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 الرابطة لأجل تطوير التربية في إفريقيا
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POLICY BRIEF



COVID-19 AND SCHOOLS REOPENING IN 40 GPE PARTNER COUNTRIES IN AFRICA

October 2021

The COVID-19 pandemic caused major disruptions to education in Africa and worldwide, and in African countries, due to school closures. Many countries have made great strides in ensuring safe reopening of schools to stem the erosion of the gains made in access to equitable and quality education, escalation of risks to children’s mental and physical health and the long-term impact of loss of learning associated with school closures. This policy brief highlights the evidence of the policy and practice responses on school reopening. It is based on the synthesis report by the **KIX Observatory on COVID-19 Responses** by Educational Systems in 40 African partner countries of the Global Partnership for Education (GPE).



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**African Population and
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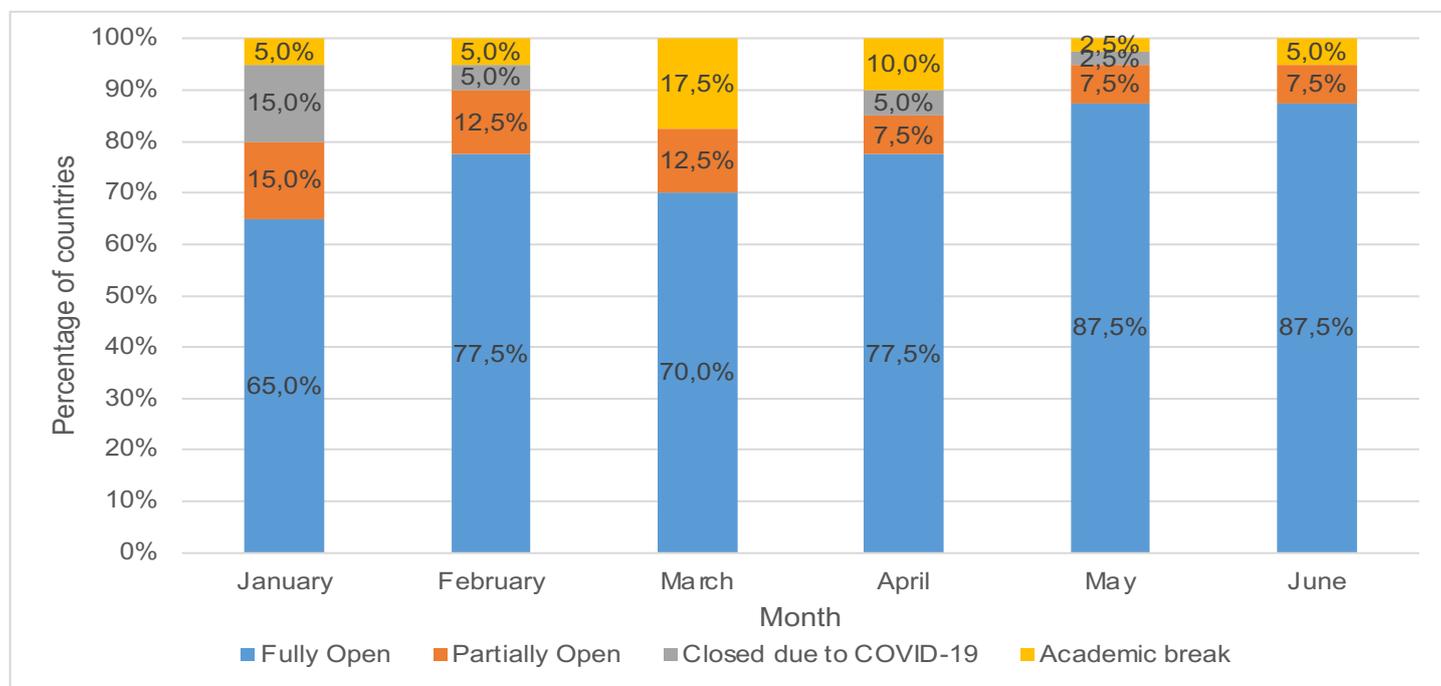


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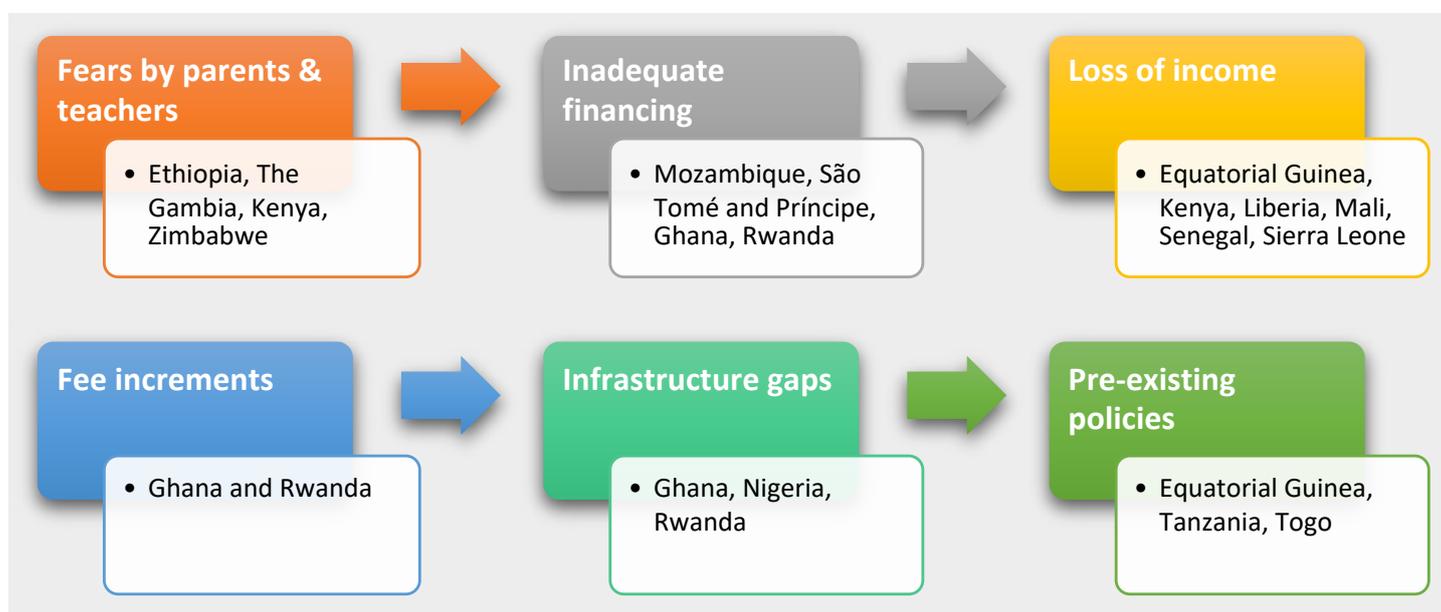
Scope of the Challenge

The synthesis report shows that more than 60% of the 40 GPE partner countries in Africa faced prolonged and recurring school closures beyond 200 days. By June 2021, however, close to 90% of the countries had opened their schools. The following Figure shows the status of school reopening from January to June 2021 among the 40 GPE partner countries.



Source of data: UNESCO (2021a).

The GPE partner countries highlighted challenges in implementing school reopening policies and practices such as fears by parents and teachers, inadequate financing, loss of income, fee increments, gaps in infrastructure for spacing and hygiene, and pre-existing policies that prevent pregnant girls and young mothers from attending school. The Figure below shows the challenges in the different groups of countries.



Other factors

Other pertinent factors are lack of adequate data, tracking of student progress, and loss of interest in schooling by some learners due to prolonged closures and barriers like unintended pregnancies, forced marriages, sexual exploitation, engagement in economic activities, mental health and nutrition issues and disruption of household livelihoods.

These challenges contributed to a general decrease in enrollments during school reopening.

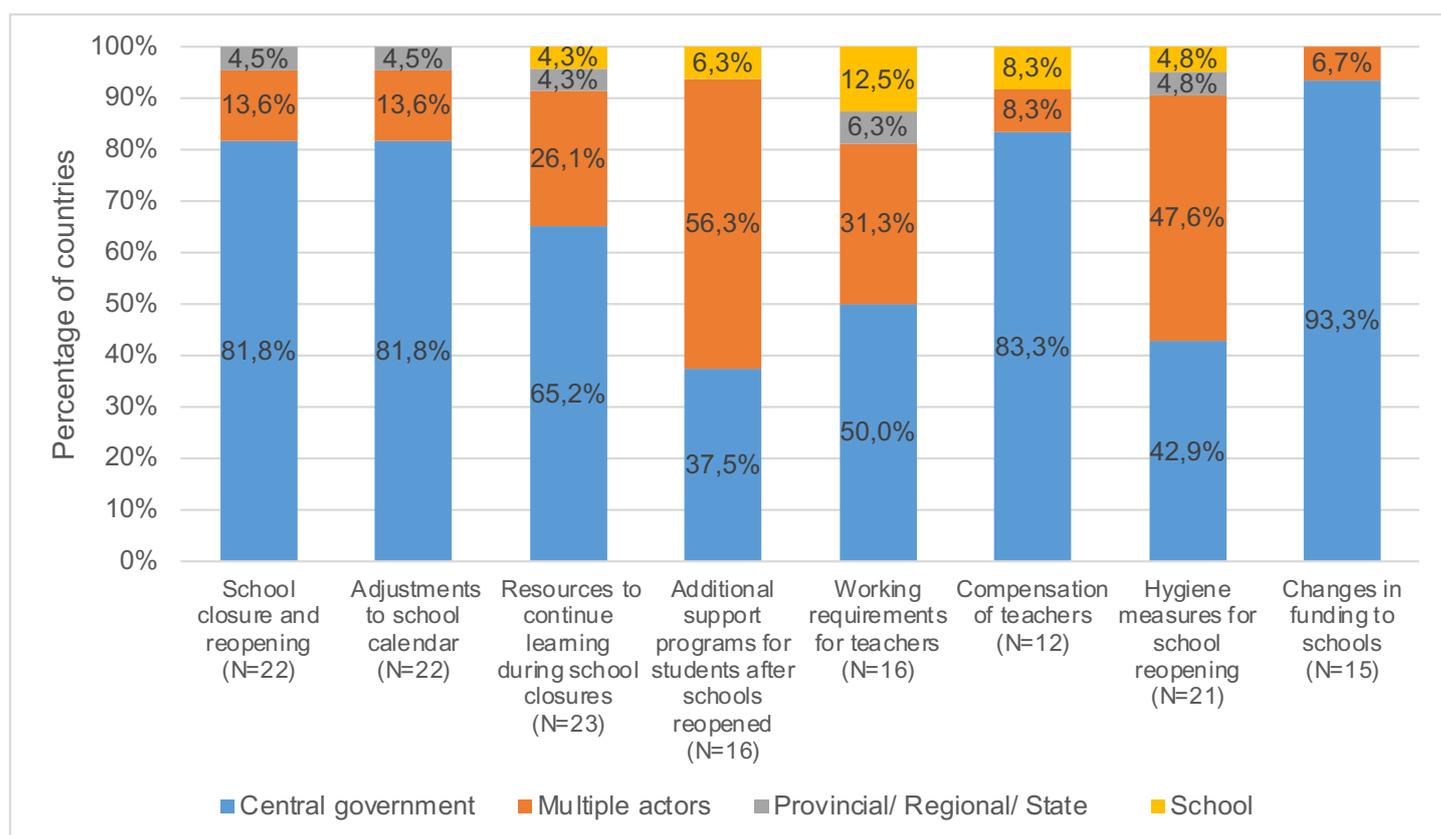
Reopening of schools during the pandemic entailed gender-sensitive and more inclusive approaches to education to mitigate the adverse effects of COVID-19.

National policy and practice responses

Most countries developed decision-making frameworks to guide their school reopening plans with input from key stakeholders such as the Local Education Groups (LEGs). Different back-to-school campaign strategies helped to mitigate the general decrease in enrollments observed during school reopening. Health-related interventions included the provision of masks to students and teachers, improvement of water, sanitation, and health (WASH) facilities, promoting physical distancing, conducting temperature checks, testing for COVID-19, tracking infected or exposed staff and students, and placing teachers among the top priority group for the COVID-19 vaccination. Countries also reorganized the school calendar and introduced remedial and accelerated learning programmes to adapt their teaching, learning and assessment during COVID-19.

Decision-making frameworks

The Figure below shows the results of an assessment of decision-making patterns among GPE countries based on eight policy decision aspects.



Source of data: UNESCO, UNICEF, World Bank and OECD (2021).

Notes: The bracketed number in each bar's label refers to the total number of responding countries, used to calculate the percentages indicated in that bar: not all countries responded to each of the eight policy decision items. The GPE countries that participated in the survey include Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cabo Verde, Cameroon, Comoros, The Gambia, Ghana, Kenya, Lesotho, Liberia, Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, Mauritania, Mozambique, Namibia, Niger, Nigeria, DRC, São Tomé and Príncipe, Senegal, Somalia, Togo, Uganda, and Chad. Two countries (Burkina Faso and Uganda) that did not respond to these survey questions were excluded in the analysis.

The central government emerged as the key player in decision-making in relation to changes in school funding in more than 93% of the countries that participated in the survey. It also took the lead on school closures and reopening, school calendar adjustments, and compensation of teachers in more than 80% of responding countries. Most decisions related to additional support programs for students were undertaken by multiple actors, as were decisions on matters concerning hygiene measures for school reopening.

Back-to-school Campaigns

Countries deployed the following national strategies as part of back-to-school campaigns:

- Use of national government local administrators to monitor and enforce return to school directives.
- Prohibition of school fees hikes after reopening.
- Encouraging the participation of major stakeholders.
- Deploying child-friendly messaging through local mass media.
- Lifting restrictive policies and developing more inclusive ones.
- Promoting school feeding programmes.
- Initiating youth-led intergenerational dialogues.

Schools in low-resourced neighborhoods benefited from interventions targeting poorest households facing economic hardships during the pandemic. These included subsidized or free access to water and electricity, Provision of cash transfers/ vouchers, and family food ration.

Health-related interventions

Regarding matters related to health in school reopening, between 85% and 100% of the countries use masks to promote respiratory hygiene, had improved hand washing facilities, promoted physical distancing, and instituted measures to promote hand hygiene practices. The following Table shows teacher's COVID-19 vaccination priority status among the 40 GPE countries in Africa.

COVID-19 teacher vaccination priority status	# (%) of countries	Countries
Priority group 1	6 (15.0)	Comoros, Côte d'Ivoire, Kenya, Malawi, Rwanda, Uganda
Priority group 2	9 (22.5)	Central African Republic, Congo, Ethiopia, Lesotho, Mozambique, Sierra Leone, South Sudan, Sudan, Zimbabwe
Priority group 3 or lower	1 (2.5)	The Gambia
Not prioritized	13 (32.5)	Benin, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Chad, DRC, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Madagascar, Mali, Niger, São Tomé and Príncipe, Senegal, Tanzania
Priority group unspecified	10 (25.0)	Cabo Verde, Cameroon, Djibouti, Ghana, Guinea, Mauritania, Nigeria, Somalia, Togo, Zambia
Missing information	1 (2.5)	Eritrea

Source of data: UNESCO (2021b).

Note: As per data available as of June 22, 2021.

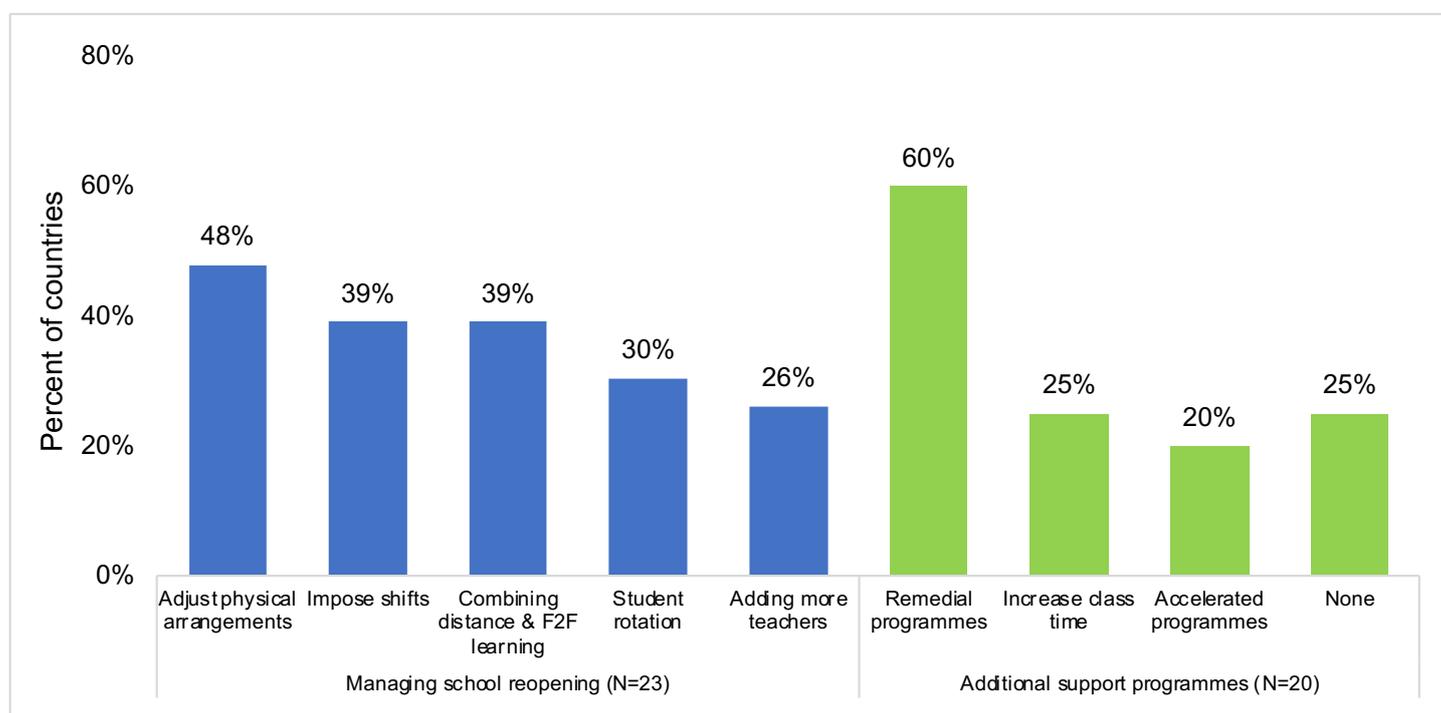
Six of the 40 GPE partner countries (Comoros, Côte d'Ivoire, Kenya, Malawi, Rwanda, and Uganda) placed teachers among the top priority group for the COVID-19 vaccination.

Adapting teaching, learning and assessment

Classroom adjustments included expanding infrastructure, splitting classrooms or grades, increasing seating, moving learning outdoors, and using other school facilities such as dining halls for learning to accommodate physical distancing and other COVID prevention.

Close to 30% of the GPE partner countries added more teaching staff to allow for smaller class sizes and greater physical distancing. Schools in some countries also set aside isolation rooms for suspected COVID-19 cases among learners and staff.

With the onset of COVID-19, many students struggled to keep pace in their academic work. To address this, countries introduced remedial catch-up programmes. The following Figure highlights how 23 GPE partners countries in Africa adapted to learning during school reopening.



Source of data: UNESCO, UNICEF, and World Bank (2020)

Note: Three countries (out of 23) where respondents indicated “Don’t Know” in questions regarding ‘Additional support programmes’ were excluded from the analysis. A list of the 23 countries that participated in this survey is provided under the first footnote in this policy brief.

Emerging research evidence

Research continues to emerge as school reopening unfolds. One area is the impact of COVID-19 on private schools, where some have either closed permanently or continue to experience financial hurdles despite reopening, and others have transferred their children to public schools.

Other emerging areas of research include the correlation between school reopening and community transmission, school management under strict COVID-19 protocols, low teacher motivation, tracking learner dropouts, teachers’ induction issues and socio-economic impacts of child undernutrition in Africa.

Call to action

African countries need to put in place robust contingency plans for better preparedness against future COVID-19-like disruptions to education. This calls for sustaining private sector investment in education, including infrastructure support to schools.

Governments also need policy reforms that promote flexible COVID-19 school reopening practices to support pregnant teen girls and mothers, and to ensure children and youth in vulnerable situations are not left behind in the reopening initiatives.

Sub-national collaboration is also key, especially among schools. Teachers require psychosocial support before, during, and after school reopening.

The following are some key policy recommendations.

- 1 Ensure that future preparedness strategies enable outreach to all children and stakeholders for education continuity.
- 2 Strengthen contingency planning to better respond to future education disruptions and ensure that response plans reflect the most current research evidence and best practices.
- 3 Consider the specific needs of the most vulnerable learners, who face extra barriers in returning to school, in the school reopening strategies. They are part of the mainstream education system and should not be left largely to humanitarian agencies.
- 4 Specifically target displaced and refugee children, hard-to-reach children from low-income families and girls in back-to-school campaigns. Budget sufficient funds to tailor communications, incentives, and other activities to increase their levels of re-enrollment.
- 5 Introduce professional development days and use other events planned in school calendars to foster sub-national level collaboration among schools, for peer learning and experience sharing in adapting learning strategies and protocols to strengthen school system resilience in future crises .
- 6 Provide infrastructure support to schools, especially to those lacking adequate water points and/or with insufficient space to accommodate the distancing needs of learners returning to school.
- 7 Offer teachers a range of additional supports to ensure their health and safety and guide them through the teaching and learning adaptations. This may entail additional professional development opportunities along with psychosocial support and prioritization for vaccination.



Photos: GPE



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