



GUIDE TO A HAPPY RETURN TO SCHOOL

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INTRODUCTION

A school without interaction between students and teachers, and among students is a cold, empty, I would say – sad place. We miss our everyday conversations, laughter, the diversity of our opinions. Now is the best time for changes. In a more up-to-date, but also a more humane way.

Adriana Krog, 2nd grade, Bjelovar School of Economics and Commerce¹

This publication was created in response to many uncertainties and questions that await us in the process of returning to school, not only after the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic - it can be used as a tool for planning of return to school after any crisis. The most important answer we want to offer in this publication is the one about the ways that school can address the challenges that undoubtedly exist in this process.

The key dilemma for everyone in the education system is whether we want to return to 'education as usual' as soon as possible and continue where we left off, or whether we see this as a possibility for change and realization of our desire for a different school. Is this the opportunity for schools to finally realize the importance of school and teacher autonomy in creating education based on the needs of their students, their local community, and simply the environment in which they live and act? Of course, many questions should be answered by the state, i.e. the education authorities in collaboration with epidemiologists. They are the ones who will provide the framework and write the recommendations. But the school and its staff, students, and their parents will have to provide their answers to this dilemma.

In the past period, schools, teachers, and students have gained a very rich experience with distance learning. State, i.e. education authorities, have also gained some experience and they should continue working on it. The issue of distance learning is likely to be relevant again in the future, so the long-term goals of education policy in many countries in the world, based on the experience with distance learning, should be:

- To improve educational strategies and related action plans;
- To empower teachers and schools for introducing alternative teaching methods and to strengthen capacities for implementing distance learning or developing hybrid models;
- To place greater emphasis on the importance of school curriculum;
- To prioritize the mental health of students and educators;
- To develop resilience strategies to new crises ('education in crisis'); and
- To insist on curriculum flexibility and teacher autonomy.

¹ The essay submitted to the literary competition 'I dream about school' by Forum for Freedom in Education in June 2020.

A recent publication by UNICEF 'Building Resilient Education Systems beyond the COVID-19 Pandemic: Considerations for education decision-makers at national, local, and school levels' (2020) highlights that crisis is an opportunity to improve the system through recovery for education systems around the world.

The authors of the report emphasize that this is an opportunity not to be missed, which requires a planning process that includes continuous assessment of the situation, addresses inequalities that exist in the system, and encourages evaluation and documenting of intervention processes and results, to exchange good practices and to sustain what works.



Four-step planning for school, local and national levels, UNICEF (2020)²

²

UNICEF (2020), Building Resilient Education Systems beyond the COVID-19 Pandemic: Considerations for decision-makers at national, local and school levels, Geneva, UNICEF, pp. 10.

A good practice example in the context of the role of the state is from Mexico, where in May 2020 the Mexican Ministry of Education organized online seminars for teachers on how to develop an education Recovery Curriculum for students in schools. The main question was how to cover the learning gaps, caused by the educational disruption during the pandemic.

However, it remains important to address the issues of how the schools themselves will react and what they will do to get students back to school with a feeling that they have returned to a place where they belong, ensuring that everyone in the system has consideration for students being out of school for such a long time, and understands that students need support in overcoming learning gaps, but also in restoring social ties in classroom and school.

This publication offers the answer exactly to that question. Here you will find examples of good practice, ideas, and suggestions on how to design the so-called *Recovery Curriculum* that will take into account all needs of students during the process of returning to school. The proposals set out in the publication are based on the recommendations of relevant international and European organizations and institutions, as well as on the opinions of international and national experts.

This resource package for educators for a happy return to school consists of three parts:

- ✓ the guide you are now reading to give you specific instructions, steps, examples of good practice, and suggestions for reopening schools and developing a recovery plan;
- ✓ collection of lesson plans for a happy return to school along with the suggestions for workshops with students related to the three topics highlighted here: school as a community, curriculum, and learning and teaching strategies (these materials are available only in Croatian at www.fso.hr);
- ✓ lesson plans in the form of presentations for distance learning (these materials are available only in Croatian at www.fso.hr).

1 / REOPENING OF SCHOOLS

'It is our wish to reopen schools, but at the same time we want to open even better schools!'

UNESCO, „Framework for re-opening schools“

Schools closure and being out of the classroom can have a severe impact on a child's ability to learn, but it can also increase many other risks.

UNESCO publication 'Framework for reopening schools' (2020)¹³ highlights that being out of school increases the risk of teenage pregnancy, sexual exploitation of children and youth, child marriage, violence, and other threats. Further, prolonged closures disrupt essential school-based services such as immunization, school feeding, mental health, and psychosocial support, and may increase stress and anxiety due to the loss of peer interaction and disrupted routines.

These negative impacts will be significantly higher for marginalized children and children at risk. School reopening therefore must be safe and consistent with each country's overall recommendations in COVID-19 response, taking all reasonable measures to protect students, educators, and their families.

Therefore, priorities when reopening schools should be:

- ✓ Physical health;
- ✓ Mental health;
- ✓ Continuity – the continuation of learning and equal opportunities for all students.

In addition to priorities, it is necessary to keep in mind the key principles of reopening schools, which are:

- ✓ Empathetic school leadership;
- ✓ Decisions based on scientific, medical, and epidemiological recommendations and advice;
- ✓ The wellbeing of students and educators;
- ✓ Risk analysis;
- ✓ The autonomy of educators;
- ✓ Intervention plan based on the previous experience with distance

learning and the period of school closure;

- ✓ Existence of plan B and readiness of everyone at the school level for a rapid change of circumstances;
- ✓ Clear and transparent communication among the stakeholders at the school level, but also towards the external stakeholders;
- ✓ Schools can communicate their needs to the education authorities (through associations, unions, through cooperation with the local and regional government, etc.);
- ✓ Schools are responsible for ensuring equal access to education for all students (children from lower SES families, children with disabilities, refugee/minority children, etc.).

The decision on when to reopen a school for all students should be guided primarily by the best interests of the child and the overall insight of public health situation, based on analyses conducted by each country. All decisions should be made together with all relevant national and local stakeholders so that they include both national and local contexts. Therefore, in the process of reopening and returning to school, it is necessary to take into account the perspectives of students and educators and to find out how do they feel with the process of returning to school.

The concerns of **students** in the process of returning to school may be the following:

- Loss of routine and structure - due to the long duration of the pandemic, student's normal daily routine and structure is disrupted;
- Feeling that they are missing parts of the educational process - 'learning gaps';
- Loss of their social life: anxiety and stress about returning to school and 'resocialization';
- Fear of virus spreading and caring for their loved ones - facing the fear of death;
- Uncertainty about the next school year and what it will look like;
- Economic insecurity - concern for the economic status of their family, etc.

'Back-to-school' process from the perspective of **educators** and the concerns that they may have:

- How to overcome the learning gaps;
- How to follow epidemiological instructions in the school and the classroom;
- Trauma, anxiety, and fear of uncertainty in the coming year;
- What if there will be a need to go back to distance learning again; What can I do differently / better;
- How to rebuild the classroom community;
- The desire to return to the 'old normal' and how to contribute to the 'new normal', etc.

What we would all like to know is how to approach all of these issues, concerns, and challenges. Some of the things we can do are the following:

- Development of a Recovery Curriculum;
- Strengthening the role and importance of School Curriculum;
- Organization of additional/supplementary classes;
- Better care for students' mental health – strengthening the activities within the cross-curricular topic of Personal and Social Development;
- Greater care for school hygiene;
- Support to educators;
- Clear communication with parents.

How can we support the students in the process of returning to school?

Reorganization of the work of professional school services (school pedagogue, psychologist, etc.) to work better in the area of students' mental health.

- workshops, activities, emphasis on the development of personal and social skills, direct work with students at risk, identifying the specific forms of support – 'measuring emotional temperature';
- development of specific teaching units that deal with student's stress management and anxiety, as well as integrating these units into regular school activities and learning contents.

Providing support to students at risk

'During the period of distance learning, the students who are otherwise introverted and reticent in the classroom came to the fore.' (Primary school principal, 3rd and 4th module for principals, Forum for Freedom in Education, July 2020) – It is necessary to identify the reasons for our new perspective and identify what we can change in our work with a particular student, and how to adapt the methods of work to her/his needs.

- minorities, refugees, children with disabilities - do we have a school-level plan for working with students at of risk, and how can we provide support to them in the future?

Overcoming the learning gaps (63% of countries in the world choose this measure as the main one⁴)

- The school develops the action plan to overcome the learning gaps caused by disrupted educational provision during the previous school year - this approach includes flexibility, solidarity, and empathy, and excludes 'My subject is the most important!' attitude;

⁴

UNESCO webinar (travanj 2020), Back to school: Preparing and managing the reopening of schools

- Additional classes for the most challenging aspects of learning content – including school analysis and school curriculum adaptation; an increase of working hours and assignments; identification of students who need additional support to get involved;
- Double-shift schooling – this is possible for schools working in one shift.

Curriculum adaptation – acceleration of certain teaching contents and skipping parts of the curriculum ('acceleration'). To achieve this, each subject teacher must revise the curriculum of their subject and the learning outcomes through the distinction of those that need to be realized and those that can be postponed or realized if there is enough time during the school year.

How can we support the educators in the process of returning to school?

Providing support to teachers at risk

In the US, 18% of teachers and 27% of principals are considered to be at risk from COVID-19⁵.

- Reorganization of work for teachers at risk - instead of replacements, a school can organize online teaching that includes good technical support in classrooms - the so-called hybrid model.
- Involvement of volunteers in school work - technical support; taking care of small children; implementation of workshops with students, etc.

The professional development of the teachers is needed more than ever!

- Identification of professional development needs;
- Identification of professional development providers (online and face-to-face professional development sessions) - ensuring financial resources;
- Collaborative learning - exchange of experiences among educators at the school level about their good and bad practices during online classes.

Communication with parents when their children return to school

During crises, parents express concerns and fears about the safety of their children - your students, and they have a lot of questions. The school can compile a leaflet/letter to parents and/or publish a text on the school website and social networks in which they will answer the questions that are important parents:

- What steps has the school taken to ensure the safety and health of all students? How can parents contribute to maintaining hygiene and how can they help with it?
- How should parents explain to their children (especially those in lower grades) why it is important to constantly wash their hands and keep a physical distance?

⁵ UNESCO 'Back to school' webinar (April 2020): Preparing and managing the reopening of schools

- How will the school ensure hygiene standards during school meals?
- What will the school do to overcome the learning gap? What type of support will my child receive to make up for what s/he lost?
- What should I do if my child experiences the process of returning to school as stressful, or if s/he is anxious and afraid of too much workload, and of how will s/he overcome the learning gap?
- How will the school support the students whose mental health has been deteriorated during the crisis?

2 / RECOVERY CURRICULUM

'It would be naive of any Headteacher/Principal to think that the child will pick up the Curriculum at the same point at which they left it on the day their school closed. Too much has happened. Listen to what the children are saying. Look at what the children are experiencing. None of this follows the usual pattern of a school year with all of the annual cycles of events. It feels like a period of true social disorder. Compassionate Leadership is crucial at this time. Now is the time to address the damage of loss and trauma, so that it does not rob our children of their lifelong opportunities. Now is the time to ensure that we restore mental wealth in our children, so that their aspirations for their future, can be a vision that becomes, one day, a reality.'

Barry Carpenter, CBE, Professor of Mental Health in Education, Oxford Brookes University, UK

Goals of Recovery Curriculum:

- ✓ Rebuilding the classroom and school community - resocialization;
- ✓ Enabling students to clearly express what they felt during the periods of school closure and distance learning;
- ✓ Providing students with space for returning to school and expressing their ideas and concerns;
- ✓ Assuring students that teachers have an understanding of their need to overcome the learning gap and that they will help them to acquire both old and new learning content;
- ✓ Focus on the cross-curricular topic 'Learning how to learn' - to restore students' confidence in their learning; and
- ✓ Focus on the cross-curricular topic 'Development of personal and social competencies' - in defining school projects and the work of professional school services, the emphasis should be put on the mental health and well-being of students.

In his article entitled 'A Recovery Curriculum: Loss and Life for our children and schools post-pandemic'⁶, Barry Carpenter from Oxford Brookes University emphasizes the importance of 'Recovery Curriculum' (not to be confused with official school curriculum document) that will clearly address all difficulties encountered by the students in the process of returning to school after a

⁶ <https://www.evidenceforlearning.net/recoverycurriculum/>

long period of absence that has disturbed their daily routine, and completely changed both their concepts of learning, as well as relationships with their peers. That is exactly why he believes that Recovery Curriculum must first and foremost prioritize the mental health and well-being of students, and not to place the emphasis on 'compensating' for 'lost' curricular content. Carpenter defines five levers that should represent the bases of the Recovery Curriculum:

Lever 1: Relationships – We cannot expect our students to return to school joyfully, and many relationships that were thriving during their education, may need to be restored. It is through strengthening their relationships that we can alleviate the negative feelings with which some of the students will return to school.

Lever 2: Community – We need to identify the needs of our students and to engage them in the transitioning, i.e. returning to school.

Lever 3: Transparent Curriculum – All of our students will feel like they have lost time for learning and we must show them that we, as a school, are addressing these gaps and that we are doing it together with them.

Lever 4: Metacognition – We must emphasize relearning in a school environment to rebuild students' confidence as learners.

Lever 5: Space – We need to allow students to express their needs and concerns without fear.

Recovery Curriculum: Areas and planning

1. SCHOOL COMMUNITY

What type of emotional support will you provide to students returning to school after six months?

How will you ensure that the students' voice, their needs, and concerns are being heard?

Do you have a work plan for the professional school services for the next year?

What activities do you plan to suggest to the homeroom teachers to enable them to work on re-establishing the class community?

How will you ensure hygienic standards in school, as well as the physical distance between students?

Activity suggestion: Worry box

Place a box in the classroom in which students will write anonymously about their worries that are related to the process of returning to school. Allow students to put as many worries as they want in the box and do this activity during the entire week. Have the homeroom teacher discuss all concerns with the students and let them come up with a solution together. The homeroom teachers pass on the conclusions from each class to you as the principal.

Activity proposal: First parent-teacher meeting topic - students' mental health

Lesson plans on the topic of re-establishing a school community can be found in the 'Collection of lesson plans for a happier return to school' on pages 5 - 9 and 17. (This publication is available only in the Croatian language.)

2. CURRICULUM

How will you identify your students' learning gaps?

How will you encourage teachers to adapt their subject curriculum to the new circumstances? What instructions will you give them?

What interventions do you plan to carry out? E.g. additional/supplementary classes, more teaching/learning hours, curriculum adaptations, etc.

What will be the emphasis in the school curriculum during this school year?
How will I address the need for mental support and well-being to students?

Activity suggestions:

Creating a Recovery curriculum - what do we expect from our students in this school year? Curriculum revision of each subject should be guided by the common-sense principle.

Peer learning as the main school project in the school year 2020/2021.

At each meeting of the professional learning community, stress the important learning outcomes for the next year.

Professional school services in cooperation with homeroom teachers prepare 'Learning how to learn' and social skills workshops for all students.

Lesson plans on the topic of the curriculum can be found in the 'Collection of lesson plans for a happier return to school' on pages 9 - 12, 17 - 18. (This publication is available only in the Croatian language.)

3. LEARNING AND TEACHING STRATEGIES

What do we need to support teachers' and students' digital skills and to ensure their readiness for quality distance learning?

What was useful during the period of distance learning and that should be continued in 'regular' teaching - practices, methods, concepts?

Does your plan include targeted support for students with more challenging learning gaps?

Do you plan to introduce peer learning in the school?

Activity proposal:

Survey students with the following questions:

How would you rate your learning from 1 to 10 while you were out of school?

Which parts of online classes were easier for you, and which were more difficult?

What do you think we should focus on the most as a school now that we are back to school? Where do you need the most support?

Proposed activities: Organize a debate on distance learning at the school level and gain insight into the pros and cons

Lesson plans on the topic of learning and teaching strategies can be found in the 'Collection of lesson plans for a happier return to school' on pages 13 -16 and 18. (This publication is available only in the Croatian language.)

Steps in Planning a Recovery Curriculum

1. THE GOAL OF YOUR RECOVERY CURRICULUM- WHAT DO YOU WANT TO ACHIEVE?

For example, the goals of your Recovery Curriculum may be: strengthening students' resilience and care for their well-being; re-establishing the class community; learning how to learn, etc.

The example of a Recovery Curriculum goal (Fordbridge Childcare Plus Primary School, Birmingham, UK⁷):

The focus for schools in the autumn will be upon ensuring that pupils are ready to learn and as such social and emotional learning will be prioritized. The act of recovery is at least as much an emotional and social one as it is academic, and our ability to recognize and plan for this will be at the heart of our learners' eventual success. All of our subject leaders have prepared plans for the autumn term.

The example of a Recovery Curriculum goal (Whitfield Aspen School, Kent, UK⁸):

Whitfield Aspen has put the child's well-being at the centre of our thinking. We acknowledge that the children will have had different experiences during this time. However, the common thread running through all is the loss of routine, structure, friendship, opportunity, and freedom. These losses can trigger anxiety in any child. Some of you may have experienced this with your children. We know that an anxious child is not in a place to learn effectively. So, with this in mind, the school community has thought about the most effective way to support your child's ability to learn. This approach will encompass and support the academic expectations for your child.

2. ANALYSIS OF STUDENT NEEDS AND INTERESTS

To define priority areas, it is necessary to identify the needs of students. We can do this by conducting a short survey with students that would help them to express their concerns and say in which areas they need the most help. This may apply to specific subject areas, but it may also relate to learning strategies and concerns about re-socialization. At the school level, it is necessary to determine the subject areas that we will monitor to gain insight into learning gaps that all of us need to overcome. When you analyze the data, you will gain insight into the needs of students and you will be able to define priority areas more easily.

3. RECOVERY CURRICULUM PRIORITY AREAS

For example, you can choose one of the three areas that were already mentioned, and plan activities related to these areas - school community, curriculum, or learning strategies. You can also select all three areas and prioritize a set of activities within each of them.

The example of identifying priority areas in Palatine Primary School Recovery Curriculum in Sussex, UK⁹:

Based on the analysis, the school has set four basic areas of focus during the school year, and within each area, several activities will be carried out. The four focus areas include: (1) Supporting students in building positive relationships

⁷ <https://www.fordbridge.solihull.sch.uk/recovery-curriculum-2020-2021/>

⁸ <https://www.whitfieldaspenschool.co.uk/recovery-curriculum/>

⁹ <https://palatineschool.org/recovery-curriculum/>

with others, (2) Supporting students in dealing with their emotions, (3) Supporting students in learning and achieving their academic goals, (4) Physical and mental well-being of students.

4. RECOVERY CURRICULUM METHODOLOGY

Activities: Make sure to emphasize short-term and long-term activities here. You can use the table that we provided below for this purpose.

Methods: What do teachers do.

Results/indicators: How you will measure and monitor the realization of each activity.

Responsible persons: Name and surname of the person in charge of carrying out the activities.

Resources: All that we need to conduct the planned activities (people, materials, funds, equipment, etc.)

Time of implementation: As you set short-term and long-term activities in the table below you can review the timeline of the activities. You will conduct some activities before the beginning of the school year, some in the first two weeks, and some, the long-term ones, you will plan for the whole year.

Informing the stakeholders: It is important that you do not prepare this document for the internal use in the school, but rather that you inform students, parents, and the local community about it so that they get the information about the measures and activities you have suggested for the challenging year ahead.

Note: The recovery curriculum should not be a comprehensive document containing long texts, but a very specific and operational document that will help you to plan your work in times of emergency. It can be an integral part of your school curriculum, as well as a special document that you will inform students and parents about so that they know what activities the school is planning within the 'back-to-school process'.

TEMPLATE

Elementary school XY - Recovery curriculum

Recovery plan goal:

Summary of students' needs assessment:

Recovery curriculum priority areas:

Table for preparation of Recovery plan

When?	PRIORITY AREA (School community, Curriculum, Learning strategies)	ACTIVITY	RESULT/ INDICATOR	METHODS	RESOURCES	WHO IS RESPONSIBLE FOR IT?
TWO WEEKS BEFORE THE SCHOOL OPENING						
FIRST WEEK						
FIRST MONTH						
ENTIRE SCHOOL YEAR						

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UNESCO 'Back to school' webinar (April 2020): *Preparing and managing the reopening of schools*

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