

Strategies for education recovery in Fiji

by Neelesh Gounder and Jai Narayan

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A school stands empty in Fiji
Photo Credit: Neelesh Gounder

In addition to economic and social disruptions, the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted teaching and learning for students through periodic closures of schools around the world. Fiji is no different, with two bouts of school closures, one in 2020 and the second **currently ongoing** since 20 April 2021.

This means that students starting Year 3 in Fiji in 2022 will have had their education disrupted since Year 1 – 12 weeks in 2020 and 12 weeks in 2021 (assuming schools remain shut until the end of July 2021). The 24 weeks lost will equate to almost one-third of the total time these students should have been at school during their first two years of schooling.

Unless teaching and learning loss is recovered, the pandemic will exacerbate the existing learning inequities in education – especially the gap between high- and low-achieving students and other vulnerable groups (such as those without access to the internet and computers).

When children are staying at home, ensuring that they are learning as much as possible is important for continuity of learning. Within Fiji's context, we suggest some possible strategies to support children in learning from home.

The first is using digital platforms to provide learning resources. Many schools and teachers started using online platforms, including social media, to provide learning resources to students during the first school closure last year. These schools and teachers, therefore, have experiences and lessons to draw upon to continue the strategy during the current closure. Earlier this month, the Ministry of Education launched its **digital hub** through which students and parents can access worksheets to use at home. Similarly, TISI Sangam, a charitable organisation which owns 21 primary and five secondary schools, has established a **digital portal** that pools learning resources from across its 26 schools to make these available to students on one platform.

Second, we recommend providing targeted support to meet individual students' needs. School teachers can support students who are learning from home by identifying individual challenges in adapting to the new mode of learning. Specifically, there are children who do not have access to the internet and computers or other devices that can be used to access online learning materials. Where the digital divide is a challenge, many schools and teachers have made significant efforts to distribute hard copies of learning materials to parents. However, this is not easy for those schools faced with COVID-related containment zones and movement restrictions. The Ministry of Education can bridge this gap through effective partnerships. It can, for example, partner with government departments such as the National Disaster Management Office, school management teams and teacher unions to disseminate hard copies of learning materials to students who may not have access to online materials. Families lacking internet access can be supported by provision of internet data.

Education recovery post-COVID-19 will be difficult, and schools and teachers will need support to meet the challenges. To help them, we propose the following strategies and policy interventions.

- Investment in digital learning infrastructure will be key. From a national perspective, developing an affordable information and communications technology (ICT) network is core to building the information economy. Good ICT connectivity is fundamental to facilitate e-education. At the school level, teachers must have access to the tools they need to fully realise the new opportunities that digital connectivity brings to teaching and learning. In the medium to long term, policy must focus on digitalisation of all school classrooms. Teachers' professional development needs to expand its focus to ICT-based interaction and teaching/learning platforms. For parents and students, apart from connectivity, affordability of data and accessibility to devices are essential to participating in e-education.
- Despite the efforts to support learning from home during school closures, more will be needed to catch up on lost teaching and learning. Intervention strategies at the classroom and school level remain the best option to recover learning losses. Ways through which learning can be recovered include focused small group tuition and classroom support through additional teachers and school hours. Integrated lessons can also provide a way to scale up lost teaching and learning, especially in primary schools. Regarding classroom support, the Ministry of Education should employ additional teachers in schools with large classes, especially for Year 1 to Year 6. The additional teacher can support the subject teacher by targeted interventions such as focusing on low-achieving students.
- Additional support may be needed for children from households with reduced

earnings. Given the **macroeconomic and socioeconomic impacts** of COVID-19, a larger percentage of children returning to school will be coming from such households. These children will likely also be vulnerable to other challenges such as food security and mental health. Children from these households can be supported with, for example, free lunches, which will play some part in augmenting household food and nutrition security. Our experience with TISI Sangam in providing free lunches to students in Sangam schools in 2020 demonstrates how it can lead to good learning outcomes through improved school attendance, and contribute to food and nutrition security.

Fiji is blessed with a diverse range of stakeholders, endowed with expertise and experience, who partner with the state to drive the provision of education. Collaboration among all stakeholders will be needed to strengthen the education system post-COVID-19.

Disclosures:

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Link: <https://devpolicy.org/strategies-for-education-recovery-in-fiji-20210630/>