

WASHINGTON POST Dec 9, 2021

DID LEARNING REMOTELY WORK INTERNATIONALLY?

By [Anthony Faiola](#)

with Claire Parker

Of all the pandemic edicts — the mask requirements, the vaccination mandates — few were more contentious than the decision to shutter schools. At the peak of closures last year, 1.6 billion students in 188 countries were locked out. Across the globe, 700 million of them reside in partially or fully closed school districts. To learn, the pandemic generation turned to laptops, cellphones, televisions and radios, leaving parents asking a nagging question: Could learning remotely work as well as being in a classroom? For the most part, new data suggests, the answer is no.

A comprehensive global report, released this week by UNESCO, UNICEF and the World Bank, adds to a growing body of evidence that students suffered massive educational losses during the pandemic. Learning setback projections have gone from bad to worse, with a disproportionate hit for poor and otherwise marginalized children regardless of whether they lived in rich and poor countries.

The more pessimistic projections — based in part on emerging data from myriad nations — are fueling fears that learning deficits will be an even bigger driver of inequality, both among and within countries, and in a way that may be hard to fix in the years ahead. The pandemic learning gap could widen disparities not only between countries and social classes, but between different generations — those who were school students in 2020 and 2021, and those who weren't.

“We fear that in 15 years we're going to write a lot of academic papers to identify and understand the negative premium or discount in terms of welfare, productivity and income just for belonging to the generation between 5 and 18 in 2021,” Jaime Saavedra, World Bank Global Director for Education, told me.

The burden of missed months in the classroom could linger for a lifetime. Worldwide, the study estimates, the pandemic generation is at risk of losing \$17 trillion in future earnings from knowledge deficits, significantly more than the \$10 trillion estimated last year, the new report concludes. The worse outlook stems from school closures that have lasted longer than earlier estimates and assessments that remote learning often fell short of the mark.

So who suffered the worst?

Particularly in low- and middle-income nations, the longer schools were closed, the worse the educational losses. The exceptionally long closures in Latin America and South

Asia, the study's authors say, dealt students there an outsize hit. Younger students suffered worse than older students. Girls, some data suggests, suffered steeper losses than boys.

The quality of remote learning mattered. In many low- and middle-income countries, teachers were offered substantially less assistance to adapt to remote learning, even as their students had limited to no access to laptops, phones — or even electricity. As a result, the share of children in low- and middle-income countries unable to read and understand a simple text by age 10 is projected to have soared between March 2020 and August 2021, leaping from estimations of 56 percent to 70 percent, according to figures updated after the report's publication.

Data coming in from developing nations across the globe confirms some of the worst fears. In two Mexican states, a survey showed significant learning losses in reading and math for students aged 10 to 15. The share of 10-year-old students who cannot read or understand a simple piece of writing rose 15 percent for richer students and 25 percent for poorer students.

In Brazil's Sao Paulo state, a study showed that on average students engaged in remote learning picked up only 28 percent of what they normally would from in-person classes. Sao Paulo's statewide exams in 2021 showed across-the-board learning deficits compared with 2019, with larger losses for younger students. Math exam scores for fifth-graders slipped dramatically — more than wiping out a decade of improving performance.

The available data on a gender gap in learning losses is somewhat conflicting, but there is worrying evidence that girls might have fared worse. After South African primary-school students missed, on average, 60 percent of the school year, second-graders experienced losses in reading that equate to missing 57 percent to 70 percent of a school year, while fourth-graders showed learning losses equal to missing 62 percent to 81 percent of a school year. Girls — who traditionally outperformed boys there in reading levels — suffered relatively steeper drops. In Nigeria, fathers were found to have discouraged their daughters from using the Internet, and fathers were less likely to help their daughters learn at home than their sons.

When measured by math knowledge, primary schoolchildren in Ethiopia learned only 30 percent to 40 percent as much in 2020 as they would during a normal year, and the learning gap between urban and rural students worsened.

Children in rich nations suffered steep educational losses, too — especially those who were economically disadvantaged. In Belgium, standardized test results also show learning losses, with sharper deficits among disadvantaged students. Evidence from across the United States show significant learning losses in math and reading. In Texas, only 30 percent of third-graders tested at or above grade level in math in 2021, compared with 48 percent in 2019.

The new report is only the latest evidence of the impact of school closures in countries that had virtually everything going for them. The Netherlands, for instance, witnessed a relatively short eight-week lockdown and enjoys high broadband penetration, meaning conditions were optimum for remote learning. Nevertheless, a study comparing school test scores before and after showed an impact equal to losing one-fifth of the school year — the same amount of time schools remained closed. Outcomes were 60 percent worse for the children of relatively less-educated families.

“The findings imply that students made little or no progress while learning from home and suggest losses even larger in countries with weaker infrastructure or longer school closures,” the authors wrote in April.

There is some reason for hope. In Sao Paulo, for instance, officials say that students have begun to make up some lost ground due to creative solutions including extended school hours and a doubling down on core skills like reading and writing.

Some countries weathered the learning storm far better than others. Before the pandemic, Uruguay, for instance, had invested heavily in social inclusion and technological equality — distributing laptops and offering no-cost Internet to all students and teachers, leaving it exceptionally well-prepared for the switch to remote learning. After the pandemic hit, the country became the first to reopen schools in Latin America, introducing a phased return to classrooms that focused on rural, poor and young students. Studies there have showed a marginal increase in math and reading skills for some school grades.

But globally, post-pandemic learning recovery is set to vary drastically. For too many schoolchildren — especially the disadvantaged, younger students and girls — the price of the pandemic could be a lifetime of opportunity lost.

“Governments have to do extraordinary things because we have been through an extraordinary shock,” Saavedra told me. “Are countries really doing that? Not many, not many, unfortunately.”