

Disrupted schooling, learning loss will have effects long after pandemic, say education experts

Already vulnerable students 'are facing a kind of shadow pandemic,' UNESCO education expert warns

[Jessica Wong](#) · CBC News · Posted: Jan 31, 2021 4:00 AM ET | Last Updated: January 31



Canadian students continue to grapple with a tumultuous education experience amid COVID-19, with education experts highlighting disrupted schooling and learning loss as longer-term concerns even after the coronavirus pandemic. (Evan Mitsui/CBC)

Compared to last spring's nationwide school shutdown, Monica Belyea and her children are having a slightly easier time with remote learning this winter term. But the Toronto parent is already worried about the next school year.

While her kids Maddie and Ben have "amazing teachers who are doing the very best they can" amid Ontario's current school closure during a COVID-19 lockdown, Belyea wonders about how much curriculum is being covered in their respective Grade 6 and Grade 4 classes.

During her kids' remote classes, Belyea hears the teachers' time taken up troubleshooting tech problems and repeatedly walking students through online tools. Opportunities for one-on-one assistance have also waned. Ben, who is nine, shies away from asking for help online because he's self-conscious about classmates hearing him struggle.

"What happens in September? Are there going to be accommodations made for the fact that [many students] are going to be behind?" Belyea said.

"It's obviously not fair to the kids if they're suddenly just thrown back into — hopefully — a regular



school in September and be expected to go full speed into the regular curriculum, if they're already behind from the year before."

While her kids Maddie and Ben have 'amazing teachers who are doing the very best they can,' Toronto parent Monica Belyea wonders how much of the curriculum is being covered, and how the education system will address pandemic learning loss. (Turgut Yeter/CBC)

From switches between remote and in-person learning to juggling class quarantines due to school-related cases, Canadian students continue to grapple with a tumultuous education experience amid COVID-19. Education advocates and international experts alike are highlighting pandemic-disrupted schooling and learning loss as longer-term concerns that will persist even after COVID-19 wanes.

A year into the coronavirus pandemic, more than 800 million students — representing more than half the world's student population — continue to experience major disruptions in their schooling, according to [a new report from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization \(UNESCO\)](#).

In-person schools were completely shuttered for an average of 3.5 months since the global emergency began, UNESCO said. The figure rises to an average of 5.5 months when localized school closures are factored in, according to the report.

"The global shift to remote learning... has not served everyone equally in the world," said Stefania Giannini, UNESCO's assistant director general of education.

More than 450 million students around the globe have been unable to access education during the pandemic, including many excluded from online learning due to lack of internet access at home, Giannini said. UNESCO currently projects that about 24 million children and youth are at risk of dropping out of school worldwide.

"It's about ... those who were already behind being left behind more," Giannini said in an interview from Paris. "They are facing a kind of shadow pandemic."

Major school disruptions are something that countries like Canada cannot ignore, she said.

- **Missing students: Edmonton educators tackle truancy for online classes during COVID-19**

"We talk about the more marginalized in advanced countries as well," Giannini said. "It is a global crisis which is affecting children who are more disadvantaged because of their background, family background and not being so supported as the richest [students]."

Some students were 'already scrambling to catch up'

UNESCO's findings didn't come as any surprise to Toronto teacher Sam Tecele, who works with Success Beyond Limits, an education support, enrichment and mentoring organization based in the Jane and Finch neighbourhood where he grew up.

Success Beyond Limits formed in 2010 to help tackle the Jane and Finch neighbourhood's higher-than-normal high-school dropout rate and to work with incoming high school students who had already faced a difficult school experience before Grade 9.



'It always, always comes back to haunt us when we don't invest in education and our young people's futures, which is our future,' says Sam Tecele, a schoolteacher, professor at the University of Toronto and community advocate working with youth in Toronto's Jane and Finch neighbourhood. (Evan Mitsui/CBC)

"The kind of learning gaps UNESCO has just detailed in their recent report, we've been seeing that in communities like Jane and Finch — or others like it in Toronto — for the last 10 years," said Tecele, who is also a university professor and community advocate.

"Often, we find that the students ... who do not find success in the school system just find it difficult to find success, period — in the city, city life and social life. So that's the danger."

[Click to WATCH:](#) *Sociology prof Janice Aurini explains how learning losses develop:*

For students already working through challenges at school, the pandemic exacerbated their struggle to have an enriching educational experience, Tecele said.

"They were already scrambling to catch up."

The sudden changes and major structural shifts to education made amidst the pandemic - including the pivot to learning remotely online - have hit marginalized communities hard and taken them longer to adjust to, he said.

Many marginalized families face multiple challenges. They might include adequate internet access, a sufficient number of devices for online learning, parents who are unable to work from home and support their children, and a lack of supervised care for younger children.

- **[Class divide: Catching vulnerable young learners before they fall through the cracks](#)**

Beyond what individual educators or groups like Success Beyond Limits are doing to address learning loss, "we know that our program alone cannot mitigate the tide," says Tecele. He believes school districts and governments must pay greater attention to it and invest in fixing the problem.

"It always, always comes back to haunt us when we don't invest in education and our young people's futures, which is our future," he said.

Education investments needed, says UNESCO

Outside of a pandemic, teachers are typically already on the lookout for students struggling with learning loss and subsequently working toward eliminating that gap. Canada also has pre-existing summer school programs designed to help students catch up. Ontario, for instance, funds two- to three-week summer programs. They are offered by nearly every school board in the province to support students with learning loss.

- **Schools scramble to make up for learning losses that have already occurred in the pandemic**

Beyond what's in place, Ontario is exploring measures to support learning recovery and working on a further plan to target learning loss "head on — with enhanced supports for reading and math for all students, for vulnerable children, including students with exceptionalities and from underrepresented communities," said Caitlin Clark, spokesperson for Ontario Education Minister Stephen Lecce.

Protecting and increasing investments into education is what UNESCO's Giannini wants to see. It was first among the priorities in a "roadmap" that came out of the organization's [global education meeting](#), held virtually last October.

Next is reopening schools with layers of preventative health and safety measures in place, followed by supporting teachers receiving "better and more training," as well as prioritizing them as "classroom front-line workers" in vaccination campaigns, according to Giannini.

Equitably bridging the digital divide and reimagining education systems to make schools more resilient and adaptable for the future are also on UNESCO's to-do list.

"Political leaders have to realize that not investing in education today is about compromising the future of our young people [and] it's also compromising development and economic growth," Giannini said.

"It's not a competition ... between reopening schools and reopening restaurants or pubs. It's about prioritizing education as the real basic human right."