

COVID-19 and the Non-State Sector: Challenges and Opportunities

20 April 2020

Executive Summary

Global Schools Forum is a network organisation established to respond to the rapid growth and variable quality of non-state education across Sub-Saharan Africa, South America and Asia. Our 49 members are school networks and intermediary organisations located in 33 countries across Asia, sub-Saharan Africa and South America. GSF members run or support over 17,000 schools serving close to 2.5 million students.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, GSF conducted a survey of its members to collect detailed information about their needs and responses. At a high-level, our members are concerned about continuity of learning, supporting parents and caregivers, business continuity, and the well-being and safeguarding of students. The purpose of this document is to provide more details about their responses.

GSF will be hosting a Virtual Town Hall on Monday, 20 April to share additional details about the survey findings, learn from our members' responses and innovations, and discuss policy implications. Among others, invited guests include members of school networks and intermediary organisations, representatives from bilateral and multilateral agencies, funders and investors. Attendees will participate in a brainstorming session to suggest ways we can work together to support the sector at this critical time.

Background & Context

According to [UNESCO](#), as of 20 April 2020, 191 countries have implemented nationwide closures of schools, affecting over 1.5 billion students, or 91% of the world's student population. These numbers mask devastating human, social and economic costs, particularly for the most vulnerable children and communities. A large and growing share of children globally are educated outside of government schools. This "non-state" sector is increasingly catering to low-income communities. According to data reported by governments and collected by the [UNESCO Institute for Statistics](#), in 2018, 42% of pre-primary children globally were educated in the non-state sector, 18% of primary children and 26% of secondary children.

The COVID-19 pandemic has created distinct threats to the non-state sector and the students served by those schools. Those specific threats are (i) lost revenue from school fees, (ii) no subsidy from Ministries of Education (unlike government schools whose teachers will continue to be paid), (iii) probable ineligibility for small business subsidies such as tax exemptions made available by governments to small businesses in the broader economy, (iv) reduced access to capital from financial institutions squeezed by COVID-19-related economic shocks, (v) significantly weaker prospects of medium-term fee revenue given major contractions in household income.

Without support from governments, the private sector, or other national and international actors, segments of the non-state education sector face collapse. The consequences of this collapse would be deep, broad and enduring; not only for the 30% of children educated in the non-state sector, but also for public education systems that would have to absorb tens of millions of additional students.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, GSF created a [webpage](#) of practical resources and convened a series of meetings for our members to connect and share information. We authored this [editorial](#),

based on what we heard. Next, GSF conducted a survey of its members to collect more detailed information about their needs and responses. GSF has begun to respond to the needs outlined in the survey in two ways: developing a virtual [offer](#) focused on COVID-19 related issues and advocating on behalf of the sector.

GSF Member COVID-19 Survey: Information about the Respondents

29 GSF members, or 60% of GSF's membership, completed the survey, demonstrating their urgent desire to share information and to work collaboratively.¹

Respondents run or operate schools in a variety of settings, rural, urban and peri-urban, with 68% running Not for Profit organisations and 32% For-Profit. 86% of respondents run school networks and 14% are intermediary organisations, providing financial and or leadership support to low-fee private schools. Respondents' revenue comes from a variety of sources, with close to two-thirds of our respondents reliant on donors, while just over 40 percent were deriving at least some of their revenue from student fees.

GSF Member COVID-19 Survey: Findings & Bright Spots

1. Members are most concerned about ensuring their students' continuity of learning.

Close to three-quarters, or 72%, of respondents named this issue as "extremely challenging", and a sharp divide exists between members who are providing instruction through "low-tech" methods (e.g. SMS/phone, radio, TV, pen & paper) and "high-tech" methods (e.g. internet). Within the "low-tech" segment, the vast majority of respondents are using SMS/phone (72%), followed by printed materials (59%). About half of the respondents reported using the internet as part of their plan.

Bright Spots: *Rising Academy Network* serves more than 50,000 students in Sierra Leone and Liberia and launched *Rising On Air* to provide free distance learning via the radio to its students. *Rising On Air* uses scripts which can be downloaded for free by others around the world and then edited, adapted and recorded in their country's voice. At the time of this writing, partners in Nepal, India, Uganda, Liberia, Pakistan, Gambia, Nigeria and Zambia are adopting *Rising On Air* as a solution.

Simple Education Foundation partners with government schools in India to provide consistent in-school support to teachers and students. They use WhatsApp and phone calls to send recorded lessons, worksheets, and videos to students and their caregivers.

2. Members are challenged by maintaining regular connection and engagement with parents and caregivers to support learning at home.

69% of respondents named this issue as "extremely challenging". As above, a clear split exists between communication with the home using low/no-tech solutions and high-tech solutions. Comments show that respondents use a variety of methods to communicate with those at home, based on the learners' ages. Early childhood providers, for example, provide parents and caregivers with information so they can actively support effective early childhood

¹ Although the survey was administered to all GSF members, it was voluntary, which may possibly skew the data.

education practices at home. Last, respondents' comments demonstrated their concern to not only have communication with those at home, but to maintain connectivity with their school staff during this time, too.

Bright Spots: *aeioTU* operates 28 early childhood educational centres in Bogotá, Colombia and created a virtual pedagogical program named "aeioTU Contigo en Casa" to accompany the children and families of all aeioTU centers. This program includes individualized check-ins between the teacher and the student and provides support for caregivers to use positive discipline approaches. They use text messages to send creative and motivational messages for families, as well as tips from their "Parenting Tips" book.

Dignitas partners with schools in communities in Kenya and provides coaching to school leaders and teachers. They are using their School Leader *WhatsApp* groups to disseminate verified health information, and to support School Leader well-being.

3. The impact of COVID-19 on longer term business continuity and sustainability is also top of mind for members.

62% of respondents named the issue of business continuity as "extremely challenging," This challenge appeared across the spectrum of respondents, regardless of their funding sources. Respondents named four primary drivers for the challenge: students' families are unable to pay school fees; donors have put a pause on contributions; government subsidy/payments are on hold or delayed; and private investment is not moving forward. One respondent named that private-sector CSR efforts are in jeopardy due to the economy's slow-down; another respondent added that they currently rely on contributions from UK-based partner schools, which are now closed due to the pandemic.

59% of respondents are not receiving any additional support from government, investors and/or donors in the form of financial support, or otherwise. Those who are mentioned receiving access to online learning platforms and resources. Several respondents also commented on receiving additional financial support to buy food parcels or to support distance learning.

4. The changed circumstances are making it increasingly difficult for members to understand and respond to their students' safety and wellbeing.

62% of respondents named that COVID-19 impacted their ability to implement child safeguarding policies and processes. Evidence from school closure during the Ebola crisis shows that the risk of safeguarding incidents can increase during school closure, without regular school engagement and support. School personnel, such as social workers and teachers, are no longer in contact with children in school, which means they physically can't see if students bear any physical marks of abuse. Without school in operation, trained school personnel are unable to provide face-to-face counselling. Other respondents named their concern that children who are abused by parents or guardians are now in compromised positions if they are in shelter-in-place with perpetrators. Several respondents voiced their concern that girls are especially at risk for increased violence and sexual assault.

Bright Spots: *PEAS* (Promoting Equality in African Schools) runs secondary schools in Zambia and Uganda and quickly developed child protection guidelines and adapted

their reporting and response structures to continue to provide safeguarding support to their students. They check in with students to understand their well-being and report any incidents, paying particular attention to vulnerable groups. Girls, for instance, get targeted and tailored support. They are contacted directly by the headteacher or staff member responsible for child protection in each school.

5. ***And finally, we have been inspired by the response of our members in contributing to their local community and national response efforts.*** In response to the question, “How is your organization supporting wider community efforts in response to COVID-19?” 59% of respondents named that they are taking active steps to support wider community efforts. Some are providing families with food, WASH resources, and accurate health information. Others named that their provision of instruction is open source and they’ve provided local government agencies with access to their educational materials.

Bright Spots: Peepul runs three schools in India and has partnered with GiveIndia, a donation platform, to raise money through crowdfunding, to provide food and other essential support to the most vulnerable families, including a cash transfer into their bank accounts for people who have lost their livelihoods.

Kidogo operates early childhood centers in Kenya and sends daily COVID-19 updates through WhatsApp (that gets forwarded to the broader community); they also distribute food packs, provide WASH awareness, and share tips and ideas on how to engage young children via social media.

Recommendations & Next Steps

Based on the findings of the survey, we have five key recommendations for stakeholders to more effectively engage with and support the non-state sector:

- A. **Governments** consider, in the design of subsidy and support programmes, the unique vulnerabilities of the non-state education sector, and that they also take steps to expand connectivity for low-income communities
- B. **Financial institutions** maintain and increase access to credit for the formal and informal low fee private school providers for whom revenues will cease in the coming months
- C. **Network providers** make available, with government support if necessary, concessions on the costs of data – a major barrier as those low-income communities fortunate enough to have hardware and connectivity increasingly move to online learning
- D. **Education technology companies** provide expanded access to online learning resources for students as well as teacher training resources for teachers
- E. **International education funders** provide maximum flexibility with existing funding and provide additional short-term funding to ensure the survival of their grantees and investees and the resumption of services when the pandemic allows.

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