



Building a Europe
for and with children
Construire une Europe
pour et avec les enfants

COUNCIL OF EUROPE



CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

Strasbourg, 12 May 2021
CDENF(2021)12

Steering Committee for the Rights of the Child (CDENF)

Summary Report

CDENF Webinar series on COVID-19 and Children's Rights

1st edition – “Overcoming educational challenges”

Prepared by the Children's Rights Division

children@coe.int
www.coe.int/cdenf

Summary Report

CDEFN Webinar series on COVID-19 and Children's Rights

1st edition – “Overcoming educational challenges”

“Providing our children with education is our duty and responsibility, to ensure they can build their own future with the best possible tools at hand. Far too many children today are living in home conditions that prevent them from getting the education that they deserve. The COVID-19 crisis has exacerbated an already far too big a gap.”

[Josep Borrell, EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the European Commission]

I. Background

Following a thorough exchange of views on the challenges posed by COVID-19 to children's rights in June 2020¹, the Steering Committee for the Rights of the Child ([CDEFN](#)) entrusted the Secretariat to organise a webinar series on the most urgent issues threatening children's enjoyment of their rights in the context of the current pandemic. Each webinar is dedicated to a specific children's rights challenge: education, intra-family violence and mental health. While the first responses to these issues have been identified in a number of member states, implementing policies effectively remains a challenge for all countries. This is where the CDEFN webinars seek to make a contribution.

The aim of the webinar series on COVID-19 and children's rights is three-fold: (1) providing for a platform for exchanges on the most urgent challenges to children's rights;(2) enabling a focused exchange on national practices implemented in response to these challenges during the pandemic by governments and other organisations; and (3) increasing awareness of relevant stakeholders on specific children's rights issues and the management of the pandemic situation, bearing in mind the indivisible nature of human rights.

One year has now passed since the first lockdown in March 2020, and many European countries are still struggling to come to terms with the effects of the pandemic, including in the area of education which is a fundamental right of children. Therefore, the first of the three-webinar series tackled the difficulties concerning the implementation of appropriate policies in the area of education which is inextricably linked with many other areas that affect the enjoyment of children's rights, besides their future opportunities.

¹ The summary report of the CDEFN exchange held in June 2020 is available [here](#).

II. Main features of the webinar

On Monday 22 March 2021, the Council of Europe held the 1st edition of the CDENF webinar series on COVID-19 and children's rights focused on "Overcoming education challenges". The event was aimed at reflecting on ways to implement children's right to education during the pandemic with no discrimination, while considering possible actions to improve the adaptability of education systems to similar crises in the future. In particular, a strong emphasis was placed on issues of **inclusion and equal access to education for all children**, while taking due account of their fundamental **social and protection needs**.

The event was moderated by Maria Andriana Kostopoulou, Chair of the CDENF, and involved the contribution of a number of speakers, including the Chairperson of the Steering Committee for Education Policy and Practice (CDPPE), Maria Fassari, national delegations from six member states (Bulgaria, Hungary, Luxembourg, Malta, Norway, Portugal), representatives of major international organisations (UNICEF, OECD and WHO) and two children sharing their personal experiences (in France and Portugal, respectively). Due to their presence in particular, the webinar was held without direct participation of the press, in order to limit unwarranted communication about the ideas exchanged. More than **80 invited CDENF members, participants and observers, as well as experts from all over Europe**, attended the event.

The event was an excellent opportunity for participants to hear the multifaceted perspectives of different stakeholders in the area of education and engage in in-depth discussions with them. On the one hand, international organisations provided the audience with an **overview and of measures taken** in different European countries to waive the impact of COVID-19 on children's right to education and the most recent trends that were taking shape with a view to the recovery phase, issuing **policy recommendations** drawn from scientific research and analysis. On the other hand, representatives of national governments highlighted their countries' approaches in the area of education during the pandemic, touching upon many aspects, including **digital schooling, inclusion, students' wellbeing** in times of lockdowns, the **support provided to children and families through schools**, the situation of **children in alternative care** and the importance of **solid national inter-agency coordination**.²

III. Mapping out the impact, the challenges and opportunities posed by COVID-19 in education settings

a) Impact and challenges of remote learning

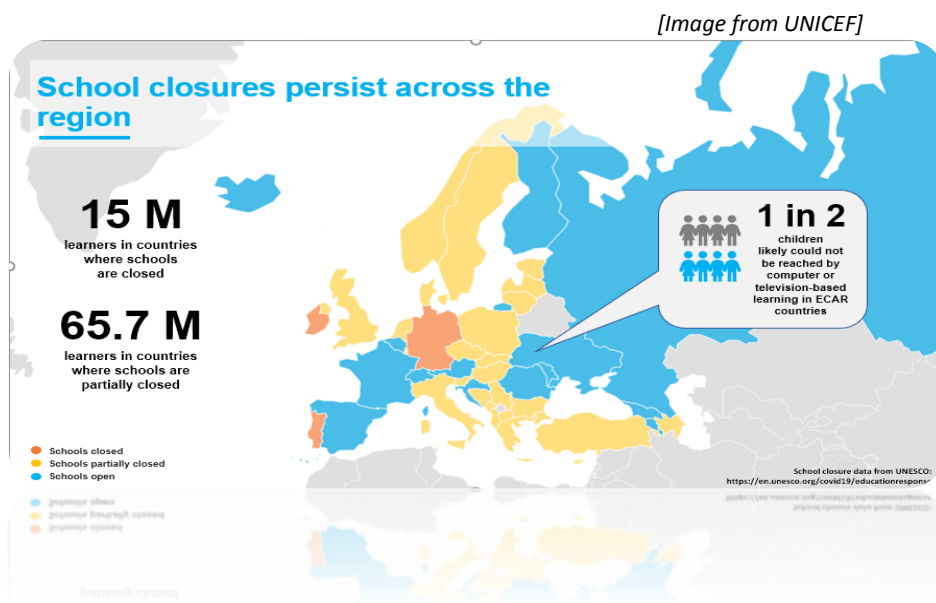
During the past year, many countries around the world went into lockdown to limit the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite the different policy measures adopted by Council of Europe member states, all countries experienced the challenge of **adapting to the new circumstances and their implications in the education sector almost overnight**. This placed significant stress on both educational institutions and the children themselves.

² To see the full programme of the event please click [here](#).

One of the main impacts of COVID-19 was the exacerbation of existing inequalities characterising many European countries, resulting in **one in two children likely not to be reached by remote learning**. Indeed, **children in vulnerable situations**, such as children with disabilities or children in institutions, suffered most from the changes in the education sphere. Specialised services meant to support such groups of children were not always considered a priority, resulting in limitations to provide alternative care to children in need or in being unable to support children with disabilities and their families via digital tools.

Similarly, **children from disadvantaged backgrounds** and **national minorities** were also particularly hit by the pandemic due to both language barriers and lack of appropriate equipment and housing, which the hardest group to reach through online learning. Roma girls in particular have been found to be at heightened risk of school drop-out after such disruptions and falling behind in education.

Overall, in many countries, the shift to remote learning hindered children's **well-being** and posed challenges to **online safety**. A significant increase in cases of **intra-family violence** was observed all over Europe, due to higher stress levels put on households and the lack of opportunities for children to spend time outside their home. Also, the rates of online sexual violence and cyberbullying, including amongst peers, reached levels of great concern. **Disruptions of social services** for children and families caused by COVID-19-related measures resulted in case management limitations which often prevented timely and swift intervention in serious cases of violence and neglect. Safety nets previously provided by educational institutions had become unavailable, preventing the detection of signs of violence against children by professionals who are usually working in direct contact with children.



b) Turning challenges into opportunities: general positive developments

Ensuring the enjoyment of children's right to education is a public responsibility and many governments were trying to adapt to the new circumstances by experimenting different policy strategies. European states approached the issue of education in a rather heterogenous manner, including cases in which face-to-face classes were kept unchanged by establishing strict health safety protocols, and others in which schools were closed and classes completely turned to online functioning. There were also countries which opted for **mixed approaches of remote and face-to-face learning** simultaneously, to accommodate every child's needs.

Different Council of Europe member states have been exploring a number of innovative tools to face the challenges posed by the pandemic. While in principle the change from face-to-face to online classes represented a disadvantage for some groups of children, governments felt encouraged and compelled to seek inclusive digital solutions precisely for those children. Indeed, in many countries **technological equipment was distributed** to disadvantaged children and families; **public Wi-Fi** was installed to ensure the broadest coverage; **video-conference tools** were developed to keep contact with pupils and new **online platforms** to supply different educational resources have played a major role in keeping education going throughout the pandemic.

Due to the increase in intra-family violence and to children's lack of contact with teachers, many member states have recognised the importance of properly **functioning and shock-responsive child protection services** at all times, including during emergencies such as the COVID-19 pandemic. **Mental-health support** was also acknowledged as crucial. In this context, the new wave of digitalisation underway has helped to partially **move professional trainings online**, redesign child protection and support services, and encouraged the creation of online databases speeding up case management. Moreover, **children's access to support services** and hotlines was improved.

Following the first wave of COVID-19, when the previously underestimated impact of the pandemic on children had started coming to light, the argument that preventive **Child Rights Impact Assessments (CRIAs)**³ could have avoided such great violations of their rights became undeniable. Since then, international organisations, such as UNICEF and the European Network for Ombudsman for Children (ENOC), have made great efforts to further develop such tools and advance their use in different countries.

What do the children have to say?

Gonçalo Felipe da Cruz (Portugal, 12 years old) underlined that, when the pandemic had started, students and teachers did not have time to prepare for the shift to online classes, and children were confused. The fact that some students **did not have the necessary equipment** for online learning as well as a **dedicated space** for studying was a challenge. The increased time spent in front of screens was tiring and limited children's opportunities to be outside and see their friends, thus making them suffer from **isolation**. On the bright side, he mentioned children learning to use new technologies as a positive aspect of these sudden changes. Gonçalo argued that in the event of a new pandemic, **all children should receive the necessary equipment** to work from home. Finally, he stated that during a pandemic, **people's health should be the priority** rather than money, and he asked the following question to the audience:

*"As I feel that countries don't define their priorities,
I would like to ask what you think should be the priority of a country that faces a pandemic?"*

June Jedele (13 years old) maintained that meeting the needs of individual children in an online environment was difficult. **Learning at home also did not guarantee proper integration**. The **social challenges** of the pandemic were described as immense, compromising also extracurricular activities. The **emotional and social losses** of children were significant. Schools were typically the most stable environments that children had, and therefore their closure greatly affected all of them.

³ Fundamental Rights Agency's definition of CRIA, available [here](#).

Overall, it was maintained that innovations occurred during the pandemic would most likely be refined and retained afterwards, as they contribute to more equal opportunities for all children in education.⁴

IV. Good practices in fulfilling children's education needs during the pandemic

During the three thematic sessions of the webinar, six member states shared their practices in specific areas related to children's enjoyment of their right to education in times of COVID-19. The impact of the pandemic was a forceful reminder that education is not only important for delivering academic achievements but also in providing multiple support, including by assisting children in their physical and emotional wellbeing and tackling pivotal issues characterising our societies, such as school dropouts, poverty and social exclusion. In this report, the practices shared by member states at the event were integrated with those provided by other countries and/or international organisations.

1) Between face-to-face and digital schooling: inclusion challenges

In Croatia, the majority of teachers had been **trained in digital skills** prior to the pandemic, as a result of previous education policies. Because of this comparative advantage, their transition to a digital learning environment was relatively smooth compared to other European countries.

Similarly, in Hungary, a digital education strategy had already been created before the pandemic, and a considerable **budget allocated** to digital forms of education. To reduce the risks associated with the increased use of the internet by children, the Hungarian government provided for a set of programmes to **fight cyberbullying**. Moreover, it **monitored the learning progress** of children by conducting a detailed survey to identify the educational gaps. On this basis, new services and tools to reduce children's difficulties were introduced, including services to compensate for developmental issues, which received funding from the Home Office and foresaw, for example, the funding of mobile devices for children.

In Bulgaria, the government funded the purchase of computers and other digital equipment for teachers and students. **Inclusive education** was a deliberate goal, and different support services were provided online. The government created **guidelines for all educational establishments** in the country to face the learning needs of students. New online platforms and tools were established to reach out to all children, including with programmes offering therapeutic activities. **Communication between educational institutions and parents** was also improved. In terms of actions aimed at children who were at risk or dropped out of school, the Bulgarian government set up an **inter-institutional mechanism** to make sure that each child who was not on the national list of pupils be reintegrated into schools. More than 50.000 students were brought back into education in this way, and the school dropout statistics significantly improved.

In France, to ensure children's online safety, schools and teachers were in contact with the ministry of education and held in-depth **exchanges with the Data Protection Officer (DPO)** to learn how to comply with basic safety rules for the use of personal accounts. In this way, they were able to give comprehensive information to all data subjects, warning them about the process that should in no way involve surveillance and monitoring of teachers' performance and of the behaviour of pupils.

⁴ The Council of Europe Steering Committee for Education Policy and Practice (CDDEP) has adopted a [Political Declaration on the education responses to COVID-19](#) and a related [roadmap for action](#).

2) Tackling students' wellbeing in times of COVID-19

During the pandemic, Luxembourg oversaw children's well-being through **solid institutional structures** and **rapid responses** specifically targeted at the effects of the COVID-19 crisis on children. The well-being of students, as well as their school performance, were set as a double **priority**. The implementation of education policies and psychosocial practice for the well-being of children in schools were delivered through **individual support** and **different forms of teaching** (formal and informal), which radically helped children to overcome difficult moments spent in isolation and to master several techniques to alleviate anxiety or stress-related issues. Communication with the parents and the establishment of a helpline, among others, were essential parts of fulfilling this strategy. A **guide for professionals** containing good practices was produced to train educational staff on how to deal with the well-being of children throughout the pandemic and such tools will continued to be used after the current pandemic.

The practices highlighted during the presentation were all part of a multi-disciplinary approach which consisted in the following main actions:

- **Outreach to prevent dropping out of school** – specialised services tried to get in touch with children at risk while they were still in school so that they can benefit from measures immediately, much faster than in the past because there was often an administrative gap;
- **Online teleconsultations** – to keep in touch with young people;
- **Specialised prevention teams** - Teams deployed on a case-by-case basis to avoid tragic events from occurring;
- **Implementation of training programmes** to make sure that at least 10% of education staff are trained in mental health issues.

3) Specific challenges

Some challenges had been identified as particularly significant in the run-up to the webinar and thus received particular attention through selected country examples.

i. Assisting children in situations of increased risks due to lockdowns

In Portugal universal access to education was ensured by introducing **daily 30-minute thematic talks** broadcasted on different TV channels and adapted to all educational levels, connectivity options and levels of risk faced by children. Importantly, these talks contained essential aspects of the school curricula and they were aimed at both assisting children in situations of increased risks and at supporting schools in tackling their students' needs.

In this context, to determine the type of learning assistance to provide to each child, a **needs assessment** was carried out by the local Commissions for child and youth protection attributing one of the three-color codes (green, yellow and red) to the students, based on the analysis of data led by the case manager. During school closures, children with the yellow code were regularly given remote and onsite technical and pedagogical support, in light of a periodic assessment, while children with a red code were allowed to attend designated school premises (1250 children fell in the latter category throughout the last year).

ii. Social exclusion and schooling for children in alternative care – support provided through schools

In Malta, children in alternative care (amounting to more than 500) are mostly placed in foster care and the rest are in residential care, trying to have as many children as possible in families rather than in institutions. To ensure these children's equal access to education, the government gave out laptops and ensured that they had access to online learning platforms and resources. In addition, the government also **delivered lunches** to all the children who were dependent on the school system for their daily meals. **After-school and "look-after" services** were established to ensure that all children were attending online classes and support their well-being.

Through the continued participatory activities carried out in the homes during the pandemic, children expressed gratitude for the assistance they had received in these difficult COVID-19 times. Moreover, children also maintained that **the education system should generally be more sensitive to their needs** and adapted to their behavioural difficulties. Indeed, professionals were found to commonly judge too quickly the behaviour of a child just because they know that a child is in care, or because they lack specific knowledge on a child's condition. The key challenge was to make children co-operate rather than compete by engaging them in **informal learning activities** to ensure their education as well as their well-being. Children showed great resilience and creativity, due to additional stimulation.

iii. National inter-agency coordination to address educational challenges during COVID-19

In Norway, the Directorate for Children, Youth and Family Affairs started in April 2020 with an initial mapping of the impact of COVID-19 on children and services, finding that many services for children and youth had closed down. The Directorate then got the mandate from the government to set-up an **inter-agency coordination group** consisting of the eight Directorates that work with children and youth at the national level. The short-term goal was to gather data and to understand how the actual situation on the ground was, as services' self-assessments were considered less reliable than objective assessments carried out by a state agency. The inter-agency coordination group's voice contributed to keep kindergartens and primary schools open during the pandemic, which benefitted many children and parents alike.

V. Main takeaways and lessons learned

The event has produced an excellent pool of recommendations for future crisis management and recovery strategies. The following main points were retained from the different presentations and endorsed by all participants:

- **Schools must remain opened** at all times, including during a health crisis.⁵ School closures have long-lasting effects, amplifying cognitive, social and emotional disadvantages.
- **Digital learning systems should be inclusive** from the outset, and teachers should be able to maintain regular contacts with their students and monitor their learning progress.
- **Children's data protection and privacy must be reconciled** and taken more seriously.
- According to national experiences, **education should not remain entirely online** in the future, and **long phases of remote learning should be avoided** in case of a new pandemic.

⁵ See the latest WHO Technical Advisory Group's (TAG) [Recommendations on schooling during COVID-19](#).

- A **sufficient number of teachers** should be hired to reduce class sizes, which may serve to improve infection control as well as child health and educational outcomes.
- **Teachers must be trained** to teach online and to identify children’s special needs when remote learning takes place.
- When school capacity is limited, **young and disadvantaged children should be prioritised**. Services and support provided to them in normal times should be ensured also during emergency situations (e.g. meals, educational support, psychological assistance, etc.).
- Ensure **reliability and predictability of services** for students and parents
- **Child protection systems must be flexible, adaptive** and in a position to work effectively also during public emergencies, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.
- The best **balance between infection controls and overall child well-being** needs to be identified and maintained.
- **Resources have to be aligned with needs** by using funding formulas to ensure that resources reflect the specific social and economic needs of students and schools.
- **Interdisciplinary cooperation** is key, including the involvement of child protection services.
- **Robust institutional structures** and **shock-responsive services** should be established and maintained in the future.
- **The development of a common language across sectors is important to understand** each other’s priorities but also how one’s priorities affect others.
- For better recovery from the consequences of the pandemic, **data, resources, responsibility, quality services and political leadership are key elements**.
- **All the tools that have been developed to address the challenges of the pandemic should remain relevant** and be used also outside of the context of the pandemic.

List of resources:

- [CDENF: COVID-19 pandemic responses – Lessons learnt from management and adaptation to ensure that children are treated as rights holders during the pandemic](#)
- [CDENF: Factsheet "the COVID-19 pandemic and children: Challenges, responses and policy implication"](#)
- [Council of Europe Guidelines on Children’s Data Protection in an Education setting](#)
- Steering Committee for Policy and Practice (CDPPE) [Political Declaration on the education responses to the COVID-19 crisis](#) + [roadmap for action](#)
- [Council of Europe Digital Citizenship Education Handbook](#)
- [UNICEF data hub on COVID-19 and children](#)
- [WHO Recommendations from the Technical Advisor Group \(TAG\) for Schooling during COVID-19](#)
- [OECD Centre on Well-being, Inclusion, Sustainability and Equal Opportunity \(WISE\)](#)
- [OECD: The impact of COVID-19 on Education – Insights from Education at a glance 2020](#)