ARGENTINA and the COVID-19 Response in Education

Over 10.5 million learners from pre-primary through to secondary are affected by the nation-wide school closure in Argentina, which began in mid-March.

**Keeping all children safe and learning**

The Government quickly moved to adopt a mix of digital and non-digital options to keep children learning in keeping with its national distance learning strategy, *Seguimos educando* (We keep learning). Learners from pre-primary to secondary can use online resources on the Ministry of Education’s *Seguimos Educando Website* without consuming data to do so. To bridge the digital divide, lessons are also available on TV, radio and in print. UNICEF has contributed to the TV and radio content as well as the development and distribution of the printed booklets aimed at 6.5 million of the most marginalized children, including those in rural areas. It is also collaborating on strategies to support 35,000 school management teams, including for ongoing monitoring during this period of home-based learning. According to a COVID19 Impact Rapid Assessment (UNICEF, April 2020), 81.2% of households with children reported that their children have engaged in home-based learning. Among the sample of adolescents, the figure was 91%.
Beyond equitable learning opportunities, UNICEF has been sensitive to the increased risk of violence and gender-based violence during this public health emergency. It has included key messages on prevention of violence and abuse as well as gender equality in the TV and radio content that it is helping to produce as part of its partnership with the EU on the Spotlight Initiative. Similarly, the printed booklets also contain information on prevention and referral mechanisms.

As a further support, public schools have made alternate arrangements to ensure students continue to receive food to compensate for lost school meals. In some cases, schools are used as distribution points for these individual food packages. In other cases, communities take on this role.

Opening up better

The disruption of the COVID-19 crisis has sparked innovation on many fronts in Argentina showing the importance of previous investments in the country’s educational and cultural TV programmes, which allowed authorities to draw on a plethora of educational resources addressed to youth and children built up over the course of a decade. It is from this place that UNICEF is working with education officials to think through how to harness and build on the innovations to plan a safe return for students affected by school closures, aiming to bring back not just currently enrolled students but those children and adolescents who had already dropped out pre-COVID. This work recognizes that gaps in access to digital resources and platforms; relevant skills, including among school managers and teachers; as well as further and sustainable investment in education must be addressed to ensure that existing inequities are not deepened.

Longer-term education planning can build greater resiliency, taking into consideration this experience with remote learning to have platforms at the ready and teachers and school directors prepared for rapid shifts in delivery and roles. Work on improving feedback loops to families who have taken a greater role in learning than ever before can strengthen the link between community and schools as never before.

The experience in Argentina has also shown how the crisis can serve to unite and build partnerships for the future. UNICEF, in its role as convener, brought together government and development partners but also the private sector, academia, influencers as well as young people, drawing on existing global partnerships such as GenU. These inclusive alliances have brought a wide range of expertise together to tackle the challenges of COVID-19 but can be used to catalyze the existing education system to create something better.

In Argentina, the partnerships have an international dimension, which is fitting for a public health crisis that knows no borders. With the backing of UNICEF UNESCO, WHO and the UN Resident Coordinator who are keenly promoting south-south cooperation, the Ministry of Education of Argentina met with the Ministries of Education of Peru, Mexico, Colombia, El Salvador, Uruguay, Paraguay, Ecuador, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Chile, and Spain. As a result, two international working groups have been established, one to focus in improving pedagogical approaches during the crisis and another to exchange good practices on plans for school reopening which aim to heighten the quality of countries’ education response.

Key features

- To bridge rather than exacerbate existing inequities, equity must be at the forefront in all phases of the education response. At the start of school closures, UNICEF worked closely with all levels of
Government to ensure that the most marginalized children and adolescents were taken into account; thus, successfully advocating for a range of remote learning options. It drew from its experience of past emergencies to mitigate against the increased risk of violence against children, abuse, and gender-based violence and supported the Government’s commitment to re-adjust school meal programmes. In preparation for school re-opening, the Education Team is advocating for the Ministry of Education to build on the innovative pedagogical approaches and platforms used during the emergency period to make school more relevant and to reach not only students affected by school closures by those who had already dropped out.

- This public health emergency provided an opportunity to support ongoing monitoring and communication among key groups, such as school directors, teachers, families, and students will serve not only in this emergency but moving forward, forging a strong link between schools and communities.

- It highlights gaps in teaching, including the use of IT-assisted learning, but at the same time, it provides a window of opportunity to modernize and promote innovative pedagogical practices, such inquiry-based learning in secondary school. For more information, see this case study on the PlaNEA Initiative.

- As Argentina is a federal state, decision-making and consultation occurred at all levels of the education system during the emergency, which strengthened the response to COVID-19.

Lessons learned

- The pandemic sparked innovation, opening up different, complementary ways for students to learn throughout the country. This sets the stage for the possibility of cultivating a greater number of flexible learning pathways in the future.

- The crisis highlights the need for robust data systems to track children’s return to school and those already out-of-school for individual children in addition to improving ongoing communication among key actors in the school community. The experience of COVID-19 has galvanized political will to strengthen these systems.

- The threat posed by COVID-19 brought different stakeholders together. UNICEF was able to leverage strategic global partnerships such as GenU to bring new thinking, resources, and more allies to find solutions to longstanding bottlenecks.