What can we learn about educational continuity from cities in the time of COVID-19?

Around the world, cities are playing a central role in the fight against the crisis resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in the field of education. Two experts from IIEP-UNESCO review the experience of French cities, indispensable partners of the State in preserving educational continuity during this time of crisis.

Health crisis, educational crisis, economic and social crisis. International crisis, national crisis, local crisis. The COVID-19 pandemic and the closure of schools around the world, affecting more than 1.5 billion learners, has required an urgent and coordinated response of decision-makers at all levels.

Because this crisis is directly affecting their territories in a multisectoral way, cities and their elected officials are in the front line of providing a contextualized response to the impact of the virus. Since children, parents and schools are affected differently according to their characteristics, cities are today key partners of the State in preserving access to quality education for all in their territory.

Exchange networks between cities, both internationally and nationally, are currently valuable platforms for sharing experiences, identifying innovative solutions and avoiding isolation. This article looks at the French experience, notably on the basis of the dialogue supported by ANDEV, the National Association of education directors and officials of cities and local authorities, in this unprecedented context, and interviews conducted with directors of education in cities, as part of IIEP’s the research project on ‘Cities and Education 2030’.

What are cities doing to support educational continuity?

In France, school closures and educational continuity have led to closer day-to-day collaboration between the national education services in the field (district education offices, school principals) and
municipal services in charge of education, respecting the areas of competence of each. Cities ensure that schools remain open for the children of essential workers during the health crisis. The same applies to the extra-curricular activities outside of school hours for which they are responsible, including in some cases at night and on weekends, relying for this on the voluntary mobilization of their education support workers.

Faced with the risk of increasing educational disparities, cities are also multiplying strategies to reach the most deprived children and to combat exclusion. A first step has been a census of schoolchildren, carried out in collaboration with the Ministry of Education, and the updating of their contacts. Despite this essential step, many pupils are still unreachable, a figure which, according to the Ministry of Education is between 5 and 8%, but which is considered to be higher depending on the region.

For the poorest families, the priority in this context is to manage daily life and meet the basic needs of physical and food security; continuity of education becomes secondary. The challenge for local authorities is then to act on these social emergency situations, in collaboration with their local and community partners, at the same time as their actions to respond to the educational emergency.

The urgency is to accompany the most vulnerable families with their basic security needs in a concrete manner. (ANDEV Tribune)

In cases where the school canteen is one of the only opportunities of a meal for the child, meals are delivered to families with the support of the community, or food vouchers are offered to them. Municipal education services also act for child protection, since confinement increases the risk of domestic violence, particularly in the case of large families living in small housing or squats.

The crisis has also highlighted the digital divide, both in terms of access to digital resources and the ability of families to use them. Several cities have made computer equipment available to disadvantaged families, in some cases drawing on their own office equipment. In some cases, they have even tried to negotiate preferential connectivity offers with private operators. In partnership with the Ministry of Education and the Post Office, the lessons and homework of pupils without access to digital resources are photocopied and sent to families at meeting points organized in schools.

The situation of certain specific groups, such as children from allophone families or children with disabilities, has also become more complex, with the difficulty of maintaining pre-existing educational arrangements. While the care of these groups is the responsibility of other specialized local actors and associations, cities, in collaboration with the Ministry of Education, play a central role in coordination and communication between actors, as well as with families. Some local authorities, such as the City of Orvault, also ensure that they maintain telephone contact with the families of children with disabilities in order to provide them with psychological support.

Coordinate multisectoral action in the area

Intersectoral collaboration, which underpins urban development strategies, is all the more essential in these times of crisis. Municipal education departments coordinate with other sectors of the city such as culture, social action, youth or sport to continue to offer education outside the school walls to the children and youth of their territory. Cultural services and media libraries provide online access to certain documentary resources or shows. In Ivry-sur-Seine, the media library makes telephone
appointments with families in difficulty, identified through community centres, to read a story to their children at afternoon snack time.

Reciprocally, the municipal educational staff supports, on a voluntary basis, those sectors in need in the context of the crisis. In several cities, canteen and school maintenance staff are working in care homes and in hospitals.

The mobilization and coordination of the various actors acting on their territory is crucial at this time. It has been made possible thanks to the pivotal role played by the city, which has been strengthened because of the crisis. The existence and quality of pre-existing coordination mechanisms condition the local educational response to the crisis.

The city is at the interaction of the social, medical and educational fields. It is the relevant level for territorial coordination. (Rozenn Merrien, President of ANDEV and Director of Childhood for the City of Saint-Denis, Seine-Saint-Denis)

Flexibility and agility in urban educational strategies

Key partners of the State during periods of confinement, local and regional authorities are also key partners during de-confinement. “While continuing to maintain their global and educational development strategy, cities are implementing the exit from the crisis and accompany every citizen, adults and children, in this process. The resumption of schooling will only work if we coordinate our efforts: this creates an obligation to succeed together,” emphasizes Rozenn Merrien. This new stage poses new challenges in terms of responsiveness, agility, collaboration and innovation, all of which are already characteristics of cities because of their position as partners of the State and their daily relations with their citizens.

Once the decision has been taken to open schools, we will not be able to work in our own corners and there will therefore be a need for concerted implementation: State services, local authorities, health services, with of course essential [collaboration] between school inspectors, school principals and the education services of local authorities. (Thierry Vasse, Deputy Director General of Orvault and Vice-President of ANDEV)

The educational crisis linked to the COVID-19 pandemic highlights the flexibility of cities’ educational strategies as a key element in their short-, medium- and long-term planning. Educational planners therefore have much to learn from the experience of cities in this regard.

Since 2019, the IIEP-UNESCO research programme ‘Cities & Education 2030’ has been examining the growing role of cities in educational planning and management.
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