

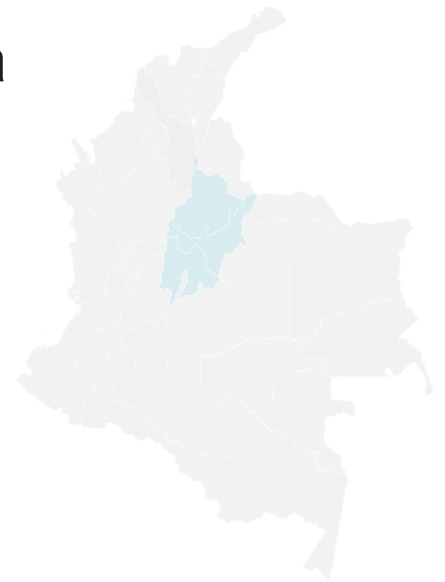
COVID-19 and the Global Impact of School Closures

Education Response to COVID-19 in Colombia

Preliminary Findings, April 20-24 2020

Summary

For the third consecutive week, as part of the Global Center for the Development of the Whole Child's (GC-DWC) investigation into the global impact of COVID-19 on educational systems, the GC-DWC's Colombia-based team interviewed 12 principals of public educational institutions (IEs) across three departments in Colombia: Boyacá, Cundinamarca, and Santander. The school directors interviewed this week all work in rural farming communities. The majority of families in these communities are of poorer socio-economic backgrounds, with low levels of formal education. Some of the families are migrant workers and travel from region to region as daily wage laborers. Most of the students in the schools benefit from government school feeding programs, and many families receive subsidies from the local government.



Educational Institution	Municipality/Department	Name	Number of Students
IE Los Comuneros	Chiquinquirà/Boyacá	Fredy Blanco	340
IE Carmen de Carupa	Carmen de Carupa/Cundinamarca	Luis Alfonso Gordillo	1020
E El Carmen, Sede Colegio Rural Telesecundaria Pastor Ospina	Guasca/Cundinamarca	Armando Moyano	1139
IE Juan de Jesús Acevedo	Chinavit/Boyacá	Raul Muñoz	119
IE Gustavo Romero Hernandez	Tibaná/Boyacá	Dora Ines Vargas	1030
IE rancho grande	Rondon/Boyacá	Esther Fonseca	160
IE El Charco	San Miguel de Serna	Pablo Alarcón	225
IE Región Sur de Aquitania	Aquitania/Boyacá	Edwin Barrera	112
IE Juan Pablo Segundo	Saboyá/Boyacá	Martha Delgadillo	190
IE Agroindustrial La Pradera	Duitama/Boyacá	Gladys Piracón	324
CE Perdida Alta	Cimitarra/Santander	Ludy Jaimes	188
IE Pueblo Regao	Barrancabermeja/ Santander	Fredy Molina	850

Data compiled during interviews.

Availability and Effectiveness of Distance Learning

Globally, COVID-19-prompted school closures have radically changed the traditional delivery of education. In Colombia, several factors influence the quality of distance learning: the availability of internet and technology in the home; the availability of a curriculum adapted to a virtual context; teacher preparedness; and the mechanisms in place for monitoring and evaluating students. For the purposes of this brief, the information shared by school directors with the GC-DWC's Colombia team is organized around three key factors:

1. Availability of distance learning options and content;
2. Teacher and parent preparedness for distance learning; and
3. Assessment of learning and well-being

Access to Distance Learning

The 12 principals interviewed reported that very few students had access to the internet and/or devices such as computers, tablets, and cell phones, making it nearly impossible to access content from the government's online program, Colombia Aprende, as well as any other departmental or local learning resource.

These restrictions are a clear limitation for many distance learning solutions. This, coupled by the fact that few parents can pay for data plans, makes it difficult for children to regularly access content even when some form of technology is available in the home.

“*The Secretary of Education of Boyacá has a link on its web page where students can download digital materials. The problem is that many students here do not have internet access or a data plan or the ability to pay for their plan. It costs 2000 or 3000 COP and is very expensive for them. They could use that money for food*” —Fredy Blanco

“*As you can see, we have done what we can. But we are limited, I am waiting for the ministry to give internet to people because otherwise we will get to the point where parents and teachers won't be able to connect.*” —Armando Moyano

One interviewee shared that the government announced the possibility of offering a data plan for students and teachers to support access to online learning platforms. However, during all of the team's interviews, only one of the principals referred to this opportunity, which suggests that greater communication is necessary to raise awareness of this resource when it is made available.

“*There is an application called Corona App where students can register, and we, teachers, can register for virtual school materials. After students have the app, they receive a passcode that will allow them to access the government page even if they do not have a data plan.*” —Martha Delgadillo

This initiative, as well as other local television or radio initiatives, shows promise in supporting distance learning. However, at a systems level, there is no national policy to connect rural families or rural schools to the government's online learning platform. Interviewees reported that in places where there has been some effort to provide connectivity to schools, such efforts have been truncated by changes in city administration or a lack of resources.

“*We have antennas that allow for internet use in remote areas that were installed by the government a couple of years back. Children used to connect there and so did the communities. But the problem is that the government contract ended last year, and this service is no longer working. The contract was not renewed.*” —Edwin Barrera

Most school directors agree new strategies are required to enable students in the rural sector to have better access to communication tools. School directors seek local connectivity solutions when possible for their students.

“*We are exploring the chance to have internet in the school with the support of the Secretary of Education. We are hoping that equipment can be loaned. This would not only serve as an education platform, but also it would offer a means of communication with families who are very isolated.*” —Ludy Jaimes

As in other regions of the country, tools such as WhatsApp and Facebook have been used to maintain contact with students. Youtube is used to send children explanatory videos to complement the learning materials they receive. Despite this, the majority of interviewees report that they still rely on print materials.

“ At the beginning we had planned on doing everything virtually. As the weeks progressed, we started having problems with the system as some parents could not connect. So, some teachers took a risk and travelled to the farthest schools to deliver the materials. Now we have a record that students received the materials.” —Fredy Molina.

“ After it was evident that we couldn't reach children without distributing printed materials, we created packages for the children, making sure materials were engaging and motivating. We also tried to make the material simple and easy to understand, essentially self-explanatory, especially since many children don't have anyone helping them. ”

Edwin Barrera

One of the challenges for teachers was the creation and delivery of printed learning guides to support students' self-directed learning.

“ We have thought a lot about how these guides should be adapted. We added games alongside the academic tasks, so it is fun, and students engage in solving the games. Our expectations keep adjusting over time.” —Martha Delgadillo

“ I said to the teachers that we will realize that what we have implemented is working as soon as we have no complaints from parents, when they stop saying “I did not know what to do here” or “what is this?” every time they receive a guide. To speed this up, we have involved parents in the guides' activities. There are activities prompting parents to discuss topics with children. We are making them active participants.” —Ludy Jaimes

In some regions, the schools are located a great distance from parents' homes, or access to parents is difficult due to transportation limitations. For this reason, schools have to be creative and coordinated in their distribution efforts of the learning packets.

“ We created a series of instructional materials, but we had to rely on a man who sells gas to take the guides to the students. We don't have transportation of any sort, so we had to rely on the community.” —Esther Fonseca

Some of the teachers and principals have used community radio stations as a communication tool. Radio has allowed teachers and schools to send messages to parents and students including instructions on how to contact teachers, how to pick-up materials, meeting dates, and other information of interest.

“ At the school level we rely on the municipality's radio station. They opened the microphones for us to communicate with the community, and they often share the teachers' cell phone numbers with instructions that parents will receive the guides via WhatsApp”. —Martha Delgadillo

Some institutions were better prepared since they had developed communication strategies prior to COVID-19 that utilized technology and included parents:

“*The communications committee created a partnership with the “Gobernacion Departamental,” the local newspaper, and the school community radio. The project has been in the making for quite some time as we have been wanting to actively implement technology into the education process. The project was designed by 18 teachers who were chosen in a contest sponsored by the Ministry. They went to Bogota and received training on how to use technology, which has proven very useful now.*”—Armando Moyano

Many of the rural schools have adopted teaching methodologies or programs such as *Escuela Nueva* or

Escuela flexible, which has made it easier for principals and teachers to develop the materials that children will use since these systems already send instructional guides and materials to homes. This flexible model is used in departments where children are frequently absent due to responsibilities at home such as harvesting.

“*Luckily, we use a flexible education system that is called “Escuela Nueva”. We have one teacher per grade, and these teachers have created the student guides for 15 days. Those guides have already been delivered. We also have access to the local radio station where teachers connect every two days to answer questions from the students who call in.*”—Raul Muñoz

Pedagogic preparation of teachers, parents, and caregivers

School closures and distance learning have exposed the weaknesses and lack of preparedness of most teachers when using technology or adapting curriculum for distance learning.

“*Today, in Colombia, there are teachers who do not know how to use the internet, Excel, Word. They barely use WhatsApp.*”—Fredy Blanco

“*A challenge is to catch up on technology: this is where one realizes that there are quite a few gaps between the use of IT in the city and in the rural areas. I'm not just saying it for the students but also for the teachers. There are teachers who do not use technology, and with this situation, we have had to rise to the challenge. We must learn the platforms now; there is no other way. Education cannot continue in the same way after the crisis. We will see that education is not the four walls of the school. We must break that paradigm and use all assets available.*”—Martha Delgadillo

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Martha Delgadillo

Without exception, the principals confirmed that COVID-19 and its impact on schools is a wake-up call that demands critical reflection regarding the different forms of teaching and learning needed to deliver quality education to all. Beyond technological obstacles, this crisis forces schools to ask critical questions about the relevance of curriculum and its current content:

“ I think for teachers this is a moment to understand the importance of time and the content we give students. We must be better with the time we use and more resourceful. We don't have infinite time anymore.”
—Dora Ines Vargas

“ We are getting prepared for a new reality. This morning I was telling teachers and students that the world will never be the same. It has changed for all of us. We need to try to keep on doing things well and to be sure we are trying to achieve excellence.” —Armando Moyano

“ We are being forced to choose between quality over quantity. Sometimes in face-to-face instruction, children are exposed to a lot of content. Now that is just not possible. We need to do what little we can do well. Overall, the content plans for all subjects are not going to be completed. Ultimately, we want to achieve more than knowledge. We want our students to feel they have a purpose in life. We want them to feel committed to a better future for themselves, their families, society, and our planet.” —Dora Ines Vargas

As mentioned above, the efficacy of distance learning requires new forms of lesson and content preparation as well as the willingness of parents and/or caregivers to support their students' educational outcomes. In the case of rural schools, part of the difficulties arise from the limited educational level of parents and caregivers. Parents and caregivers often work in the fields, and it is difficult for them to help their child with studying.

Regarding parental participation in learning, school directors reported mixed parental behaviors. Some reported parents being very active participants despite obstacles:

“ We have seen the commitment that parents have, not only with academic activities but with all sorts of activities. For example, before the crisis we had a science fair, and parents from many schools came and engaged in cultural activities. It was very nice seeing them all participate. We are hoping this engagement won't waiver during the crisis.” —Edwin Barrera

“ Previously, the greatest difficulty was bringing in parents. Before this happened, we had challenges with them. Now there is a greater commitment to the education of their children. It is amazing.” —Pablo Alarcón

In those schools that had managed to increase parental engagement, there is greater optimism and an understanding that current parental involvement stems from previous investments in school and community activities aimed at increasing parental engagement such as adult literacy programs.

Most principals have found that the emergency is an opportunity to further connect parents to schools as well as an opportunity to develop future processes that will allow them to encourage parental involvement in future school activities.

“ When they told us not to go to the school anymore, we told parents that we were not going to abandon them. We held a last meeting with parents explaining to them what was coming and telling them that our work cannot exist without their help. We asked them to talk to their children because they needed to be prepared for what was coming. We asked that they create an atmosphere where the child feels that the parents are a source of learning. We also provided little things from the school that parents could carry home to help teach.” —Ludy Jaimes

Finally, the importance of understanding family dynamics was critical to not only gaining parental support for learning but also to understanding other factors impacting children during COVID-19 as families may be under stress.

“ There were discussions on how to involve the family and keep a closer eye on students as intra-family violence increased, including child abuse. The situation is worrisome.” —Gladys Piracon

“ I think for teachers this is a moment to understand the importance of time and the content we give students. We must be better with the time we use and more resourceful. We don't have infinite time anymore. ”

Armando Moyano

Assessment of Learning and Well-being

One of the main concerns of principals and teachers is better understanding whether or not students understand what is being asked of them in this new format of learning and how the new format influences children's emotional well-being. Most teachers reported having focused their efforts to call families in order to speak with children and "check" for both understanding and emotional well-being.

- “ Some of our students, I dare say most of them, don't have access to internet, only to a phone. The thing is that teachers must call students and motivate them and see how they are doing in their education process.” —Esther Fonseca
- “ Many students struggle to find cellphone signals. Some of them must go to a high place to get reception, and there they can communicate with the teachers, usually daily. They call the teacher and tell them they need guidance.” —Fredy Molina
- “ It is an effort that our teachers embrace. They are using their personal data plans. It is a huge professional commitment. They even contact children outside of the regular schedule. Sometimes it might not be possible during regular school hours because of reception. They are going above and beyond.” —Edwin Barrera

“ Evaluation should go beyond qualitative and quantitative measures. We must consider the student's understanding of the content they are studying and its relationship to the reality they are living. We cannot compare a student that has a computer and lives in an urban area with support to a child that lives in a rural area and has nothing. ”

Dora Ines Vargas

While teachers and principals ensured the distribution of physical materials for most of their students, they are also making efforts to maintain telephone communication with students.

“ Even if teachers speak with children for just a few minutes, sometimes those calls are the only time someone spends with those children. We know we play an important role in their lives, and that they might open up to us in ways they will not with their parents. We try to do our best, and try to give recommendations on study habits and other things, like what they can do to be safe.” —Edwin Barrera

The conversation around student well-being extends to assessments and testing. Most interviewees agreed that testing comprehension is important; however, it should not add to students' stress.

- “ We call the children and tell them, “Testing will be from 9 to 9:30”. It is not to scare the child. When the time comes, we start with questions about how they are feeling overall with the remote studying, what they have, and how much homework remains. We are trying to make them learn. If they do not understand, we try to better explain.” —Edwin Barrera
- “ We have been encouraging follow up. We have asked students to send their work to teachers, so they can check it. It will not be the same as face-to-face instruction, but it is something.” —Esther Fonseca
- “ Evaluation should go beyond qualitative and quantitative measures. We must consider the student's understanding of the content they are studying and its relationship to the reality they are living. We cannot compare a student that has a computer and lives in an urban area with support to a child that lives in a rural area and has nothing. Everything has to be celebrated, every little achievement of the child has to be considered.” —Dora Ines Vargas

Innovative Ideas

Most school directors and teachers insisted that creativity has helped preserve learning. Innovative ideas are necessary to make learning relevant to the current reality of students.

Evaluation of Distance Learning Process

Teachers develop creative feedback mechanisms with families in order to better understand student motivation and comprehension. Teachers use telephone communication and WhatsApp audio or video to help the process:

- “ Each teacher has a diary where they write all the accomplishments they have had with their students and the upcoming items they need to focus on for future weeks.” —Pablo Alarcón
- “ One thing we are considering is asking parents to use their phone to record student activities, so we can listen to them afterwards and try and identify if the child understands and is motivated. We can then go back and try and help.” —Edwin Barrera

Distribution of Instructional Materials

Creativity has been critical in defining ways to get learning materials to very rural and remote students.

- “ Each of the learning packages has a schedule they can follow that will help them organize their time. For example, we tell them that from 8-10 they should work on Spanish and then from 10-12 on Math. We are currently organizing the packages in plastic bags and are trying to make sure the packing is good, so it can survive the long travel and reach our children. Each of our schools has one coordinator, a parent. We avoid having more than two people, so there is no contagion. After the package is ready, it is given to the man that delivers food to the children. With the packages, we also include a mask, disinfectant, and gloves, so parents can clean them when they receive them.”
—Edwin Barrera

“ Ultimately, it does not matter if we can't see the child face to face. He or she is not going to be stagnant, and we will still find a way to accompany them. I think this process will allow us all to learn how to be better. ”

Ludy Jaimes

Local Schools and Community Capacities

Investment in schools and communities prior to the crisis is helping in this current period of school closures. At the school *Carmen Sede Telesecundaria Rural School Pastor Ospina* in Guasca, Cundinamarca, a teacher had been an exchange student in the Republic of South Korea and participated in a program where he learned about the use of technology in the classroom. He brought several best practices back to his Colombian classroom such as the use of the Classting Tool¹ which has been helping schools and parents communicate during this crisis.

“ A group of our teachers and students have been using this Classting tool. We have been working with people from South Korea who visited last year. Since then, we have had the responsibility of incorporating their comments into our school planning process. We are hoping they will come again in September. Thanks to this, we were not caught totally off guard.”

1. Classting is a global educational platform that powers effective school communication and adaptive learning. The Classting company is focused on promoting a better education system that includes the voice of teachers, students, and parents through the active use of technology: <https://www.classting.com>

Emotional Needs

Increasingly, the teachers and principals interviewed referred to the need for emotional support for students and parents who are facing multiple challenges simultaneously and need help better managing confinement, overcrowding at home, and stress. Emotional support for students and teachers was also highlighted as important by school directors.

“ In terms of psychological support, we have given out a support-line telephone number for students and teachers. We have received distress calls and requests from both.” —Dora Ines Vargas

“ Our psychologist is helping parents. They are very worried because they do not know how to read and how to help their children - especially the ones that are little. Many parents now have to leave them alone at home while they go harvesting.” —Edwin Barrera

“ A teacher shared her experience with me. She also has her children who are studying at home ... she herself realizes that sometimes the study guides are very hard to understand. This teacher says that she has more work now, including housework, and she feels exhausted. I think we have to be understanding of the situation of teachers, most of whom are women. ”