UNICEF Education COVID-19 Case Study
South Africa – Opening schools up better by expanding access to digital learning
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Efforts to expand digital learning have been pivotal not only to South Africa's COVID-19 response, but also well beyond it. UNICEF is working with the Department of Basic Education (DBE) to scale up mass e-learning, online and app-based access with private sector input, including partnering with 2Enable to develop new digital learning content for preschool and primary students. Strategies also comprise radio and TV broadcasts to reach children who lack devices and the internet. Reopening was phased, starting with students in examination classes. Due to fluctuations in COVID-19 cases throughout the country, reopening took various steps forwards and backwards as required. Schools are using a hybrid model to ensure physical distancing, where 50 per cent of students come to school on a rotational basis, alternating days. On the days that students are not in school, UNICEF is continuing radio and TV broadcasting as well as digital platforms, described below.

KEY FEATURES

- **Listen to young people** – The Government is engaging young people as equal partners in the country's recovery, which is key to an effective response. According to the recent national survey conducted through UNICEF's U-Report SMS platform, only 11 per cent of young people reported access to a laptop and internet, and 41 per cent highlighted the need for information on skills and training opportunities. The results of the poll will be used to advocate for increased access to information and data. UNICEF also supports a platform that ushers regular dialogue between the DBE and students on their learning and overall wellbeing.

- **Vitalise partnerships for real results** – Dynamic partnerships have been key to South Africa's successes in expanding digital learning as schools began to reopen.
  - Immediately, the LEGO Foundation provided USD $1 million to support home-based learning from early childhood to secondary. The DBE, the Department of Social Development (DSD) and UNICEF developed online and app-based approaches, engaged in direct outreach to teachers and infused play-based learning, benefiting 7.8 million children. These digital resources are still being used now that schools have reopened.

- UNICEF helped make localised and engaging content from Ubongo, which is Africa's leading children's edutainment and media company, accessible on the free 2Enable platforms. This was supported by the British Council and aimed to open up digital learning to all children in South Africa.
  - With the University of Pretoria, UNICEF is supporting the 'Junior Tukkie' programme and winter and summer schools for more than 150,000 secondary school students in math and science through a digital coaching intervention, which aims to train and adapt students to various technologies during COVID-19 and beyond. This involves robotics and other dynamic innovations, putting digital literacy and learning at the forefront.
- **Bolster early learning** – Early childhood education programmes resumed in person on 6 July. To support early learning rooted in the National curriculum framework for children birth to four, UNICEF rapidly translated popular digital materials, suitable for children aged 0 to 5, into all 11 local languages. To date, over 683,000 parents of young children have accessed the Tshwaragano Ka Bana (Let's play, learn and grow together) series, which UNICEF has been promoting on social media and the DBE's and DSD's websites. Funds from the LEGO Foundation have also enabled the design, finalisation and hosting of ECD Mobi, a virtual resource room for parents, caregivers and educators with ideas to support their children's learning through play according to their age. While the Tshwagarano Ka Bana series was geared towards the youngest children, the Active Learning@Home programme targeted children in primary and secondary school on a wide range of subjects within the South African curriculum.
- **Digital resources can help students catch up before exams**. With schools reopening, the priority has been Grade 12 students who will undergo exams in December. Together with the DBE, National Education Trust and the South African Broadcasting Corporation, UNICEF is also supporting 'WoZa Matric' that provides students with additional digital learning materials and psychosocial support as they prepare for their final exams.

EMERGENT LESSONS LEARNED

- **Despite good intentions, online learning can exacerbate inequality.** While efforts are promising, online learning remains a challenge in the country, where up to 30 per cent of households in urban areas have access to computers, compared to only 9 per cent of those in the rural areas. Coupled with high internet and data costs, access to digital learning has been differential, and alternative strategies are needed to reach vulnerable communities. In response, UNICEF South Africa is helping to make learning content accessible via mobile phones.

- **Strengthen metrics for determining reach and effectiveness of online learning.** To be sustainable, digital platforms must track student progress. The reopening phase is critical to recover lost learning, and student learning must be monitored to inform education policy and course correct over time. Learning assessments during COVID-19 have been survey based, including regular school census templates used to capture data from schools. This information is fed into the South African School and Administration Management System, an electronically integrated application hosted by the government to meet the needs of public schools.

- **Reimagine education in South Africa so that every child has access to digital learning**. UNICEF is reimagining education through a new initiative that aims to make internet connectivity and access to digital learning a reality for all boys and girls. The Reimagine Education Initiative aligns with the Government's National Youth Policy 2020-2030 to empower adolescents, including through digital and other 21st century skills that can help open doors to new ways of learning but also improved life prospects, steering a smoother transition from school to decent work.

OTHER RESOURCES

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