



## Education equity and the lessons of the COVID-19 pandemic

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# **Education equity and the lessons of the COVID-19 pandemic**

**Intro** [00:00:02] Welcome to OECD podcasts, where policy meets people.

**Kate Lancaster** [00:00:07] September 2021 has brought a very literal “back to school” in most OECD countries. Many students are returning to in-person learning at last, after months of classes taught partially or entirely online. School closures have been significant across the OECD, with 55 in-person learning days lost on average for pre-primary schoolchildren, and as many as 100 days lost on average for high school students. So what has the impact been on young people's learning and wellbeing? Which groups of students have been the most affected by closures? What are the long-term implications for both individuals and countries? I am Kate Lancaster, and you are listening to OECD podcasts. To answer these questions and to discuss what countries can do to strengthen equity in education; I am speaking with Marie-Hélène Doumet, senior analyst for education and skills at the OECD. Welcome, Marie-Hélène, and thank you for being here today.

**Marie-Hélène Doumet** [00:01:09] Thank you, Kate.

**Kate Lancaster** [00:01:11] So we know the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on education has been huge. Can you walk us through the key numbers?

**Marie-Hélène Doumet** [00:01:20] Certainly. So more than one year into the COVID pandemic, close to half the world's students are still affected by partial or full school closures. Now, of course, the number of school lockdown days. So what I mean by that is when schools were fully closed. And here we are not counting holiday periods or weekends or anything, but the number of actual instruction days for schools were closed. You know, very differently across countries, but also across education levels. And what we find is that schools closed for longer periods at higher levels of education. So, for example, between the start of 2020 and until May 2021, Key primary schools were closed for about 55 days on average, compared to more than 100 days at upper secondary level.

**Kate Lancaster** [00:02:08] So high school?

**Marie-Hélène Doumet** [00:02:09] Yes, high school. So if we want to bring this back relative to the number of our students but have normally spent in school on a full year, this represents around 28% of total instructional days for pre-primary children. But more than half of their instruction days for high school children.

**Kate Lancaster** [00:02:29] And so that means not that those 50% of days was completely lost, that there was no education happening, but that it wasn't happening in person.

**Marie-Hélène Doumet** [00:02:38] Yes, exactly. Schools shut down, but students did not stop learning. They just shifted the learning to happen at home. Almost all schools across OECD countries closed down. But if we look at what happened in 2021, we see that the situation is quite different. In addition, most schools closed for shorter periods in 2021 than in 2020.

**Kate Lancaster** [00:03:05] How have different students been affected? Has everyone been affected in the same way by school closures and this shift to more online learning?

**Marie-Hélène Doumet** [00:03:13] We can already see if we take from the perspective of an education level, pre-primary education there has been a lot of focus on that, particularly to keep them open. And there are different reasons why many countries have really insisted on keeping them open as much as possible. The first one is that there is a strong recognition and awareness now of the importance of the early years for children's, cognitive, social and emotional skills. The second reason is that distance learning is just very difficult for children at such a young age. They cannot sit still in front of a computer screen, and it is probably not desirable for them to do so. I mean, we would not want our children to stay on screens for hours on end neither, because they are so young. And the third reason is once confinement started to alleviate a bit and people started returning to work, having children go back to school was really essential to allow their parents to turn back to work. Another level that has also been hardly hit, I would say, is vocational education and training. There are two reasons for that. One of the first reasons is that this is a very practically oriented programme.

**Kate Lancaster** [00:04:26] Very hands on.

**Marie-Hélène Doumet** [00:04:27] Yes, very hands on. And while the theoretical component of vocational education can, of course, happen online, all the practise, the field based work, all that is very challenging. The other issue with vocational education is that a lot of them are having a work-based component where they need to go in an enterprise and work for some time there. But with COVID and with the economic situation, a lot of those who are not able to provide the apprenticeships that they usually to.

**Kate Lancaster** [00:04:58] We talk a lot about the digital divide, but I am wondering how that translates for children and for young adults.

**Marie-Hélène Doumet** [00:05:03] Well, we talk a lot about the digital divide. Students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, or from from less well-off families, might not have the connectivity in place to connect remotely to distance learning, and even when they do, their connexions might not be stable enough. They might also not have a quiet place at home to study. So all this affects their learning environment, which, you know, really isn't effective for quality learning to take place. Beyond that, also learning from home requires a certain set of, you know, other skills that perhaps are not taught so much within the school. You know, like, being able to learn on your own, autonomy. Also perseverance and commitment. It's not easy to just in front of a screen and to manage your own time and to know when you need to connect, when you need to study, when we need to do your homework. So all that also, I think children who already had a hard time engaging with education in school will probably find it even more difficult when they're less guidance at home.

**Kate Lancaster** [00:06:09] Well, it's interesting what you say, the challenges that were already there, because while it's true that these differences and inequalities are quite striking, I think this is something the OECD has been drawing attention to for a long time now that the fact that we need to aim for equity and educational opportunities.

**Marie-Hélène Doumet** [00:06:29] These inequalities have always been there. The OECD Programme for International Student Assessment, what we refer to as PISA, provides information on all students performance when they're 15, just at the end of compulsory education. And it also looks at how their performance varies across a number of the various equity dimensions like gender, socioeconomic status, the country of origin, just to name some. And what we find is that across these dimensions, socioeconomic status is the one that affects students' performance the most. So what we see, for example, across OECD countries, is that the share of students that achieve PISA level to the system, the minimal level that we expect adults to attain at least be able to lead fruitful lives.

**Kate Lancaster** [00:07:17] And can I just interject PISA measures skills in reading and science and mathematics.

**Marie-Hélène Doumet** [00:07:23] So here I am, referring to reading scores. So the share of students that are achieved at least PISA-level 2 in reading down from the lowest socioeconomic backgrounds is around 30% lower than the share of students that reached this level from the highest socioeconomic backgrounds.

**Kate Lancaster** [00:07:42] So even before the constraints and challenges posed by COVID, we were already seen quite a striking difference.

**Marie-Hélène Doumet** [00:07:49] Yes, exactly. Now, some countries were better simply at achieving equitable outcomes. So for example, this was the case in Canada, Estonia and Finland, where the difference is less than 15% for those from the most advantaged families and the most disadvantaged families. It is extremely high, if we take the case of Brazil or Mexico, this difference is more than 50%.

**Kate Lancaster** [00:08:13] So what do you think the long term impact could be?

**Marie-Hélène Doumet** [00:08:18] the most immediate impact is that they are likely to learn less, If they're likely to learn less, those that already had trouble engaging in school before the pandemic will have even more difficulty doing so. They will disengage even further. They might even drop out of education altogether. And of course, the risk of not having upper secondary education means that this might have a longer term impacts on the economic and labour market outcomes of individuals. The employment rate of those that don't have enough for secondary education is 20% points below those that have a university degree, and they also earn less. But even going beyond the money, it's not just about employment, it's not just about earnings. Many social outcomes are associated with higher education. For example, better health, more involvement in community, in government also being more connected to other people. And we find that the higher educational attainment people have, the more likely they are to engage in these other activities.

**Kate Lancaster** [00:09:23] So this is a lot of pressure for this back to school. What do we need to do to improve equity in education both now and as the pandemic eases?

**Marie-Hélène Doumet** [00:09:33] there, there'll be another number of things that will need to be done. So first, I would say the countries have done a great job in really ramping up investment in education to help the education system response for the pandemic. Now, two thirds of countries increased funding in 2020. More than three quarters of them did so in 2021. This is very positive, but it will be really important to help sustain this investment in the future. It is not so much how much expense that is important, but also how we spend it and how countries spend it and make sure that learning is effective and it is efficient. I would focus perhaps on three elements.

The first one is making sure that we invest in the audience. So this is extremely important. We have evidence that shows that those who attend early childhood education and care are more likely to perform later in school and in life, and also to acquire the solid foundations of social and emotional skills that will then carry them throughout their lifetime.

The second one is investing in teachers. You know, we've seen with the pandemic that a lot of teachers were not trained in terms of ICT. They don't have the digital skills to shift so quickly to digital learning. But again, during the pandemic, many countries have tried to have quickly provided services to help teachers rise up to this task.

Finally, the last one, I would say, is to invest in adult learning. We're living in unprecedented times. The world is changing at such a pace that adult learning is really crucial to make sure individuals can adapt to the changes and develop new skills throughout their career as the world evolves. And this is really important for all adults, the high skilled ones and those in low-skilled occupations as well. In high technology sectors, workers need to update their competencies to be able to keep pace with the changing techniques. In low-technology sectors, it's more the risk of automation and losing their job, so they need to reskill as well. So it really impacts all all adults. But what we see is that still only half of 25 to 64 year olds participate in some form of formal or non-formal training before the pandemic.

**Kate Lancaster** [00:12:02] By formal, you mean like signing up for a certification course or training in a classroom, and informal is more on the job or with colleagues or training provided at work.

**Marie-Hélène Doumet** [00:12:14] Formal is a recognised credential from an institution and non-formal would be, for example, a training that's developed by a company. For example, you would do within your workplace,

**Kate Lancaster** [00:12:28] and you said only about 50 percent of kind of prime-age workers participate in in either one of those kinds of training. Do we know anything about which kinds of workers are more likely to participate?

**Marie-Hélène Doumet** [00:12:40] So those with high skills are more likely to participate in some form of adult learning. Those that already have a higher education degree are more likely to participate in than those that don't. Also, the younger, more likely to participate than older adults as well. So yes, there is. There is work that needs to be done to promote adult learning to those that need it the most. We actually look at the data on barriers to adult learning and under the top three reasons reported for not engaging in some form of adult learning, relates to either cost, schedule or family barriers, particularly when it comes to women or family reasons like taking care of children. And that's where we see where perhaps during the pandemic, what happened is that all three of those were suddenly hit and people had less time because they were juggling so many different tasks. Family reasons also increased to particularly for those who had children at home and tried to combine work with home schooling and then cost as well, with the economic

crisis. That also was a factor. What we see is that participation dropped by about 27% in EU countries second quarter of 2020 compared to 2019.

**Kate Lancaster** [00:14:02] And to me, that's very striking because we've also have at OECD about the kinds of jobs that have been most affected by COVID, and a lot of them are mid or low skilled jobs. And these are the same kind of people and positions where people are not having access to training.

**Marie-Hélène Doumet** [00:14:17] Yes, I mean, the sectors that are more most affected by COVID were in the hospitality sectors, the tourism sectors, you know, in contrast, though, but there were there was a lot of creation of opportunities as well. There was more demand and the health sector. There was a lot of demand also in the digital sector. Jobs for computer programming that also rose during the pandemic. So it's again, it's a question about being able to reskill, adapt and to

**Kate Lancaster** [00:14:49] continue learning throughout your life, but to have the opportunity to do that and the means.

**Marie-Hélène Doumet** [00:14:55] Yeah, exactly. Well, the good news is that data from the third and fourth quarter of 2020 already show the participation rates would have increased. That is good. Yes, so there is some good news.

**Kate Lancaster** [00:15:07] Another thing that when were you thinking about jobs and skills and learning from the pandemic that has been very striking to me is the reminder it gave us of how important many jobs, that we might describe as vocational, are in the frontline service jobs, the frontline health worker jobs. I was wondering if you have anything to share with us on that?

**Marie-Hélène Doumet** [00:15:27] The pandemic has definitely brought to the forefront all of these vocational jobs. They were all considered essential services, most of them. During the pandemic they were the only ones who were keeping society afloat while everyone was confined. There is probably an opportunity here as well, as we think about the lessons that we learnt from the pandemic that we want to carry over with us. Vocational education was traditionally considered as something you would not go to directly on your own, but more something that you, for example, if you didn't perform well academically, then you would go down that road. Many countries as well have neglected vocational education for a number of years, you know, focussing many of their efforts on developing higher education. But it is something probably with a pandemic, we do see that it has restored a bit of the attractiveness of some of these vocational professions. There is an opportunity here, perhaps to raise the attractiveness do have more efforts in terms of informing individuals so that going into these pathways is not just one of last resort. The data and education plans that we also show, which is that the share of students without tertiary educated parents who go into tertiary education is very low compared to those who do have tertiary education parents.

**Kate Lancaster** [00:16:58] So if your parents have a university degree, you're more likely to go to university, and if they don't, you're not.

**Marie-Hélène Doumet** [00:17:03] Yes, exactly. But the opposite is true for vocational class. So when parents don't have a tertiary degree, you're more likely to go into a vocational class than they did in the sense that so often it's not a question of choice, so much as just doing what you're used to and what you're used to seeing in your environment. And that's why this will be a huge opportunity to highlight what vocational education is, the benefits it brings to society, to give students the choice, a real choice beyond just what they see in their household. It's not just making sure that disadvantaged students have the same opportunities as more advantaged ones. It's also making sure that everyone has the same opportunities and is aware of all of the opportunities so they can really make informed decisions about their pathways.

**Kate Lancaster** [00:17:55] Well, thank you. And as we wrap up, are there any other lessons you'd like to share with our listeners?

**Marie-Hélène Doumet** [00:18:00] I would say that COVID-19 has caused a lot of disruption because a lot of suffering, of course. But we've also seen a lot of experimentation and a lot of innovation come out of it. I think it's these that we should build on if we want to continue working towards more inclusion in education and society more generally. I mean, there's been very, very interesting developments around the world. You know, teachers and students have come together with parents, with business, with civil society to try and help students learn, give them access to digital materials. I think the interaction between teachers and students became closer as well during confinement. And teachers were more empowered as well to focus on those students, which they felt needed it the most. I think it's those lessons that we can carry forward with us as we continue to build stronger out of this pandemic.

**Kate Lancaster** [00:19:02] Marie-Hélène Doumet, thank you very much for speaking with us today. It's been a pleasure.

**Marie-Hélène Doumet** [00:19:07] Thank you very much.

**Kate Lancaster** [00:19:08] To learn more about the issues we've been discussing today, go to [OECD.ORG/coronavirus/en/education-equity](https://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/en/education-equity)

**Speaker 3** [00:19:22] To listen to other OECD podcasts, find us on iTunes, Spotify, Google Podcasts, [SoundCloud.com/OECD](https://www.soundcloud.com/OECD).