

POLICY BRIEF

RESPONDING TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Education in the Time of COVID: Bridging Inequalities in Access to Opportunities

Background

In an attempt to control the spread of the COVID-19 virus, virtually all schools around the world were closed by the end of the first quarter of 2020. Following a brief hiatus, the majority of the countries opted to utilize variations of distance learning—as opposed to resuming face-to-face classes—to minimize disruptions in the education of the more than 1.5 billion students in 191 countries (United Nations, 2020). In the Philippines, the remote education multi-modal approach took the following forms: the use of modules (Modular Distance Learning), radio/television-based instruction (R/TVI), and online facilities (Online Distance Learning; Department of Education Region VIII, 2020).

However, school closures and the abrupt switch to distance learning in 2020 resulted in a drop in enrollment of more than 2.73 million students in the school year 2020–21. The data revealed that the lack of financial resources—including the means to participate in online distance learning—tops the list of reasons for the decision not to enroll in the school year 2020–21 (Economic Policy Research Institute, 2020, as cited by Castillo, 2021). Moreover, various studies confirm that distance learning is likely to exacerbate existing inequalities, especially in developing countries like the Philippines where access to basic remote education infrastructures—such as internet connection and online distance learning devices (i.e., desktops, laptops, tablets, smartphones, etc.)—are limited to no more than 30% of the population (based on the Department of Information and Communications Technology [DICT] survey, as cited by Castillo, 2021).

After more than a year of school closures, the Philippine Department of Education (DepEd), in partnership with the Department of Health (DOH), was given the “green light” for the pilot implementation of the resumption of face-to-face learning modality (Phase 1). A maximum of 120 schools—100 public and 20 private schools—will be selected to participate in Phase 1, which shall commence on November 15, 2021. The DepEd and DOH will only allow schools that are located in minimal risk areas and pass the DepEd-DOH school safety assessment to join the pilot implementation (DepEd-DOH, 2021). Among others, the chosen public and private schools must likewise strictly adhere to the mandated safe reopening guidelines detailed in the Joint Memorandum Circular No. 1 (DepEd-DOH, 2021).

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Beyond health and safety considerations, however, the implementation of limited face-to-face learning modality should also address the widening gap in access to educational opportunities as evidenced by the significant drops in the school year 2020–21 enrollments in basic education and research findings that confirmed the existence and consequences of the digital divide in the Philippines (Castillo, 2021). Given this backdrop, I put forward the following policy recommendations:

1. prioritize the reopening of schools located in areas where effective participation in distance learning in the past year was hampered the most;
2. conduct COVID-19 vaccinations—for teachers, school employees, and students—within school grounds or in nearby locations of the chosen schools in these priority regions; and
3. create a school-based monitoring system for COVID-19 transmission within the communities as a means of gathering information that can be used as the basis for decisions on school activities and the implementation of timely and effective health and safety measures.

Policy Recommendations Discussions

Reopening schools in Philippine regions and localities most affected by the consequences of the digital divide is a necessary first step in minimizing learning losses owing to the need to shift to remote education in the school year 2020–21. Thus, particularly for the expanded implementation of the resumption of limited face-to-face learning modality (Phase 2), in addition to the minimal risk criterion and safe reopening guidelines established in the Joint Circular (DepEd-DOH, 2021), the recommendation is to prioritize the reopening of schools located in areas where effective participation in distance learning in the past year was hampered the most. For instance, in the school year 2020–21, the four regions that registered significant drops in enrollment across all basic education levels—kindergarten, elementary school, junior high school, and senior high school—were Region III, Region

IV-A, Region X, and the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM). Notably, BARMM reported “critical drops in enrollments” in kindergarten (68%), elementary school (75%), junior high school (58%), and senior high school (59%; Luz, 2020). Moreover, the school year 2020–21 enrolled BARMM students were also the most likely to have had considerable difficulty with distance learning given the DICT (2019) survey results that, across the country, BARMM had the least access to power (84.7% with access), internet services (4.5% with access), and radio equipment (20.3% with access). Bridging the widening inequality in access to educational opportunities, therefore, necessitates that the essential financial and in-kind assistance be extended to schools located in these regions so that they could meet the DepEd and DOH requirements for reopening schools—safe operations, teaching, and learning, including the most marginalized, and well-being protection guidelines—and, thus, conduct in-person schooling at the soonest possible time.

Furthermore, in line with the goals of keeping schools and communities safe and tempering the growing inequality in access to opportunities in the country, COVID-19 vaccinations for teachers, school employees, and students within school grounds or nearby locations of the chosen schools in these priority regions is recommended. The DOH (2021) reported that, as of November 11, 2021, 36.91 million Filipinos had received the first dose of the COVID-19 vaccine—roughly 33.41% of the 110.46 million Philippine population (Statista, 2021a)—and 30.81 million are fully vaccinated—27.89% of the Philippine population. Using the latest Statista data (2021b; 2021c) and the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) BARMM population data (PSA, 2021), the computed fully-vaccinated rates for the identified regions with significant drops in enrollment fall below the national average—22.09% for Region III, 24.71% for Region IV-A, 18.91% for Region X, and 6.43% for BARMM.

The DepEd-DOH (2021) Joint Circular recognized vaccination as “an essential strategy” to prevent COVID-19 transmission (p. 5) and, therefore, expresses encouragement and support for the inoculation of all school personnel and students.

Thus, providing the means for reopened schools in the priority regions to work with local government units in order to hold school-based vaccinations or facilitate access to vaccinations in nearby locations of the chosen schools in these priority regions would not only reinforce the DepEd-DOH prescribed health and safety measures but also bridge the observable gap in access to COVID-19 vaccines (health services) in these provinces.

At the very least, the reopened schools in these priority regions could be mobilized as venues to promote vaccination and to address vaccine hesitancy, if any, among the school personnel and students and, by extension, their households if they are guided and equipped to: (a) conduct information campaigns that encourage vaccine trust and confidence (i.e., integrated with science and health classes, distribution of flyers on vaccination FAQs, etc.); or (b) institutionalize policies that support individuals who opt to be vaccinated or who have side effects after vaccination (i.e., sick leave options for school personnel, excused absences for students, etc.; United States Department of Education, 2021; CDC, as cited by the Minnesota Department of Health, 2021).

Lastly, despite the painstaking implementation of sound and comprehensive health and safety measures, countries that reopened schools in 2020 reported COVID-19 transmissions within school settings; but they are “typically lower than—or at least similar to—levels of community transmission, when prevention strategies are in place in schools” (i.e., the United Kingdom, Australia, Michigan and Washington states in the United States, etc.; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2021a). Infections, however, can be introduced into the school facilities from the communities, especially if and when the levels of community transmission rise (CDC, 2021b). Hence, it is highly recommended that administrators of reopened schools, in cooperation with local government units, create school-based monitoring systems for COVID-19 transmission within the communities to which they belong as a means of gathering information that can be used as the basis for decisions on school activities and the implementation of a timely and

effective health and safety measures. For example, the CDC (2021b) designed a color-coded matrix that categorizes COVID-19 community transmission based on the total new cases/100,000 persons in the past seven days and the percentage of nucleic acid amplification tests (NAATs) that are positive during the past seven days into: low (blue), moderate (yellow), substantial (orange), and high (red). In communities with low transmission (with 0–9 total new cases per 100,000 persons in the past seven days and less than 5% NAATs during the past seven days), reopened schools may choose to allow “sports and extracurricular activities with at least six feet of physical distance to the greatest extent possible” (CDC, 2021b). For communities with moderate to high transmissions, on the other hand, schools may opt to conduct “expanded screening testing for students offered at least once per week” (CDC, 2021b). Reopened schools in the Philippines—with the help of the DepEd, DOH, and the relevant local government units—may use a similar system as the basis for expanding learning opportunities while guarding the health and safety of the institutions and the communities to which they belong.

Synthesis

Although the comprehensive health and safety measures prescribed by the DepEd and DOH are critical to safeguarding the well-being of all the members of the schools chosen to participate in the limited face-to-face learning modality pilot implementation, equally important is that consideration be given to addressing the growing inequality in access to educational opportunities attributed to the prolonged school closures in the country by prioritizing schools in regions with significant enrollment losses for the school year 2020–21 for the expanded implementation of limited face-to-face learning modality (Phase 2). Ensuring that schools in these priority regions are able to keep their doors open longer despite the ongoing threat of COVID-19 could also be achieved by assisting them in establishing school-based vaccination programs and school-based community transmission monitoring systems.

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