

COVID-19 and the Global Impact of School Closures

Education Response to COVID-19 in Colombia

Preliminary Findings, April 24-May 1, 2020

Summary

Between April 24 and May 1, 2020, 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 team interviewed 15 rectors of rural public schools from 8 departments of Colombia: Santander, Caldas, Bolívar, Córdoba, Nariño, Cauca, Putumayo, and Guaviare.

Without exception, these schools are in rural areas, far from urban centers. In these communities, the COVID-19 pandemic is an additional challenge for communities that already encounter numerous, daily challenges. All of the schools represented in this brief are actively seeking alternatives to traditional in-person instruction in order to maintain student learning during COVID-19. One principal's insight aptly reflects the feelings and situations of all of the school directors interviewed:

“ This is a community hit by violence, by poverty, and added to this immense isolation you add this epidemic. I do not believe that the quality of education will improve; on the contrary, it will deteriorate. We can't and won't remain still. We must find ways to help one another and to determine when we do go back to the classrooms, how we will best support our students.” —Mario Rodríguez

Along with the closure of schools, which affects nearly 91% of the world's student population,¹ the COVID-19 pandemic severely limits education as well as other critical support services such as school feeding programs and child protection. Out-of-school children face increased risk of exposure to abuse, forced recruitment, child labor, disease, malnutrition, and family stress.

While these unprecedented school closures have led to many innovative responses and the opportunity for new practices, the reality is that closures also test the ability of schools and their actors to adjust. As summarized by several of the experiences reflected in this report, COVID-19 has exacerbated the inequities that schools face in rural contexts.

1. For updated figures associated with the impacts of the Covid-19 on the school site you can see UNESCO's website: <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse>

“ We did not have to use this technology...now we have to use it. We have developed the capacity to use tech, and we now feel empowered. Now teachers are happy to send the guides via email. We now meet virtually for conferences or meetings. We even joke amongst ourselves and say ‘we have learned more than our students.’ This has motivated us a lot.” —Evelio Gutierrez

“ Now we are working outside all regulations: institutional and governmental mandates. We are at a point where there are no rules, no perfect solutions. We must use our common sense, be rational and reasonable, and deliver education as best we can considering the situation.” —Jairo Barrera

“ This situation has tested the creativity of teachers - we have some teachers that are doing innovative things - things that they had to learn how to do because of the crisis. We have teachers who are recording the classes in their homes and forwarding the videos through WhatsApp or through Facebook to their students.” —Danilo Vega

Ultimately, the information provided by these rectors allows us to better understand the extent to which already vulnerable schools have been impacted by and responded to COVID-19-related challenges. Many of these schools are located in regions of extreme poverty with poor infrastructure, the presence of illegal armed actors, and limited or no access to technology and/or internet connectivity.

COVID-19 and the Vulnerability of the Rural Educational Context

Extreme Poverty

According to the rectors interviewed, the lack of access to basic services is a constant challenge for families and students. Often, students do not have enough food, lack access to a combination of basic health care services, have poor drinking water, and attend underperforming schools. According to many directors, the emergency risks sending more families into poverty. According to Fedesarrollo,¹ poverty in Colombia could rise by 6 percentage points, essentially eliminating more than half of the achievements made in the fight against poverty over the last decade.

“ We have houses where you do not have a TV or electricity. Some support has been provided by the government institutions for families facing hunger. Most children don't have a smartphone, and if they do, it is from the parents.” —Danilo Vega

“ I have students from the lowest socio-economic status, even students who fall below the poverty line, and they are not receiving aid since they are not attending school. These children need to be in school in order to receive food and eat.” —Jesus Castillo

Poverty and limited resources are a source of concern for the school directors because this affects the continuity of learning in the present and may discourage students and families from attending school in the future:

“ What are we going to do when we have a COVID-19 case? There is only one health worker in the community, and we don't even have a nurse. It is complicated because at some point we will have to return to school, but how we will do it and survive?”
—Jairo Barrera

“ We need to maintain social distancing and use masks, but what will happen in the classrooms when we return? The distance between students is usually just 15 or 20 centimeters because of overcrowding. Now we are being told that we need to have a distance greater than 1 or 1.5 meters between students, how is that going to happen?” —Hugo Cruz

“ It is complicated because at some point we will have to return to school, **but how we will do it and survive?** ”

Julia Barrera

1. Fedesarrollo. Jairo Nuñez – Coronavirus: more poor and less people in the middle class. April 30, 2020- <https://www.dinero.com/pais/articulo/cuanto-subiria-la-pobreza-tras-la-pandemia/284721>

The Challenges of Rural Education

The lack of resources in rural schools and limited technology are just some of the obstacles schools face. The disparity in resources is most evident between private and public schools as well as between urban and rural schools.

“ Among the inequalities we currently face, a large one is access to connectivity. Having access to a computer or having a person who can support you is critical. Most of our parents are peasants: they are illiterate. We send an activity home, and the child does not know how to do it, and the teacher is not there to explain, so they won't be able to do it. This creates conflict in the family. That deepens social inequality.”
—William de la Cruz

“ When COVID-19 did not exist, there was a big difference between the resources of a child in the city, a child in a town, and child in a rural area. And I am referring to the minimum conditions for a school. My region has places where there is no electricity. In the classroom, the only technology is the teacher. And now in this situation, the teacher is taken away and the inequality between urban and rural education will grow.” —William de la Cruz

“ Rural schools are the schools that have been left behind. We are measured by the standards of city schools, yet we are in schools with fewer resources: there should be different measures for different contexts.” —Jairo Barrera

“ This pandemic is a new challenge and must lead to greater equity between urban and rural education, between the public and private sector schools.”
—David Torres

Government decisions have further limited access to technology and connectivity. Many digital programs only exist under certain administrations and are eventually abandoned once their terms are completed. An example of this is seen in the digital kiosk programs that provided connectivity to rural communities: all the rectors interviewed mentioned these were useful programs, which have been missed since their discontinuation.

“ We have felt abandoned by the government, and now during this tragedy, I think the situation is worse. Sometimes I think all of this was necessary for the government to see the inequality between urban and rural children.” —William de la Cruz

The rectors interviewed believe that COVID-19 also threatens academic gains made in previous school years.

“ This is very negative for the academic development of students and the schools with the greatest unmet needs. Honestly, we feel that it will affect us on a large-scale in terms of the academic development of our students.” —Second Jacanamejoy

The challenges of bringing the classroom to the home in rural areas

Poverty and a lack of internet access are not the only obstacles rural schools face. An additional challenge is parental involvement in education. Parental support of learning is limited by the lower educational levels of parents, grandparents, and other adults responsible for the care of children at home in many rural schools. Additionally, many families need the support of their children in farming and providing food for the family.

“ The distribution of physical learning materials – guides or activities – is not received in the same way by rural communities where parents' support may be limited by a lack of education or exhaustion from working in the fields. What we can do is make things simpler and easier for the child to work through. We have told children that if they don't understand, they can skip activities, and the teacher will explain it when he or she can later.” —William de la Cruz

“ This pandemic is a new challenge and must lead to greater equity between urban and rural education, between the public and private sector schools. ”

David Torres

The shift of the educational burden from schools to homes and the accompanying pressures also contribute to conflicts within families

“ If the government does not undertake a real strategy to strengthen schools, especially in regards to technology, such as providing tablets and internet access, in order to reduce the pressures families experience, parents will feel stressed and may believe it is better that their children do not study.” —Mario Rodríguez

The limited ability of parents and caregivers to be supportive of students' education during quarantine is a challenge that risks having a long-term impact.

“ We have an extensive problem of illiteracy in Macayepo. And it is very difficult for students to have help at home or for their caregivers to help children complete their study guides.” —Alvaro Castillo

“ Teachers are not prepared for distance teaching and neither are children. We have had problems with buy-in and use of the home activity guides. Children have no help, and most parents are illiterate. So, for the teachers it has been difficult to prepare these guides knowing the circumstances in the home.” —Ramiro Rojas

“ Some parents have said they prefer that their child repeats the year because they are not learning, and they can't help them.” —Ramiro Rojas

“ Children have no help, and most parents are illiterate. So, for the teachers it has been difficult to prepare these guides knowing the circumstances in the home. ”

Ramiro Rojas

A pandemic, armed actors, and rural education

Rural education in Colombia has been affected by armed conflict and actors, military or rebel occupation of schools, the discontinuity of classes due to violence, and threats made on educators. The environments around schools are also dangerous with many schools experiencing security threats such as landmines.

Some school directors reported that the presence of armed actors in their territories has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

“ Since 2018 the situation has worsened because of armed groups fighting in this area. In my experience, there are incidents such as teachers having to ask permission from these groups to enter schools, or there are days that they cannot enter because of confrontations in the community between armed groups or simply because the groups don't want to accept teachers. Inevitably when this happens, children lose classroom instruction time.” —Mario Rodríguez

“ In areas with the presence of armed actors, violence, ushered in by the pandemic, brings new risks: we have to be on our toes because some groups might even try to recruit children when they are out of school. Without the help of the secretary of education and schools, girls and boys are at risk of recruitment. Recruitment leads to displacement as families flee out of fear. Now added to all of this, COVID-19 brings more difficulties to the community and schools.” —Mario Rodríguez

“ In areas with the presence of armed actors, violence, ushered in by the pandemic, brings new risks: we have to be on our toes because some groups might even try to recruit children when they are out of school. ”

Mario Rodríguez

Social control exercised by armed actors includes restrictions on mobility, interference in family matters, and the imposition of certain social rules or norms. Some armed actors interfere in education.

“*In areas where armed groups act outside the law, they give the orders, and they impose the law. In fact, if the government states that the roads into communities must be opened, these actors can just say no, and teachers will not be allowed to enter.*” —William De la Cruz

In the midst of school closures, both teachers and directors need to take the presence of armed actors into account when developing their response plans.

“*In a conflict zone, armed actors have their rules, and one simply tries not to rock the boat.*” —Jairo Arroyo

Some solutions that connect children with teachers during school closures simply are not possible due to the presence of armed groups. Some directors pointed out that armed actors control messages in communities, local media, and even cell phones in order to limit the information that can be shared about their activities within the community. These limits on media and communication negatively affect the ability of communities to keep schools and students connected.

“*In a conflict zone, armed actors have their rules, and one simply tries not to rock the boat.*”

Jairo Arroyo

“*In the rural areas and near rivers, there are armed or delinquent groups that are in control, and they do not allow someone to have a cell phone with internet. If they find some people with phones, they take them because they do not want people to communicate with the urban areas. Here violent groups decide who has a telephone and who has internet. They do not allow people to use technology. It is a challenging situation.*” —Jesus Castillo

“*COVID-19 increases social inequities. Even if we could get antennas and computers for children to use or connect, we couldn't learn or be allowed to use these resources because of armed groups. It is not easy to design, print, and distribute activity guides, but we don't have other means to make this work.*” —William De la Cruz

Compounded Risks of School Closures

School closures and restrictions on mobility have disrupted children's routines as well as their parents' and caregivers' routines, leading to increased stress in many households.

“*Believe me it is not easy. It's very difficult; it is very complex. We know that most parents in our educational community leave their homes between 5 and 6 in the morning to get to work and return at 4:30 or 5 in the afternoon, which makes the situation even harder because children are alone, and they don't have their parents for guidance or have a cell phone with a data plan. When they do have a phone, they often don't have reception: we live in an isolated area.*” —Hugo Cruz

“*Here violent groups decide who has a telephone and who has internet. They do not allow people to use technology. It is a challenging situation.*”

Jesus Castillo

Some rectors fear that students may engage in riskier behaviors than normal during the pandemic.

“*School desertion is a concern. We have students who go and work in gold mines [located two- or three-days walking distance from the community]. Children who work there start making money at a very young age. When this happens amidst poverty and a pandemic, the children may never return. It’s our job to keep the child’s attention and keep him or her interested.*”
—Jairo Arroyo

“*Some children go to cultivate coca and others go to the mines. While some mines do not accept minors, forced recruitment to illegal mining is out of our hands, and there are always one or two students a year that leave school and join illegal groups, or girls who fall in love men from these groups and withdraw from school. In the absence of the state security, groups often and easily recruit the young.*”
—William De la Cruz

In rural areas, where many children and adolescents live in poverty, the schools provide many supports beyond academic ones:

“*When students are at school, we take care of them. Many children come to school abused. We have many cases of sexual abuse and pregnancy at a young age. We are now concerned we cannot do checkups or help these children like we did before the pandemic.*” —Ramiro Rojas

“*Children come to school with emotional pain. In our city, we have psycho-social workers that help support emotional problems in children; however, if they cannot come to school, we cannot identify these children and cannot help them.*” —Olmes Campos

The Response of some Indigenous School Communities to COVID-19

Strategies for crisis management in indigenous school communities draw from the knowledge and practices of the traditional culture. Some educational authorities have found an opportunity to call upon these traditional practices.

“*For indigenous people, we see an opportunity to make education more human and based on respect for the earth and all the beings that inhabit it. This situation has allowed us to start looking at our own resources and knowledge as we find ourselves looking inward and at how our culture can be brought into education.*” —William González

Education in indigenous communities also draws on the presence of practical skills and indigenous knowledge. It does not rely only on the teacher for the transmission of knowledge.

“*If a student has trouble in school, how is he or she going to understand by just looking at a photocopy? We decided that we should talk to parents and teachers to see if we can also work on practical things to support learning. We have suggested reactivating the family orchards, working with seeds, tools, birds, chickens, and other things to complement formal education with practical knowledge and skills.*” —William González

“*For indigenous people, we see an opportunity to make education more human and based on respect for the earth and all the beings that inhabit it. This situation has allowed us to start looking at our own resources and knowledge as we find ourselves looking inward and at how our culture can be brought into education.*”

William González

Traditional, indigenous knowledge also helps communities adhere to security measures implemented by the state.

“The elders from the Indian reservations are working to make masks, special soaps, hand gels, and shampoos with traditional herbs and giving these materials to community groups in Cañamo Loma Prieta.”

—Carmen Trejos

“We are looking at the possibility of working with the school to plant community gardens to avoid starvation.” —William González

Indigenous communities and schools are also working together to meet the emotional needs of students, once again drawing from tradition and culture.

“We use a car speaker and drive through the community playing traditional music and a recording of a traditional healer, encouraging communities to go into orchards and collect basil and make special teas.

When we can, we use social media and Facebook to share advice on traditional medicine to help keep the body and the spirit healthy.” —Carmen Trejos

“Traditional forms of teaching use medicinal plants like eucalyptus, pine, and lemon to protect us from disease. The elders are evoking good spirits to protect us all. We are following the elders and ancestral knowledge. For us, education has a second, important spiritual component.” —William González

Continuity of Education

The directors interviewed expressed their concern about the duration and complexity of the crisis and its impacts on the quality of the learning process.

“When the children are in school, we give them the tools needed to learn. Now, sometimes we lend a cell phone to students to collaborate on academic work. We do not send home ten activities and say it is the parent’s responsibility. These parents are too busy thinking about how they will provide food, not how they can help their children learn. Some parents have tried to do both, but we don’t know how long this will last: it is hard for them, and we don’t have any tools to help them.” —Mario Rodríguez

“I fear that when we return to school, students may not have that same optimism and that same joy for education.

That is why we are trying to go home to home and explain to all the families what is going on. We tell parents that it is not their fault. We are going to do everything we can to help their son or daughter.”

Jairo Arroyo

In many regions, directors expressed frustration that achievements and progress made in previous years will be jeopardized by the current crisis:

“We have done various things to keep students interested in education. What strikes us the most is that without us, children will lose their way. They will go to the mines, some might be married, or end up where they should not be. I fear that when we return to school, students may not find that same optimism and that same joy for education. That is why we are trying to go home to home and explain to all of the families what is going on. We tell parents that it is not their fault, and we are all going to continue. We are going to do everything we can to help their son or daughter.” —Jairo Arroyo

Additional Details of the Educational Institutes

The information in this table was collected during interviews with principals, directors, coordinators, and teachers and represents their best estimates or perceptions of the categories outlined. As a result, responses differ according to the interviewee's preferred means of responding.

Educational Institution	Municipality/ Department	Name of Rector	Number of Students	Community context
IE Rafael Uribe Uribe	Albania / Santander	Jairo Barrera	8 venues, 144 students	Livestock
IE Educativa Sipirraresguardo Indígena Cañamomo Loma Prieta	Riosucio / Caldas	Carmen Trejos	133 students	Producers of panela
IE Macayepo	Carmen de Bolívar / Bolívar	Alvaro Castillo	11 locations, 668 students	Difficult-to-reach, must be done on foot or by mule
IE Caracolí	Carmen de Bolívar / Bolívar	David Torres	7 locations, 780 students	Farmers
IE Sagrado Corazón de Jesús	San Jose de Ure / Córdoba	Mario Rodríguez	245 students	Mining / fishing
De la Ventura	Tiquisio Bolívar	Jairo Arroyo	950 students (846 are ages 0-11, and the rest are adolescents and adults)	Farming population, in an area with limited access and high exposure violence
IE Corcovado	Morales / Bolívar	William De La Cruz	926 students	Rural mountain area with mining
IE Agropecuaria Mariscal Sucre	Funes / Nariño	Hugo Cruz	3 associated centers, 130 students	Agriculture and livestock
IE Luis Irizar Salazar	Barbacoas / Nariño	Jesus Castillo	7 schools: 5 primary and 1 high school, ~3,500 students	
IE Agropecuaria Hermes Martínez	Morales / Cauca	Olmes Campos	405 students	Indigenous community
IE Santa Marta	Santa Rosa / Cauca	Segundo Jacanamejoy	120 students	Farming and indigenous and Afro-colombians
IE Quizgó	Silvia / Cauca	William González	scattered locations, 650 students	Rich in fauna and 95% forest community
IE Leonidas Norzagaray	Puerto Leguizamo / Putumayo	Ramiro Rojas	320 students	Ethnicity group known as the Muruimuinane (<i>Huitoto</i>) group
IE Los Garzones	Monteria / Córdoba	Danilo Vega	1450 students	
IE Las Acacias	San Jose Del Guaviare	Evelio Gutierrez	120 students and 9 teachers	