



# COVID-19 and the Global Impact of School Closures

## Education Response to COVID-19 in Colombia

Preliminary Findings, April 8-11 2020



Between April 8 and April 11, the Global Center for the Development of the Whole Child's Colombia team conducted five interviews with teachers and principals working in public schools in Colombia in order to identify the primary obstacles school closures present for schools in rural and marginalized communities. The team also identified a series of innovative practices in place to reach these learners.

### Summary

The principals and teachers interviewed work in schools that vary in size. All the schools are in vulnerable, rural areas of the departments of Meta, Antioquia, Norte de Santander and Guajira. Children in institutions where the interviewees work are mostly black, Venezuelan migrants, and from indigenous communities.

Following the instructions of the national government, all the schools where the interviewees work have been closed since March 16. In some schools, teachers took additional time (a week after the initial announcement) to prepare their educational response to COVID-19. In other schools, such preparations did not occur.

School	Municipality and Department	Number of Students	Venezuelan Migrants	Children in Feeding Programs	% Computer/ Tablet/Internet Access
IE Marco Fidel Suarez	Medellin, Antioquia	2500	20%	700	20%
IE Alfonso Lopez	Medellin, Antioquia	650	15%	500	30%
IE Luis Gabriel Castro	Villa del Rosario, Norte de Santander	3320	17%	100	20%
IE No. 6	Paraguachon, Guajira	1300	62%	1000	0%
IE San Juan De Arama	San Juan de Arama, Meta	950	10%	950	5%

Source: Data collected during the interviews.

# Common elements experienced in the school sector in Colombia as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic

## Initial School Closures

- Teachers and principals interviewed agreed with the national government's decision to close schools in response to the pandemic. In some cases, teachers remarked that closures were the best scenario for children as schools couldn't guarantee minimum health conditions prior to the pandemic due to severe overcrowding and poor hygiene conditions (i.e., limited availability of water, soap, and sinks).
- Principals reported that the government's information was fragmented, and there were no clear closure guidelines established. One of the main problems principals faced was a lack of clarity on whether they could or could not reallocate their school's budget to meet the specific needs of their institution.
- The primary means of communicating school closures to families, principals, and teachers was through mass media (i.e., television, radio, and newspapers).
- In most communities, there is no access to radio stations to inform or educate families; therefore, the use of radio is not being considered as part of most schools' contingency plans.

## Continuity and Enrollment

- By directive of the Colombia Ministry of Education, a vacation period was advanced a couple of weeks and extended until April 21st. Currently, there is no clarity on what the next steps will be or if face-to-face instruction will resume once the vacation period has finished. Teachers surveyed hope they will be able to make up the time lost by extending the school calendar, which usually ends in November, to December.
- Negative impacts on the enrollment process are evident due to school closures as there is no digital mechanism in place to enroll new students.

## Quality of Learning

- There is no mechanism in place to follow up on the academic progress of students. Currently, the progress is either completely interrupted or unverifiable.
- Teachers and principals believe that school closures will greatly impact the quality of student learning. They expressed hopes of being able to remediate with students once face-to-face instruction resumes. They believe that when this happens, time with students who were not able to study due to a lack of internet access or inability to obtain study guides will need to be prioritized.

“Quality in education will continue to decrease until we have defeated the virus that has been killing our society for generations: **poverty**. If we continue having these levels of poverty there is no going forward.”

Karol Cossio, Principal

“ Here the most important thing is life. Education is important, yes. *But in the absence life and health, what is education good for?* ”

Georgina DeLuquez, Director

## Distance Learning Programs

- None of the schools represented in interviews have formal distance learning programs.
- There are some materials that the Ministry of Education has designed to aid learning, especially tailored for rural areas. Nonetheless, teachers and principals surveyed believe these contents are too general and don't consider local and regional particularities that are key for instruction.
- The majority of students who study in these educational institutes do not have internet access. In the most extreme cases, the lack is absolute, and in the best-case scenario, the coverage is close to 30%. In rural areas, only 5% of the children have internet access.
- The lack is near absolute in terms of access to computers and tablets. Frequently, the only device available is an old smartphone without, or with a very limited, data plan. This inhibits parents and children from accessing any virtual platform that might be available.
- There are no strategies for the schooling of preschool children. Since these children do not have basic reading and writing skills, it is difficult for teachers to develop guides or strategies for them to continue their education. Although basic information is sent to their parents, follow-up is limited.

## Complementary Services

- For many students, the only health coverage they have is their student insurance, which only covers them within the school premises. This implies that while at home, they are unprotected.
- The support that students have received in terms of nutrition is negligible or none. In the month since the crisis started, only one grocery shipment has been delivered to children who had prior access to the National Food Plan.
- Some of the teachers expressed concern that children who did receive food will likely have to share it with their families; consequently, the supply will last days and not weeks (as intended).

## Teacher and Staff Support

- Teachers and principals remarked that in Colombia there is not a virtual work culture. Teachers do not have the capacity or training to implement a 100% virtual classroom.
- There is an evident lack of support for teachers and principals during the crisis (most interviewees were emotionally affected). Many of them expressed the need for psychosocial support.

“ The government thinks that we can just do everything virtually. You have a computer and so do I, but *we cannot compare ourselves with students...they don't have these kinds of things.* ”

Jose Antonio Amaya, Principal

## Other Considerations

- Overcrowding in classrooms is a future risk for children. In one institution in La Guajira, there was a classroom that had the capacity to host 35 children yet hosted between 50-80 children before the crisis started. With more children requiring schooling once the pandemic is over, this situation will likely worsen.
- Parents often have a low level of education themselves or do not have the willingness due to time constraints or overall fatigue to support their children's educational process. The teachers surveyed stated that it is necessary to establish a support and training program for parents that would, in turn, help children in their academic pursuits.
- There was concern over abuse occurring at home.

“ In rural areas, the parents of the families have the *habit of listening to radio stations*, community stations. ”

Hector Gomez, Director

- Child labor is often associated with crises for families as families must force children to work in order to help provide food and shelter for them and their families.
- Principals mentioned a delay in money transfers that had been promised from the national government to aid schools with the purchase of protective materials (e.g., soap, disinfectants, and sinks).



## Innovative Ideas

- When possible, teachers try to contact their students via *WhatsApp* groups. They use this to inform, send academic guides, answer questions, and maintain communication with parents and children. However, parents in these vulnerable communities have restricted data plans that don't allow them to connect to the internet, let alone consistently download documents.
- Due to the high mobility that characterizes some of the children in vulnerable populations, teachers enlist the *aid of other students* to share information with one another.
- *Appointments for psychological support* for children are being scheduled through Facebook using a Google form.
- Due to national regulations, parents have the possibility of leaving quarantine once a week to buy food. In many cases, this means they might get close to the school. Teachers have used this as an opportunity to leave *written guides* in previously agreed upon sites, so parents can pick them up and take them home for the children to study.
- In San Juan de Arama, a *community radio network* has been used to inform parents about school regulations. Specifically, the network alerts them of places where they can collect groceries or copies of study guides.

“ Anyone with *internet access* is privileged. ”

Juan Diego Garcia, School Coordinator