

COVID-19: IMPENDING SITUATION THREATENS TO DEEPEN NIGERIA'S EDUCATION CRISIS

The past few weeks have ushered in a range of government sanctioned and structure-shifting risk-control directives across Nigeria and the Globe, in an attempt to curtail the spread of the novel coronavirus disease-COVID-19. From international airport closures, to a nationwide closure of all schools, and now, a two-week lockdown of three major states - Lagos, Abuja and Ogun, the ramifications from the slowdown/shutdown of economic activity are poised to be severe for Nigeria. It is especially critical, because in the backdrop of COVID-19, the global economic crisis and the recent slump in oil prices are further expected to intensify the impending economic crises, and create sharp shocks that will reshape the economy in the near term.

For some sectors, the immediate ramifications are evident. One of such sector is the basic education sector, the impact of which has been largely felt by students. The nationwide school closures have disrupted learning and access to vital school-provided services for a record number of students in Nigeria. According to [UNESCO](#), almost 40 million learners have been affected by the nationwide school closures in Nigeria, of which over 91 percent are primary and secondary school learners. In a short time, COVID-19 has disrupted the landscape of learning in Nigeria by limiting how students can access learning across the country.

For an already fragile education system, the COVID-19 pandemic poses unprecedented challenges on the government, students, and parents, that will highlight and could amplify some of the cracks in the system. As the nation begins to grapple with these challenges, a key question arises: *Is the Nigerian education system designed to adapt rapidly to the changing world?* Given the state of affairs in the world today, the nation's ability to ensure continuation of learning will depend largely on their ability to swiftly harness available technology, provide adequate infrastructure, and mobilize stakeholders to prepare alternative learning programs.

Generally, Nigeria's education sector is not adapting, and is expected to struggle on that front for the foreseeable future. However, the consequential socio-economic burden will be borne disproportionately by students in public schools, as compared to those in private schools. While several private schools have begun to initiate distance learning programs, and taking advantage of the myriad of ICT-learning opportunities provided by [the international community](#), the government limited by funds and persistent deficiencies in planning, is yet to announce any official plans for providing distance learning opportunities, especially for public schools. The implication being that these students in public schools currently have no formal learning plans and could be missing learning altogether.

In this piece, we examine some of the immediate and long-term impacts of the closures, and proffering suggestions as to how the government can mitigate these consequences. Additionally, we are looking towards the future, and making prescriptions for how they might turn this disruptive crisis into an opportunity to address several of its pre-pandemic supply side education problems.

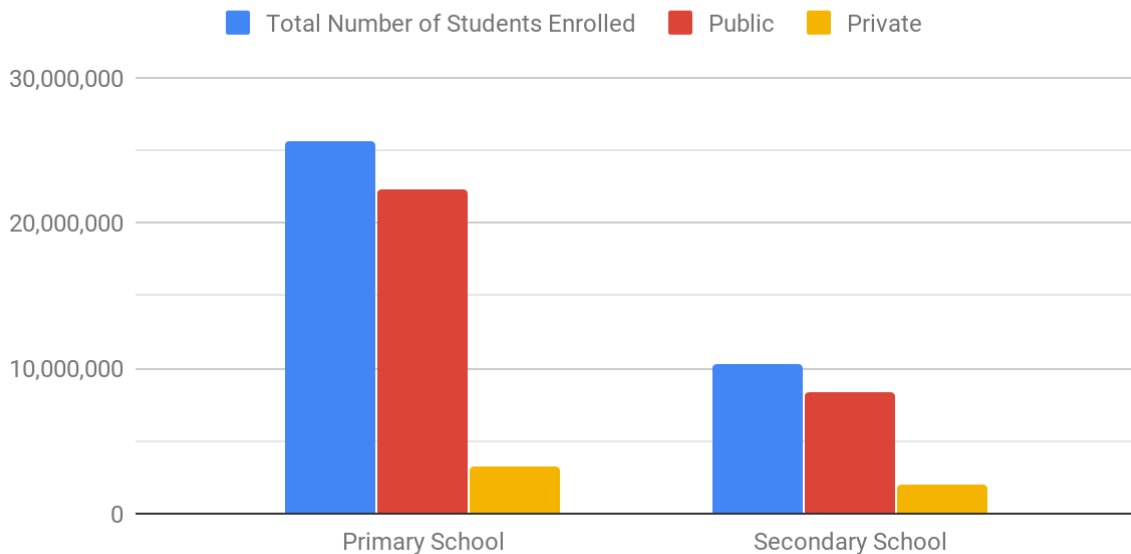
How has education been impacted? A crisis within a crisis.

1. Missed learning for the majority of pre-pandemic in-school-students: According to [UNESCO](#), about 35.9 million primary and secondary school learners are currently out-of-school as a result of the school closures. For primary schools, this number totals approximately 25.6 million students, of which about 87 percent (23.5 million) are students enrolled in public schools. The numbers are just as stark for secondary

school learners. Of the roughly 10.3 million secondary school students who are out-of-school as a result of the closures, approximately 81 percent (8.4 million) of them are public school students.

Total Enrolment in Primary and Secondary Schools in Nigeria

Public vs. Private School Enrolment



In Nigeria, school opportunity is correlated to income level, and public schools differ from private schools in the populations they serve. While private schools serve learners from higher socio-economic backgrounds who are willing and able to pay more to access the better resources offered by private schools, public schools which are usually free, comprise students from lower socio-economic households and low-income areas. In instances where distance learning opportunities are available, uptake will be low from the students in the public schools category, as a result of poor infrastructure such as lack of electricity, or poor/no internet connectivity, etc.

Opportunities to learn within the homes are also limited, given that a parent's ability to provide education support to their children will be shaped by their own level of educational attainment, general literacy level, and other commitments. Given the significant relationship between educational attainment and income level, and the correlation between parents income level and school choice, we can infer that the literacy level of parents in public schools in Nigeria might be lower than their private school counterparts. In instances where the parents are educated, investing the time to train their children during this time might be a luxury.

For Nigeria, the reality is simple - while the school closures are necessary to curtail the spread of the COVID-19 virus, until the ban on movement is lifted and schools are reopened, majority of students will not be learning.

2. Loss of access to vital school-provided services: Beyond the missed learning opportunities, students in Nigeria are also losing access to the daily meals made available by the federally-funded school feeding

programs. Nigeria has one of the largest school feeding programs in the world, with the [World Food Programme](#) estimating that in 2019, Nigeria's Homegrown Schools Feeding Initiative provided access to daily meals to over 9 million children in over 40,000 public schools.

The benefits of school feeding programs extend beyond the immediate education benefits of the meals provided, such as encouraging enrollment in schools, and boosting learning. School feeding programs yield larger socio-economic benefits for children, their families, and society at large, two of which are especially pertinent to children of low socio-economic groups: boosting health and nutrition, and providing social protection and safety nets.

- **Health and Nutrition** - For some students, especially those from disadvantaged and vulnerable backgrounds, the daily meals provided at schools are their primary source of healthy and nutritious meals. With schools closed, over 9 million public school students are currently being deprived of this benefit. Beyond feeding, Nigeria's feeding program also offers health services, including deworming and immunizations for students in public schools across 17 states. This closure would unfortunately also affect access to some basic health services for poorer children.
- **Social Protection and Social Safety Nets** - Over 50 percent of students accessing free meals fall into first and second wealth quintiles, representing the poorest 40 percent of the population, in a country where over 50 percent of the country live below the poverty line. As [empirical evidence](#) has revealed, people living below the poverty line usually spend between half and three-quarters of their income on food, representing a significant proportion of a poor household income. For each individual meal provided, the value can represent up to 10 percent of a family's income; for families with more than one child in school, this small figure can represent significant savings for families. The school feeding program can provide safety nets by boosting income for households. The absence of these daily meals is likely causing posing potential challenges for households, especially at this time where there has been a shut-down/slow down in economic activities across the country.

3. Leaving more kids behind - A longer-term impact of these school closures would be deepened educational inequality. While some international development partners ([UNESCO](#), for example) have put together and provided access to ICT-based resources to foster learning, uptake will depend largely on the level and quality of digital and internet access, and language accessibility (as most programs are available in English or other non-native Nigerian languages).

According to the [Digital 2020 Global Overview Report](#) published in January 2020, about 60 percent of Nigerians are not connected to the internet. The statistics for mobile phones, which could also be used as a learning medium, are more hopeful. According to the report, around 169.2 million people - 83 percent of Nigerians have access to mobile phone connections; however, of these, 50 percent - around 84.5 million people, reside in urban areas. For the population with access, the proportion would be skewed towards high socio-economic households and urban households; an overwhelming majority of whom are private school students who already have a learning advantage over their public school peers. For children from poorer backgrounds who tend to have less access to internet connectivity, computers, and other devices, and reside in rural areas where local languages take dominance over English, ICT-learning uptake will be limited. The inequity in access to ICT-based learning has the adverse effect of further intensifying the existing disparities in learning outcomes along socio-economic lines, and the urban-rural divide. Given that the school closures are currently indefinite, these students would continue to fall further behind. For students with learning disabilities, and those living in fragile and conflict-affected regions, the outlook is even more bleak.

This raises a major challenge around educational inequality - given the technological landscape and income driven digital-divide, how do we harness available technology to support already marginalized students during these closures? If this is unaddressed, the gap in education quality, and inadvertently socio-economic equality could become more extreme as a result of the school closures.

Mitigation strategies to stem the rising learning crisis

Distance Learning Through Low-Cost Technology

Reaching the vulnerable population in Nigeria will require adopting multiple learning delivery modalities ranging from television, radio and SMS-based mobile platforms that are more easily available to the poor. With over 80 percent of the adult population having access to radios and phones, it would be possible to reach most children left behind with targeted instructions via these mediums. However, while online platforms offer personalized learning, other delivery modalities require a central planner, as well coordination between all three tiers of government, and the private sector (media platform owners). This is where the role of the Ministry of Education will crucially extend beyond traditional policy making and regulations. The commissioners of education could help in the deployment and use of these tools within states, while the federal government coordinates the state efforts by plugging capacity and finance gaps. The government could draw on the experience of Sierra Leone, where the Ebola crisis led to school closures for about 9 months. To reach the most vulnerable and excluded children, the Government of Sierra Leone harnessed radios and televisions to deliver lessons. Whatever strategy the government chooses to incorporate, they must ensure that it is cost-effective (at least available within the home) and easy to use (children and their parents/guardians have some knowledge of it beforehand or can easily learn to use them).

Empowering and Supporting parents

Parents/guardians irrespective of their education level will be required to play a pivotal role to ensure learning is unencumbered. In order to ensure proper uptake of the available resources, the government will also need to ensure that parents are equipped to create a conducive learning environment, and support children in this new mode of learning. At this time, parents would be required to act as intermediaries between the school management/government and the children in learning delivery. In some instances, parents would need to take on the role of a teacher in home schooling their children, although relying on guidance from school. Additionally, most of the learning mediums would be shared amongst household members, and the responsibility will fall on the parents to determine and allocate usage among family members. Therefore, it is essential that the government supports them in understanding and executing their roles during this crucial time.

Ensuring Access to Nutritious Meals and Vital Services

As part of palliatives to cushion the economic effect of the lockdown, the government announced that it intends to sustain the school feeding program to children. While this is reassuring, it is not yet known how this would be implemented. For example, will the government send daily prepared meals to households, or would the cost of the meals be monetized? By extension, there is a need to design a strategy to keep other educational support programmes flowing. The pandemic already underscores the importance of vaccinations, hence windows to vaccinate children for protection against diseases need to be open. Given that all children are at home, house-to-house vaccination could be deployed. Other vital services, such as providing sanitary pads for girls, can also be distributed via this means. Given that these services are an integral part of learning, scaling them up during these difficult economic times might be crucial. Since the major beneficiary of school feeding programmes are the poor, and given the economic shocks facing the

entire household, it might be insufficient to reach only children within the household; the government might need to seek ways to provide meals for entire households.

Reaching the most vulnerable

In keeping the flow of these education support programmes, the educational needs of the hard-to-reach families could also be met. Lessons and homework can go together with physical deliveries of additional education support, while each family develops their homegrown strategy to cover the materials. Angola, Uganda and Zambia have already embedded this approach in their COVID-19 response strategy. The key requirement would be the conscious and active involvement of school administrators in the various government interventions.

Education Financing

The fiscal space to fund education has further shrunk with the shock on government revenue and economic downturn arising from the COVID-19 pandemic. Many items in the 2020 Education Sector appropriation bill, will not be implemented due to the drastic financial shortfall. Yet, more funding is required to keep learning going or scaled-up education support programmes as part of the government's palliative measures. For the government, reducing costs will require re-prioritising its plans in light of this new reality. The most urgent needs at the moment will be improving teachers' motivation, learners' preparedness and galvanizing domestic digital and media enterprises. This needs to be complemented with innovative sourcing of learning infrastructure during this period. For example, reaching children through existing school and home appliances and gadgets will be more cost-effective. Greater involvement of domestic philanthropists and digital entrepreneurs can reduce the financial burden of sustaining learning through the crisis.

Tapping into Global Resources

The World Bank, UNESCO and other development partners have already rolled out a number of education resources that developing countries can readily deploy. The Edtech industry in general is also providing free online platforms to engage directly with students and to assist school administrators and governments to identify technological solutions that support remote learning. On a larger scale, the countries should explore international loans and grants facilities for education as part of mitigation and recovery plans in weathering the COVID-19 crisis.

Ways COVID-19 Pandemic Will Reshape Education in Nigeria? Turning Challenges into Opportunities

The immediate consequences of the pandemic might be dire, but this crisis offers a unique turning point; an opportunity to learn, reshape, and build resilience into the educational system in Nigeria. Policymakers have a unique opportunity to explore how this emerging reality could usher in a new education architecture that tackles two of the nation's most urgent pre-pandemic education crisis: access (as the country has the highest out-of-school children in the world); and quality (as majority of children in school are not learning).

The crisis has pointed to a number of fundamental action steps, two of which are crucial now and beyond:

- the imperative need to embed appropriate technology into learning, and;
- The urgency to bridge educational divides that currently exist, and could further be exacerbated with a shift in education approaches.

One emerging evidence from the present crisis is the need to embed more technology into the classroom. Technological solutions, like adaptive learning technology, can ensure personalized learning with minimal teacher involvement, and have the potential to deliver better learning experiences at low-costs. Yet, the pace of adoption of these technologies has been slow and uneven in Nigeria. The post-crisis period is an opportunity to invest in technology in both the private and public-school systems. To achieve this system-wide, it will be important to encourage public-private educational partnerships. Various stakeholders, including the government, internet service providers, phone providers, educational professionals, among others, would need to collaborate to drive the required innovation. Conscious effort is also required to bridge the digital divide, by ensuring that the cost of technology adoption is low. Overall, introducing innovative technology into classrooms could help in improving learning outcomes across the board.

The crisis is adding to the policy menu towards addressing the out-of-school children as the forced closure of schools has sprung up various modalities in reaching children when out of school. Yet, the prevailing policy response to the out-of-children problem in Nigeria has focused only on bringing children to school. Going forward, some of the learning delivery modalities adopted during the crisis should also be explored for the pre-pandemic out-of-school population. The approach will be similar to the [School Meets Learner](#) approach used to bring education to girls in the North-Eastern part of Nigeria: taking education to children in situations where cultural and economic circumstances prevent them from accessing school. While the end goal must remain to bring all school-age children to school, finding ways to reach children at home can be part of the process.

COVID-19 has highlighted a critical gap in school-based (learning) contingency planning and emergency preparedness within the education sector in Nigeria. Learning-based contingency planning is essential to ensure learning continuity during times of crisis, to protect students and educators, and to build resilience within the education sector. While the government released a COVID-19 [contingency plan](#), the information contained within the document focused on keeping schools safe during the pandemic, and counseling and providing information to the students above preventative measures and actions to take to curb the spread. While this is beneficial information, a school-based contingency plan that doesn't ensure continuity of learning despite the challenge, is incomplete.

Perhaps this COVID-19 driven school closure is the crisis we needed to identify some crucial sector-wide gaps. The COVID-19 pandemic is surely not the last crisis that will threaten school continuity in Nigeria, given the increase in the number of infectious diseases worldwide, or the conflict in the North East. It is therefore imperative that the government creates a holistic contingency plan that goes beyond addressing school-based safety measures, but also identify ways to ensure learning continuing and provide support for both students and teachers during times of crisis.

Inevitably, the COVID-19 pandemic will be resolved, either through a breakthrough in treatment options, the development of a vaccine or with the world population developing herd immunity; however, without intentional and concerted effort, its effects on education could have a lasting impact on the trajectory of education. The onus is now on us; do we allow this crisis to further deepen our education crisis, or do we seize the opportunity to affect change that could address both pandemic-driven and pre-pandemic challenges?