assumes that resilient education systems rely on the interaction between policies and institutions with classroom-level practices and the ability of agents to mobilize them. Successful policy implementation requires skilled teachers and effective school leaders to connect classroom practices with the broader education reform agenda.<sup>8</sup> Well-designed policies, supported by political commitment and strong institutional structures, including capacity and resourcing, have the best chance of success.

The OECD (2020) proposes three key policy priorities to take education forward beyond the COVID-19 pandemic. It challenges systems to take a transformational view of education that values people and processes over classrooms and devices. This links to the second policy priority, which calls for investments in teachers through carefully designed professional development that builds resilience and responsiveness to the new learning environment which considers new learning approaches that meet the learning needs of all children. The third priority area focuses on equity and inclusion in learning that combines policies that support effective learning interventions with student engagement and well-being.

In the context of COVID-19, education systems must understand the policy levers and school-level inputs that are necessary for safeguarding learning to pre-pandemic trajectories. For example:

- Policies support schools and teachers to develop emergency distance learning materials and activities accessible to all children, particularly the most marginalized.
- Government health authorities decide when schools reopen, and all educational authorities adhere to the Guidance for COVID-19 Prevention and Control in Schools.
- Education planners develop and adapt instructional times, curricula, and learning resources and tools, as well as modify examinations and promotion procedures to make them feasible.

## School-Level Practices

There is no doubt that quality inputs at the school level have the potential to influence student outcomes positively.<sup>9</sup> The quality of those inputs and the potential they bring for student learning and well-being depend on what students, teachers, school leaders, and parents do and how they interpret and enact broader policies that guide classroom practice and student learning. When we consider the school-level practices that have the potential to promote a resilient approach to change and support equitable outcomes for all, it is helpful to conceptualize the school as a community made up of four key stakeholder groups that come together to support learning and well-being. They are the students, the teachers, the school leaders, the parents, and the community. We refer to these different stakeholder groups as “Agents” in recognition of the active role they can play in identifying needs within the school community and responding to those needs, particularly during a time of change or disruption. School-level factors that have the potential to influence student outcomes positively include the following.

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<sup>8</sup> Schleicher, A. (2018). *What makes high-performing school systems different. World Class: How to Build a 21st-Century School System*. Paris: OECD Publishing.

<sup>9</sup> Hattie, J. (2003). Teachers make a difference, What is the research evidence? [University of Auckland](#).

- **Leadership:** Leadership that focuses on improving student learning, supporting ongoing teacher professional learning and collaboration, engaging all members of the school community, and promoting the well-being and growth of the school community. In the context of this framework, we acknowledge that leadership can occur at various levels, including at policy, school, or classroom levels. In this current study, we are interested in how leadership at the school level contributes to resilience in the face of challenges and supports equitable outcomes. This leadership may come from school leaders themselves, but also collaborative leadership involving teachers, families, and the local community.
- **Collaboration:** Quality collaboration between school and families to support learning and well-being, professional collaboration between teachers that is focused on improving learning and the impact on student outcomes<sup>10</sup>, and collaboration between students and teachers (e.g., formative assessment<sup>11</sup>) to improve student engagement, motivation, and learning.<sup>12</sup>
- **Reflection:** A culture of reflection that looks for pathways to improvement and growth, uses evidence to evaluate impact, and identifies areas for improvement, involves all members of the school community in the process of reflection. Feedback is also an integral part of the reflective process<sup>13</sup> allowing agents across various levels of the school to develop a sense of agency.
- **Differentiation:** Multiple pathways for learning, flexible options for engaging in learning, responsiveness to individual needs, using evidence to inform decision-making and planning, teacher autonomy to adjust and respond to the needs of their students and the context for teaching and learning, support for teachers to enable a differentiated approach (training, resources, mentoring).<sup>14</sup>
- **Well-Being and Inclusion:** An emphasis on promoting well-being as a valued outcome of school, structures, processes, and programs that support the well-being of all members of the school community (students, teachers, school leaders, and families) can support student engagement, and learning<sup>15</sup> Inclusion should also be considered a key condition for well-being.<sup>16</sup>
- **Growth:** an emphasis on making progress, change and improvement, and other structures and processes that support teachers, students, and families to contribute to improvement within their school community.<sup>17</sup>

While the system and school structures are crucial components of educational quality, understanding what happens in a school setting can offer meaningful insights into overcoming barriers to educational quality. Exploring which school-based practices and responses have

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<sup>10</sup> Donohoo, J. (2018). Collective teacher efficacy research: Productive patterns of behaviour and other positive consequences. *Journal of educational change*, 19(3), 323-345.

<sup>11</sup> William\*, D., Lee, C., Harrison, C., & Black, P. (2004). Teachers developing assessment for learning: Impact on student achievement. *Assessment in education: principles, policy & practice*, 11(1), 49-65.

<sup>12</sup> Timperley, H., Ell, F., & Le Fevre, D. (2017). Developing adaptive expertise through professional learning communities. In *Teachers leading educational reform* (pp. 175-189). Routledge.

<sup>13</sup> Hattie, J., & Clarke, S. (2019). *Visible learning: Feedback*. Routledge.

<sup>14</sup> Tomlinson, C. A., Murphy, M. (2016). *Leading for differentiation: Growing teachers who grow kids*. Hawker Brownlow Education.

<sup>15</sup> Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2000). Self-determination theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development, and well-being. *American psychologist*, 55(1), 68.

<sup>16</sup> Goldan, J., Hoffmann, L., Schwab, S. (2021). A matter of resources? – students' academic self-concept, social inclusion and school well-being in inclusive education. *Resourcing Inclusive Education*, 89–100. <https://doi.org/10.1108/s1479-363620210000015008>.

<sup>17</sup> Griffin, P. E. (2017). *Assessment for teaching*. Cambridge University Press.

been effective in supporting the continuity of learning during the COVID-19 pandemic has yet to be well examined, particularly in Asia.

In the context of this framework, the above school-level practices are intentionally broad and reflect the established body of research on the importance of in-school practices on student learning. This is a point of difference to many existing frameworks that assess school improvement or education quality, which often base quality on access to resources, infrastructure, school management systems, standards-based curricula, and summative assessment.