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Invest in and work with teachers: the imperative for COVID-19 recovery in education

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1.6 billion. This is the number of learners that have been affected by what will be remembered as “[the largest disruption of education systems in history](#)”. But as COVID-19 continues to take its toll, what do we know about the impact of the pandemic on teachers and how can we mitigate its long-term effects on education?

Education like we’ve never seen it before

In March 2020, [Education International’s global membership survey](#) revealed a picture of almost universal school closures, leaving teachers and education support personnel on the front line, struggling to provide emergency remote education to their students. In Europe, this meant mostly online teaching and learning - a completely new experience for which most teachers lacked training, tools and support. In some cases, educators were providing both in person *and* distance learning. The initial phase of the pandemic was also marked by a leadership vacuum, as governments scrambled to develop new policies and workable solutions.

Education was in crisis mode. [Learning new skills and tools within days](#), transforming their professional practice on a dime, addressing a new host of problems like [Zoom bombing](#) day in and day out – this is the ongoing pandemic reality for teachers across Europe. When many governments failed to provide support, teachers supported each other. Teacher networks flourished on all social media platforms and were abuzz with advice and creative ideas to make this strange situation work for their students, in spite of everything.

But it wasn’t all tools and pedagogy. Most of the teachers I spoke to at this time were concerned about their [students’ wellbeing](#). Did they have a device and internet to participate in classes? Did they have a quiet place to study? Had they had breakfast that morning or lunch that afternoon? Had they lost someone to the virus? Were they safe at home? Beyond keeping up with curricula, these were the questions teachers struggled with every day. For many, this meant long days and late nights calling students and parents one by one and trying to help as much as they could. Somewhere in the background, teachers also had their personal lives to keep up with, family responsibilities to shoulder and constant anxiety to overcome. Despite all these challenges, teachers have stepped up and have shown [outstanding leadership](#) and dedication to their students, all at great personal cost. The long hours and unsustainable workloads have led to deteriorating wellbeing across the profession.

To make matters worse, the female-dominated teaching workforce experienced disproportionately high pressure at home as well. In addition to the expanded professional responsibilities, female teachers also saw their care burden surge. Preparing for and teaching classes online, checking up on

individual students and supporting them, all while caring for their own children and family at home has put many teachers on the verge of burnout.

Education unions report that an increasing number of teachers are planning to leave the profession. The attrition rates we are likely to witness in the aftermath of COVID-19 are a major concern and could spell disaster in Europe and beyond.

Working together: Strong unions and the power of social dialogue

Since the beginning of the pandemic, teachers turned to unions in unprecedented numbers. I am happy to say education unions were there for their members, providing information, support, training, and representation throughout the crisis.

Education systems where governments engaged with unions have weathered this storm much better than those where teachers were not at the decision-making table. Social and policy dialogue during this crisis has meant taking decisions informed by practitioners and with the support of the workforce that implements them. It made the difference between countries where teachers confidently returned to school knowing everything had been done to support them and ensure the safety of students and staff, and countries where teachers felt their life was in danger and their professionalism ignored, if not disregarded.

Where do we go from here? From crisis to opportunity

Just weeks ago, at the end of April 2021, Education International and the OECD jointly released [10 Principles for Effective and Equitable Educational Recovery](#), a practical road map for a collaborative way forward for nations and their education systems. Naturally, educators are at the very core of the recovery process.

As schools reopen, teachers are expected to make up for lost time and minimise the long-term effects of the crisis on students' education. An already overwhelmed workforce running on fumes cannot be expected to do this without support. Investing in and working with the profession are absolute imperatives going forward.

How do we combat attrition? Education International advocates for [equity audits](#) to be conducted at all levels of education to assess the impact of the pandemic on both students and educators and inform effective and equitable recovery. A whole host of measures can and should be taken urgently to support the profession: improve working conditions and terms of employment; provide continuous professional development; establish new, or improve existing, mechanisms for consulting and listening to the profession. Addressing teachers' wellbeing and focusing on the gendered impacts of the COVID-19 crisis are also critical steps.

While the pandemic has exacerbated many existing problems that must be addressed without delay, it has also created new challenges. The [technology that has transformed education overnight](#) requires governance structures and teachers must be included in the decision-making on how technology is used in their schools and classrooms. Questions around [copyright exceptions in education](#), data privacy and protecting students and teaching staff online must be answered. [Private actors](#) with profit-driven agendas cannot be allowed to determine the provision of the universal right to education. Public education systems must be strengthened and made more resilient.



How will we know if governments are serious about building back better in education? A leading indicator will be a collaborative approach that includes teachers and their unions. We are ready to play our part.

