

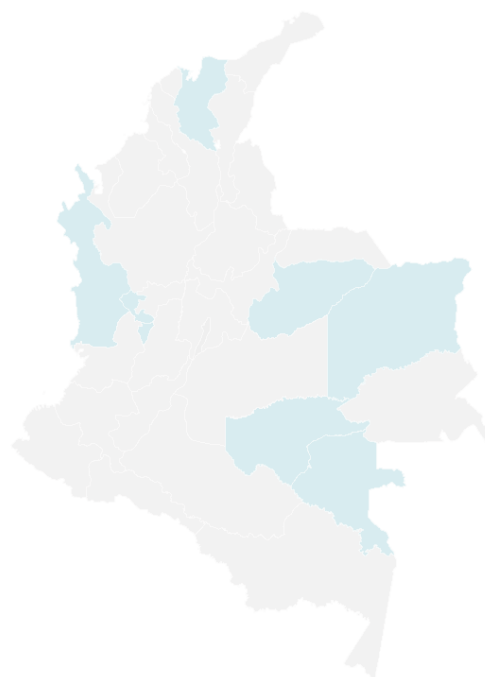
COVID-19 and the Global Impact of School Closures

Education Response to COVID-19 in Colombia

Preliminary Findings, May 4-8, 2020

Summary

Between May 4 and May 8, 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 13 principals of public educational institutions (IEs) in rural areas from 8 departments of Colombia: Chocó, Casanare, Guaviare, Magdalena, Vichada, Vaupés, Quindío, and Risaralda. The most relevant findings are summarized in this bulletin and revolve around the difficult conditions faced by these educational institutions, the different impacts that COVID-19 has had on them and their community, and finally, on the forms of response that these institutions have developed from a resilience approach to continue the learning process.



COVID-19 revealed many pre-existing fragilities and long-neglected needs that limit the minimum conditions for learning and teaching in rural Colombian schools. In these contexts, the effects of school closures have a disproportionate impact on access to education for children and young people and require teachers and principals to take extraordinary measures to maintain the education process. The role of the school in rural communities is not only central to the development of the educational process; it also provides a unique space of socialization in communities that lack other areas for connection and recreation.

The generally observed impacts prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic and school closures, include mental health impacts on teachers, students, and parents. Notably, a study published by the University of Cambridge (2013) conducted with families who lived in quarantine and isolation due to the H1N1 pandemic showed that isolation measures turn out to be traumatic for both children and parents in the medium term (30% of children and 25% of parents showed symptoms of post-traumatic stress).¹ These impacts add to the other risks that arise from confinement including increased domestic violence and difficulties in inter-personal relationships that have the potential to affect the quality and development of the educational process. Additionally, there is ample evidence of the increase in child abuse rates, neglect, and exploitation during previous public health emergencies, such as the Ebola outbreak in West Africa that occurred between 2014-2017.

1. Wang, G., Zhang, Y., Zhao, J., Zhang, J., & Jiang, F. (2020). Mitigate the effects of home confinement on children during the COVID-19 outbreak. *The Lancet*, 395(10228), 945-947. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(20\)30547-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(20)30547-X)

In Colombia, many of the difficulties schools face are structural, and on top of this, there is uncertainty surrounding an eventual return to normalcy. Because of this, responsibility is often placed on the teachers and principals to maintain both the learning processes and provide support to the school community.

Adversity in Colombia's Rural Education

For many rural Colombian schools, facing adversity is a day-to-day activity. Rural schools often face severe climate conditions, geographical dispersion, and above all, a lack of resources including limited infrastructure, understaffing, and other infrastructure failures. These conditions constantly challenge rural teachers, forcing them to be creative and to efficiently leverage any available resources in order to develop strategies that will allow them to maintain the educational process.

“ Here we lack infrastructure: we don't have enough classrooms. Children attend class outdoors, sheltered under mango trees. It is not easy for them or the teachers. There is no drinking water. The community must take water from the wells not apt for human consumption. To make it clear how difficult it is, the school only has two 7X7 classrooms (about 49m²), a classroom suitable for a bathroom and that is it. It is not enough for the 225 students that we have; we all suffer very much.”—Aroldo López

Unfortunately, this type of space limitation is prevalent across rural schools in Colombia, making education more vulnerable to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. In rural areas, there are clear expressions of inequality, poverty, and lack of access to basic sanitation and health services, which disproportionately increase the negative effects of the pandemic when compared to urban areas. The principals interviewed frequently expressed their hope that this type of emergency will make their reality more visible and known, which hopefully can elicit support and resources.

Due to these compounding and severe conditions, schools face difficulties both in coverage and in retention. As research has shown, poor quality of education furthers the limited interest of young people in finishing high school and continuing onto post-secondary education.¹ In Colombia's rural areas, around 39% of adolescents between the ages of 16 and 17 drop out of school.² They do so for many reasons: the lack of relevant instructional materials, the overall low quality of education, and the limited opportunities for education to contribute to an improvement in living conditions or to positively impact incoming generations.³ This explains why many of the teachers and principals in rural areas work hard to keep children and adolescents in school.

In addition to dropout, pre-existing poverty conditions in rural areas and the costs associated with education disincentivize assistance from various stakeholders. In Colombia, this challenge disproportionately impacts middle school children in rural areas, emphasizing the gap between the rural and urban education systems.

COVID-19 has only aggravated these challenges in rural education, affecting the most vulnerable in a salient manner. Apart from being a challenge for absorption, retention and assistance, school closures limit the protective potential of the school.

1. DNP. (2014). National Development Plan Bases 2014-2018 “All for a New Country”. Bogota D.C.

2. Ministry of National Education. (2018). Special rural education plan for rural development and peacebuilding.

3. DNP. (2014). National Development Plan Bases 2014-2018 “All for a New Country”. Bogota D.C.

“ The pandemic shows the fragility of the territory. **These regions need more support,** and not only support related to connectivity. ”

“ The crisis deepened, and it is now even more evident, the inequalities in the education system. It is not the same for a student whose parents went to the university and who have a job. These parents, in most cases, can guarantee their child everything in terms of equipment, knowledge, support, accompaniment, and permanent motivation. We cannot compare this child to a student who lives in an overcrowded house, where there is no library, no computer, no cell phone. Poor children often live on the periphery, in a farm with a relative or a friend. Many without a clear support network. This pandemic amplifies this existing crisis because when the student arrives at an institution, his or her entire environment changes. He or she receives food, plays with his or her friends, and talks to his or her teacher, who supports him or her, who motivates him or her. We are very far from being able to guarantee something like this via homeschool.” —Julio Hidalgo

Some of the solutions that have been proposed by the Colombia government as strategies to address school closures and maintain education are inapplicable in dispersed rural regions as these regions are characterized by vast distances between school institutions as well as a total lack of connectivity and digital resources.

“ Because of this situation and the suspension of face-to-face instruction since March 15, it is clear that many of our schools, especially in the rural area, are not in a position to handle a situation as adverse as the one we’re experiencing. We received the instruction from the national government that virtual education should be established. But that is not a reality here. Conditions here are precarious. Children do not have a computer or a cell phone with data plans that enable connection. It is an impossible situation for these communities.” —Aroldo López

It is not only the lack of connectivity that affects the quality of education. According to most of the principals interviewed, various other aspects jeopardize the possibility of children and young people continuing their education during the COVID-19 pandemic. One of the biggest difficulties addressed by principals was related to the limitations of living spaces.

“ The other thing we must consider is what is going on around the child while he/she is connecting from his house. Often, there is a lot of interference from the family. These children do not have a “study” or a specific place where they can work. They must sit where they can, in the dining room or near the kitchen where their mother is cooking, or with their siblings. There are a lot of distractions.” —Carlos Lozada

“ Our students will never have access to the internet; students who are in the jungle will never have television, the internet, or computers. When the Ministry of Education says that the students should connect and interact virtually, this simply does not apply here. We are in the jungle. We do not have big schools with internet in my municipality. Even at the departmental level, by comparison, we are privileged and we do not have those things. I have worked in other rural areas, and things are very tough. What we are doing here is with our nails, from scratch, and with great difficulty. ”

Igancio Garcia

Impacts caused by COVID-19 on rural education

Ultimately, the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on education in rural communities are evident in different ways. They are evident in the limitations of socialization among children and young people and in the added burdens that teachers have to assume. They are also evident in the varying degrees of affectations that parents adopt while taking a more active role in their children's education: a role for which they are often not prepared. Furthermore, these impacts have emerged in a context of increased uncertainty and concerns (economic or otherwise) stimulated by confinement and its associated stresses, which in most cases only exacerbates the impacts further.

School as a space for social connection

The suspension of face-to-face instruction has isolated children and young people from their peers, forcing them to assume new routines and stay indoors, which is a challenge for those who do not have appropriate living conditions and often live in overcrowded spaces with several family members. Teachers and principals interviewed agree that most children and adolescents, faced with these new realities, wish to return to school as soon as possible. These observations coincide with international findings that indicate that close to 97% of children and adolescents want to return to their educational institutions.¹

“They miss sharing with their friends, with their peers, and with their teachers. We often write to them to tell them that we miss them and that we love them. There are even some teachers who record the classes by WhatsApp. It is not the same... we all yearn for that coexistence, for the possibility to share with one another.” —Marta Cecilia Ruiz

The principals shared that the limitations of socialization are especially salient for children and young people who require more support from teachers or peers in their socialization processes.

“The consequences of this new reality are many. In the case of students, the relationship with them has new dynamics. Many are in need of support, not of schooling. We are not currently measuring this, but we know it will have long-term effects as some of our children require more emotional support. In this situation emotional support is hard, without our support, it is going to be harder for them to become stronger and overcome difficulties.” —Victor Rentería

Most principals expressed concern about the impacts of isolation on children and young people in rural ar-

reas. For them, the school is a space for socialization where the community can come together and support children and teachers alike.

“The only fun place that children have in Tagachí is the school. In Tagachí there is no park; there is nothing.” —Elizabeth Moreno

These effects can be differentiated by age. The teachers and principals interviewed expressed greater concern for the emotional wellbeing of preschoolers.

“From my perspective, there are students and teachers that are more affected than others, primarily preschoolers. Because of their developmental level, the preschoolers require social interaction, and they do not have that. Currently, we are not able to address this situation as we would want to. There should be a series of measures and supports. We must think of the future and consider the effect this might have, especially considering the limitations we have for interaction. We are social beings; we need to meet and interact with others. And these little children, they are not able to play, which is the ideal way of learning at their age.” —Aroldo López

Part of the efforts of the coordinators, principals, and teachers is to support children and adolescents, so they can eventually return to school. They are clear in the idea that they are all working towards a common goal.

“The day we go back to school, it's going to be the happiest day in the world. We will jump. We are going to have games with water and get wet. We are going to throw ourselves on the floor. We are going to “throw the school out the window.” We are going to have a party and dance. We are waiting for that moment again, for the moment when we are back together. This passion, this love we have for the school and for our children is in our soul, in our blood. We are all waiting for that moment. And we will make it one to remember, I'll promise you that!” —Orlando Ramírez

1. Education 2020. Results report Testimonies and experiences of educational communities in the face of the health crisis. April 2020.

Mental Health Effects

Being a teacher or a principal in conditions of extreme vulnerability, like the ones experienced in rural Colombian communities, poses significant risks to one's mental health and well-being. The accumulation of stressors, such as those that occur in the context of COVID-19, has the potential to thwart the ability of teachers and principals to manage them.

“The fact is you are fighting against an invisible enemy that generates a lot of anxiety, and if we add to that the anxiety that is generated by the implementation of this type of education, it gets worse. It affects our teachers, and the parents who are now forced to accompany their children in ways they have never done and are not trained to do. I think, overall, it is the worst for those in elementary school.” —Carlos Lozada

The change in the education model and in the learning rhythm in addition to long days burdens teachers. Some of the principals interviewed discussed the difficult emotional situations they face.

“In the 41 years I have been with students, this time has been the hardest. The work has doubled or tripled, and the fatigue is at an extreme because now we must be available all the time. It is not the same as having the children in the classroom.” —Orlando Ramírez

“The teachers are sick, and it is because of the stress. They must attend to their tasks at home, and they must design the guides for their students. Next week they will contact me to organize delivery of the guides, but it is hard, transportation is scarce. I am doing my best.” —Elizabeth Moreno

“Their class schedule was from 6 a.m. to 2 p.m. because we travel from Quibdo. Now we are working all day because there will be a child or a father who sends a message at 9 or 10 at night saying, ‘Teacher, I do not understand how to do this.’ Even though we put out a schedule, we are always available. How does a teacher not answer parents or the child when they write? For many this is the only time we have them...” —Bety Valencia

The impact on mental health caused by the COVID-19 pandemic is not exclusive to teachers. It also extends to parents and, of course, children and adolescents. Some of the principals have implemented strategies that try to address this problem.

“In the first week back to classes (April 20-27), we worked with them on socio-emotional wellbeing because we noticed that parents were very tired and were not engaging with us or their children. Children were responding, saying that they didn't want to do the task and that they did not know that it was homework. The teacher must be patient and speak to them with great love to help them understand because they all are in a difficult position. For psychological support, the teacher sends audio or a video and explains the socio-emotional component to parents, including the care and the patience that parents must have with their children. We do this to help them. It's worked a lot for us: parents like it.” —Bety Valencia

Some preliminary studies on the mental health impact of school closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic show that 80% of students report that their mental health has been affected by confinement. The main effects are anxiety, depression, varying degrees of confusion and sadness, feelings of isolation, and difficulties in maintaining routines.

“Every day I congratulate them. I give them shout-outs and support because the situation is very hard. Some children get sick, some cry, some fear not going back to school this year because they hear things from the adults. The children are distressed, and with this anguish, they must learn to live. And so, must the teachers. It is not the same, and we are quite concerned. Although we have 95% connectivity, it is not the same. This experience has shown that Colombia is not prepared in terms of internet capacity. We are fighting every day.” —Orlando Ramírez

Concerns from the principals have led them to devise strategies to limit the impact of mental health on the continuity of learning for children and adolescents.

“At the beginning, we heard that the children were going to defect. Some of our teachers called those children and told them, ‘You are capable. This will pass. We will overcome it. You are not alone.’ The teachers send these children motivational messages almost on a daily basis so that they can reflect. It has been an abrupt change, but we want them to understand that they are not alone, that in addition to being their teachers, we are their friends, their counselors. We do not care if they do the guides right away; we just want them to be calm and remain committed. The effort that we make is so great that now we stay in touch with them; we communicate with them. We have not surrendered; the guide is the least important thing. We just don't want to lose them.” —Olga Arango

Resilient Alternatives: Efforts to Continue Learning

The current pandemic has been a significant challenge for educational communities, especially in rural areas. Despite difficulties, it has encouraged the development of alternatives for distance learning. When faced with school closures, principals in dispersed rural regions have designed unique strategies that have allowed them to maintain the learning process. Because of the lack of resources, these strategies include transforming the face-to-face instructional model for a distance model, designing guides that are suitable for learning in the context of limited parental education and/or support, and devising strategies for the distribution of the material.

The principals and teachers have dedicated special care to the design of the guides and materials. Doing so has often led them to combine different subjects, integrate the use of graphics and colors, and to limit the information presented to only that which is necessary for the development of the educational process. For most of the principals interviewed, there has been a conscious effort to minimize the number of guides their students receive because there is concern over overwhelming students by sending large amounts of material and activities. Additionally, the design of the materials is intentional to make the learning process relate to their daily life.

With an unmatched will, the principals interviewed have made great efforts to maintain their relationship with students, despite the problematic geographic conditions that make it almost impossible to deliver the learning guides.

“ We went to deliver the guides personally, but the first community is an hour away by boat, and another community is close to three hours away. You have to walk quite a lot, so it has been tough to give them the material. Knowing these difficulties, we knew ‘the only way was for us to go.’ —Ignacio Garcia

In other educational institutions, the efforts of the principals have been focused on providing connectivity to teachers to ensure that they have the necessary tools to create good learning guides. Some schools have even tried to provide internet to students and their families.

“ Our institution tried to offer free resources so that the children and parents could connect to the internet in each house. We gave internet for two months. Even though we have given the teachers the same tools, there has been some resistance, as often happens with abrupt change. I said to my teachers that we need to think of this as a game: we need to assimilate to the reality and adapt, so we can start working.” —Humberto Doors

“ At the beginning, we heard that the children were going to defect. Some of our teachers called those children and told them, ‘You are capable. This will pass. We will overcome it. You are not alone.’ ”

Olga Arango

In some communities, where connectivity conditions are precarious, teachers and principals have devised outreach strategies for families, so they can monitor their students' progress.

“Elementary school teachers pay families a daily visit. Why? In doing so, they can monitor student progress according to the schedule that we have established for the pandemic. The teacher brings the student a guide, for example, of mathematics, and the guide usually includes a workshop. The teacher arrives and explains first to the father and/or mother in a separate space, so they can help their child. And then, the next day, another teacher comes. He/she will deliver work for art and collect the work from mathematics. Thank God that the population is small, so we can feasibly obtain the materials and review them. Otherwise, I do not know what we would have done. The lever schedule- that is what we call it- is from Monday to Friday.”
—Elizabeth Moreno

In the words of the principals, such strategies, which sometimes involve great journeys, are part of necessary efforts to prevent children and adolescents from losing their school year. In certain regions, these efforts include river transportation or long-distance travel. Some educational institutions have people in charge of the transportation and logistics of the guides.

“Here, we have the academic messenger, who is a very attentive and collaborative person: a father who works despite the extreme heat. He works by motorcycle and travels the immense distances and then walks from one farm to the other. Can you imagine the conditions in which we are working?”
—Olga Arango

“Students are reached through pedagogical messengers. They receive the materials and know that they have to work on them for a couple of days, so the material can be picked up again and distributed to their teachers. It is an alternative that we have found.” —Aroldo López

According to the majority of the principals interviewed, in order to overcome the challenges of the crisis and support children and young people, it is necessary to actively include teachers, coordinators, and parents in the learning process.

“So far, the parents have been very committed. We get the videos, and they keep the schedule they had in school. The moms are in the kitchen doing their stuff, and the children are sitting down doing their work. It has been a significant compromise on their part. However, the commitment level is not consistent for everyone. I think it depends on the motivation of the teacher and his or her responsiveness.”
—Marta Cecilia Ruiz

“The response of the parents has been positive; they have been very involved in the delivery of materials. The children do the work, and then the parents take it and leave it in a box on the door of the school, and that is where the teachers collect it.”
—Humberto Boteyo

Some principals have experienced great solidarity with teachers, parents, and students. They have all helped to develop strategies that allow the educational process to remain active.

“Families pay for a data plan one week to share with everyone, and the next week, another family pays. The teachers have no rest because when the signal is available for the child, they must take advantage and respond to any questions and offer guidance. It is a lot of work all the time, and it is complicated.” —Olga Arango

Aware of the importance of maintaining everyone's commitment amid the circumstances of isolation and mitigating the pressures generated by the pandemic on the school system, some coordinators have taken on the role of being emotional support for teachers and students.

“We have a responsibility. It falls on us that the teachers do not have great anxieties and can help our students. I have chosen to make calls, video calls. There are videos of me praying and singing to the children. The children are the institution; they have hopes to be with all of us again, to live again. Before the shutdown, I waited for them in the morning, and I received them with a smile, played dress up with them, danced with them, and I was with them in that enthusiasm (...) it's not the same now; we're trying. This weight is on us. We want to be there for them but also respect the families and the parents.. Time will tell us if we did the right thing; the most important thing now, as the Ministry said, is to exist, live and learn. We go slowly. This experience is very hard.”

Additional Details of the Educational Institutes

The information in this table was collected during interviews with principals, 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 Principal	Number of Students	Community context
IE Lucila Piragauta	Yopal - Casanare	Carlos Lozada	1600 students - 200 in the weekend program	Families from vulnerable strata 1, 2, and 3
IE de Carurú Vaupes	Carurú - Vaupés	Ignacio García / Víctor Manuel Castañeda	629 at headquarters - 34 at annexed locations	
IE Internado Eduardo Carranza	Puerto Carreño - Vichada	Julio Hidalgo	970 students (preschool to grade 11)	80% indigenous, 20% "mestizos"
IE María Inmaculada	Puerto Carreño - Vichada	Humberto Boteyo	850 students	Families primarily from vulnerable strata 1, 2, and 3
IE De Samurindo	Atrato - Chocó	Victor Rentería	543 students - 10 venues	20% indigenous and Afros, 80% "mestizos"
IE Agua Bonita	San José del Guaviare - Guaviare	Humberto Puertas	600 students - 5 venues	12% "mestizos," 8% indigenous, and 80% Afros
IE Técnico Agropecuaria de Tagachi	Tagachi - Chocó	Elizabeth Moreno	218 students	High vulnerability: displaced and demobilized
IE Técnico Agroecológica Cristo Rey de Tutunendo	Tutunendo - Chocó	Betty Valencia	583 students - 531 in normal system and 52 in weekend schedule	95% Afro, 5% indigenous
IE Quimbaya	Quimbaya - Quindío	Orlando Ramírez	1199 students - 362 secondary, 474 primary, 363 adults	63 indigenous people - Walk 1 km daily to attend class- 452 Afro students and 16 "mestizos"- The place they live "Coregimiento San Fco Ichu" is 10kms away from Tutunendo
CE Jordania	Apía - Risaralda	Marta Cecilia Ruiz	238 students	Families from vulnerable strata 1, 2, and 3 - With difference among schools
IE San Rafael	Calarcá - Quindío	Jorge López		Families from vulnerable strata 1, 2, and 3
IE Departamental Rural María Auxiliadora	Guamal - Magdalena	Olga Arango	825 students	Rural scattered, low-income families
IE Departamental Santa Rosa de Lima	Chivolo - Magdalena	Aroldo López	605 students - 2 different headquarters	Very extreme conditions. Children in the school "Angeles 3" receive classes in the outdoors, they must be kept under trees and lack running water

Visit the GC-DWC's [COVID-19 response page](#) to read the rest of the Colombia team's briefs on the impact of COVID-19 on rural schools in Colombia.