

UNICEF Education COVID-19 Case Study

Uruguay – Long-term investments in digital learning helps schools open up better

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Long before COVID-19, Uruguay was the first country in the world to provide one laptop per child and free internet connection through [Plan Ceibal](#). From 2007, when the programme began, to 2011, access to a computer per child aged 6–13 years rose from 30 per cent to 94 per cent, with the largest increase seen in children from lower-income families (from 9 per cent to 93 per cent). Today, it covers 85 per cent of Uruguay's 1 million students in the formal education system: 100 per cent in public schools aged 6–15 years and their teachers, as well as students in private schools in poor areas. Additionally, its high-quality video conferencing network connects more than 1,500 educational centres nationwide. Under the Plan, children get laptops, free internet, digitised educational content and online learning platforms.

During school closures and now with [reopening](#), the continuation of Plan Ceibal – together with the provision of school meals, scholarships and other complementary social benefits associated with education – helps prevent the most vulnerable students from falling through the cracks. This long-term investment in digital learning has been pivotal to keeping children learning both during lockdown and phased reopening, which balanced in-person and online learning.

KEY FEATURES

- **The long-term investment in digital learning has made Uruguay's education system more resilient** – Due to the country's pre-existing capacity to implement virtual modes of education, Uruguay had tools to confront a crisis that shuttered schools worldwide. Critically, the country's investments went beyond devices and connectivity to embrace teacher training on new pedagogies, including more student-centred methodologies and the extension of teaching beyond the classroom. The high level of connectivity and government ownership of a policy such as Plan Ceibal have been central to sustain learning in virtual environments, not only in operational and functional terms but also culturally, for children and their families.

- **National online platforms, contents and education staff were poised to help the hybrid return to face-to-face classes** – Uruguay was among the first countries in the world to reopen, starting on 22 April with rural schools, then moving to open up schools with vulnerable students and finally all schools. To reach students and families who were the least engaged in virtual learning, school staff and technical advisors were supported by Plan Ceibal and the [Crea](#) platform, local media through radio and television, and landline and mobile phones, mainly via WhatsApp. These strategies succeeded, and in mid-July, 92 per cent of primary students had been in contact with their teachers, according to a National Administration of Public Education (ANEP) teachers' survey.
- **Complementary social benefits reduced the negative impacts of school closures** – Other essential services for children, particularly family allowances and school meals that establish a bond between the student and school beyond academic activities, helped to reduce the negative impacts of school closures, particularly for the most vulnerable. For reopening, since some students face added challenges in getting to school, logistical issues were addressed by identifying and ensuring transport so that every boy and girl can arrive at school safely.

EMERGENT LESSONS LEARNED

- **Flexibility and adaptability are key.** The fluctuating nature of COVID-19 necessitates flexibility in decision-making and education policy. The pathway and resources for remote learning, including Plan Ceibal and the Crea platform, as well as household connectivity enabled the country to adapt favourably to the challenging situation.
- **It is imperative to address inequities beyond access to devices.** Attending school following reopening was voluntary, which meant that gaps could widen between students who attend school and those who do not. In response, UNICEF Uruguay worked with authorities on an inclusive Back-to-school campaign that involved cash transfers for students at higher risk of dropping out due to the economic crisis brought about by COVID-19.
- **Teachers were flexible, stepping away from traditional disciplines and practices.** In response to the pandemic, teachers necessarily elevated their digital skills and knowledge over a short period of time. UNICEF, in partnership with Plan Ceibal and the ANEP, developed a course on virtual learning for teachers to improve their long-term skills as educators. Moreover, teachers were empowered to make decisions for their own classrooms and work collaboratively in teams. Physical education, language and art were integrated into remote learning curriculum, which continue to complement in-person schooling.
- **Fully remote learning is “not a substitute forever.”** A parent and member of the support committee at School N° 73 in San Pedro, Department of Colonia, said “when school opened, we were very happy because the children would be together with their friends, their classmates. I believe that it cannot compare with the other way, which is useful in these cases, to work online on the platforms, but not as a substitute forever.” See this inspiring [video](#) for more information. Inevitably, digital learning has come to stay in Uruguay and will likely complement face-to-face education in the years to come.

OTHER RESOURCES

For other resources, including more case studies, please click [here](#) and filter by “Area of Work” (Education).

For more information, please contact:

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