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## [Sustaining learning communities through and beyond COVID-19](#)

### [Blog](#)

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[The post originally appeared on the NORRAG blog.](#)

*The author explores how normal social interactions and routines have been suspended by the closure of schools during COVID – 19, thereby creating a new reality to which we must adapt. He suggests that we must invest in advance, to prepare ourselves for future crises and emergencies.*

According to [UNESCO](#), 1.58 billion students who would normally be in school or university are now at home, representing more than 91% of total enrolled learners. 191 countries have implemented country-wide closures of their schools and universities.

Just weeks ago, it would have been unimaginable to hear so many governments telling students not to go to school or university, and workers not to go to work unless essential. Their message now is to **'stay at home'**.

Although countries are experiencing the [COVID-19](#) pandemic in different ways, and to different [timeframes](#), there is a growing sense that humanity is in this together. In general, national [policy responses](#) appear to have converged rather than diverged, including in the area of education.

Such extensive school closures reveal a lot about what societies think about education and the role of schools in particular. Ideas such as 'going to school', or 'dropping out of school', and indeed 'school closures' refer to the buildings where schooling takes place, and not to the people who make up the school – the learning community. Under COVID-19, with adequate support, students and staff can continue learning and teaching, although physically apart.

The first knee-jerk reaction to COVID-19 school closures was often to turn to education technologies. To compensate for the closure of school buildings, the priority was to mobilize '[distance learning solutions](#)'. Students, teachers and parents or carers rapidly had to adopt digital technologies to

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enable the transfer of curriculum-based studies to virtual spaces and homes, to minimize disruption to learning and teaching. Whether through low technology radio and television programmes, or hi-tech mobile applications, the vision was the same – to build learning environments that did not depend upon school buildings.

If, however, the idea of ‘school’ had been primarily understood as the people, meaning the learning community of students, staff, parents and other stakeholders – and not the buildings – the initial and subsequent reactions may have been different. Instead of material, technological, response to closures, there may have been a more humanistic response, prioritising human relationships and the wide-ranging needs of children, youth, and adults subjected to social distancing. Sustaining the health and socio-emotional well-being of students, teachers, parents, and others – especially the most vulnerable – might have received more immediate attention than curriculum-based learning. Priority to contact and communication between schools, homes and communities, and the provision of information and counselling, could have informed needs assessments and decisions about services required and which, if any, technologies to deploy.

Under social distancing, girls and boys, youth and adults, are not only prevented from their normal social interactions and routines, but they are also forced to adapt to new circumstances, in a wide variety of conditions, with minimal social, emotional, or psychological support. Extracurricular and other social activities are also disrupted. Many students no longer benefit from [school meals](#), sanitary facilities, or other health and social services previously accessed inside school buildings. For learners whose exams have been cancelled or postponed, a decisive milestone in their lives has disappeared. Anxiety about exams has been replaced with anxiety about COVID-19, educational and professional prospects, and plans. All of us affected by this crisis are experiencing, to some extent, a sense of loss and possibly bereavement.

In these circumstances, in which social distancing is a temporary preventative measure, the idea of ‘school’ as a learning community may help reframe the problem. The ‘problem’ becomes how to sustain – in the short to medium term – the relationships, peer-to-peer learning, intellectual engagement, services, and sense of belonging. Solutions may require more continuity than change, to ensure that the school as a learning community remains healthy and caring, inclusive and active, using appropriate technologies, including community radio, television, telephone and postal services.

Where education systems have already been investing in building learning communities, such [New York City’s community schools](#), by fostering high levels of school-community trust, engagement and family support, sustaining learning through and beyond COVID-19 might be more feasible than in other situations. As members of learning communities, students have built mutually enriching relationships, and have learnt skills and values such as learning to learn, empathy and solidarity that will stand the test of time. Roles may change, but learners, teachers, parents and others with strong networks and social capital can together figure out how to sustain thriving learning communities – and learning processes – in a crisis. In such contexts, there may be less risk of disengagement and ‘drop-out’ when school buildings reopen. However, where there is already a large social and cultural distance between ‘school’ and ‘home’, formal learning communities may be weaker and have less resilience. In these situations, increased efforts will be needed to maintain communication and to sustain relationships, especially with disadvantaged groups.

The COVID-19 crisis is qualitatively different from emergencies such as conflicts, hurricanes, earthquakes or forest fires. It is also unprecedented in scale. Reducing the focus on the physical or virtual environments and increasing the focus on people, and the development of crucial [social and emotional skills](#) including empathy and solidarity could prove a survival strategy for sustaining

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learning communities through and beyond COVID-19. Investing in learning communities could strengthen resilience in advance of other crises and emergency situations.

When the world eventually looks back in 2020 there will be much to learn from each other. Educational responses to the crisis are capable of changing the meanings, purposes and values of 'school' and could potentially help to shape more humanistic futures for education and learning worldwide.

*Author's Note: The ideas and opinions expressed in this blog are those of the author; they are not necessarily those of UNESCO and do not commit the Organization.*

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