

CLASS ATTENDANCE
ABSENT: 168 MILLION CHILDREN

**COVID-19
AND SCHOOL
CLOSURES**
ONE YEAR OF
EDUCATION
DISRUPTION

Key findings

1. In the period between March 11, 2020 and February 2, 2021, schools have been fully closed for an average of 95 instruction days globally, which represents approximately half the time intended for classroom instruction.
2. Countries in the Latin America and the Caribbean region were the most affected with 158 days of full school closures on average, followed by countries in South Asia with 146 days. Countries in the Eastern and Southern Africa region were the third most affected with an average of 101 days.
3. Among the top 20 countries with the longest full school closures during this period, more than half are situated in the Latin America and the Caribbean region.
4. Globally, 214 million students from pre-primary to upper secondary education in 23 countries have missed at least three-quarters of classroom instruction time at the pre-primary to upper secondary level since March 2020.
5. Of these 214 million students, 168 million in 14 countries missed almost all classroom instruction time due to school closures.
6. Countries with the longest durations of school closures tend to have a low prevalence of school-age children with a fixed internet connection at home.
7. While the majority of countries have fully opened schools (53 per cent) and almost a quarter of the world's countries have partially opened schools, 196 million students in 27 countries (13 per cent globally) have schools that were fully closed as of February 2, 2021, the most recent date for which data is available.
8. On average, in countries where schools were still closed as of February 2, 2021, nearly 80 per cent of classroom instruction has been missed in the eleven-month period since March 2020.



Introduction

We are facing a COVID-19 education crisis. As this report finds, schools for more than 168 million children globally have been closed for almost a full year. With every day that goes by, these children will fall further behind and the most vulnerable will pay the heaviest price. Governments must reopen schools better than before and ensure every child can return to school.

School closures are expected to exacerbate the learning crisis that existed before the pandemic, with the most vulnerable children being the most adversely affected. The World Bank estimates that global school closures could result in a loss of at least US \$10 trillion in lifetime earnings for this generation (World Bank, 2020). Early evidence from school closures already suggests an increase in early marriage and sexual violence in some countries, whereas others report increased involvement of children in household chores (Asanov, 2020; Reuters, 2020).

This report presents unique findings regarding government responses to the pandemic in terms of school closures with data from more than 200 countries between March 11, 2020 and February 2, 2021¹. The report uses UNESCO's definition of school closures². Schools are considered "fully closed" when the closures affect most or all of the schoolchildren enrolled at pre-primary, primary, lower and upper secondary levels. "Partial closures" refer to situations in which schools are either closed in some of a country's administrative units, for some grade levels, or are operating with limited capacity. Finally, a status of "fully open" means that classes are held in-person for all schoolchildren and at all grade levels.



¹ Please refer to the methodology section for more detailed information.

² https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/en_methodological_note_-_unesco_map_on_covid-19_caused_school_closures_reopening_final.pdf

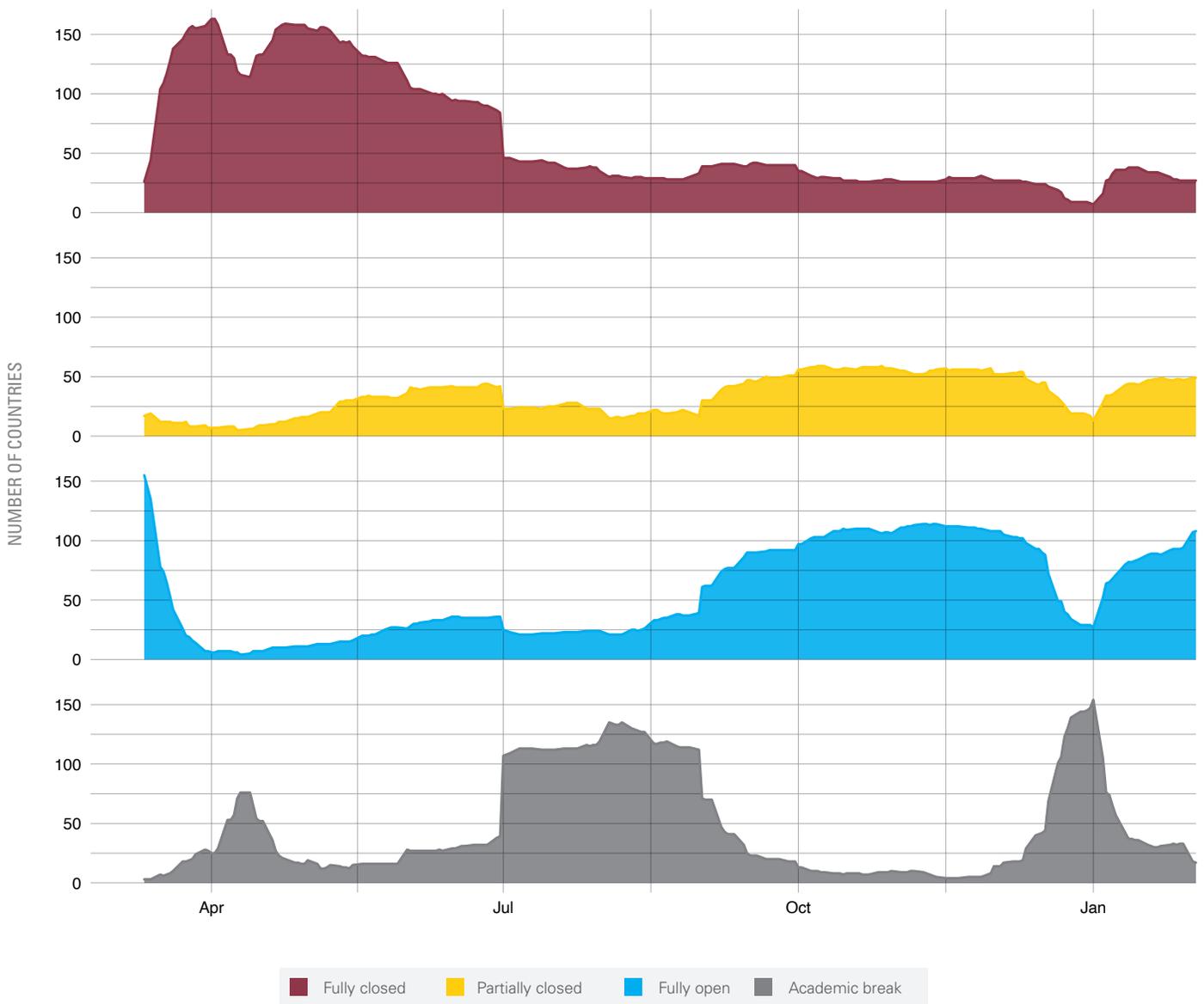


Tracking the status of school closures

Figure 1 shows the trends in school closures since March 2020. At first, about 150 countries had fully closed their schools, while about 10 countries were partially closed and another 10 were fully open. This situation begins to change in May, where a decline in the number of countries observing full school closures is accompanied by an increase in the number of countries where schools are partially or fully open.

In the period from July to September, a drop is observed in full school closures due to more than 100 countries being on academic break. In October, six months after the start of school closures, a reversal in this trend emerges, and around 100 countries open schools fully, while roughly 50 countries open schools partially and approximately 25 countries have their schools fully shut.

FIGURE 1
Time-series of school closure status from March 2020 to February 2021



Source: UNESCO Global monitoring of school closures caused by COVID-19

Note: The analysis covers schools from pre-primary to upper secondary level.

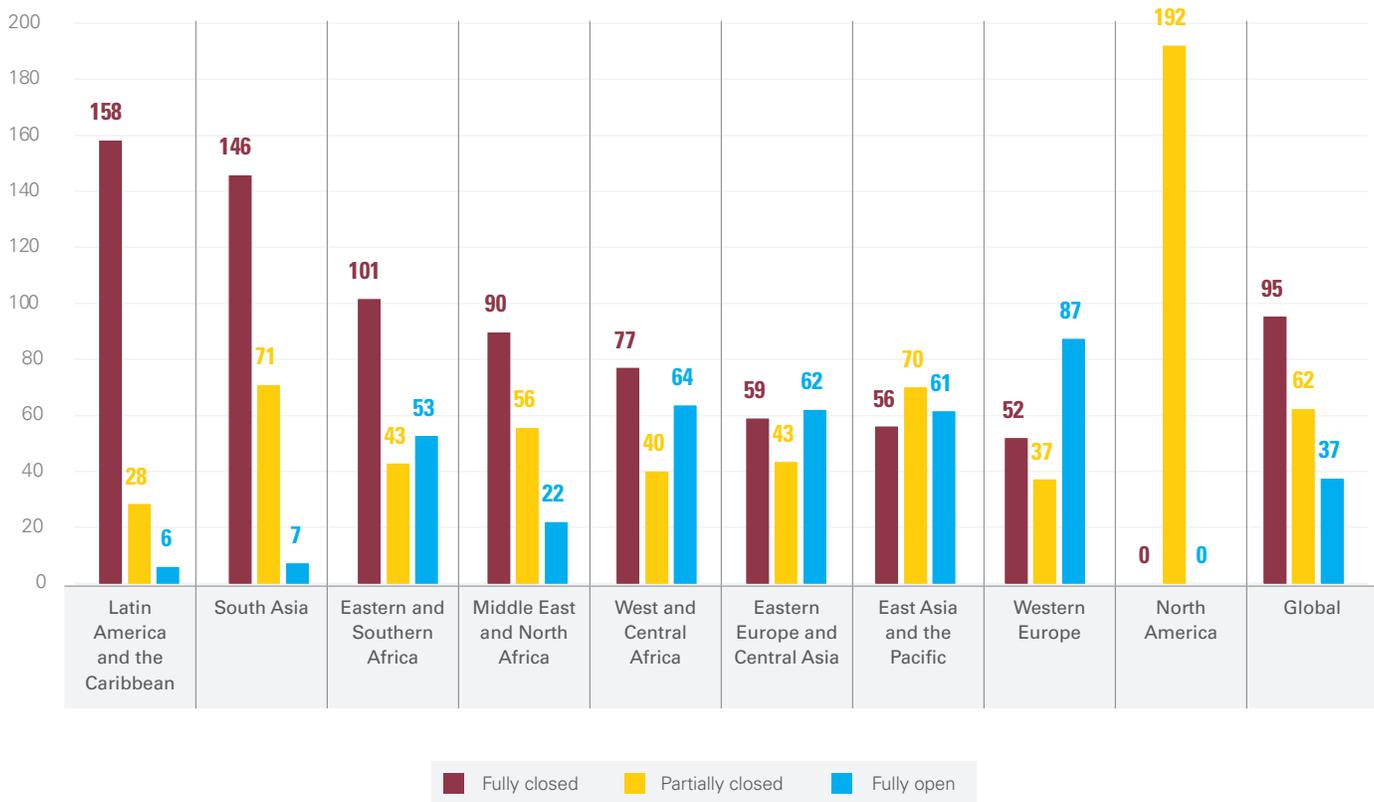
The magnitude of school closures: A regional perspective

The duration of school closures indicates the number of days students did not receive in-person classroom instruction. Different regions were affected disproportionately in terms of the magnitude of school closures (Figure 2). The highest average number of days when classroom instruction was disrupted was seen in the Latin America and the Caribbean region, followed by the South Asia, and Eastern and Southern Africa regions. In contrast, in North America region schools closed partially. Globally, schools were closed for an average of 95 (roughly 50 per cent) instruction days, which represents a high proportion of intended classroom instruction time.



FIGURE 2

Number of students (in million) impacted in countries with fully closed schools as of February 2, 2021



Source: UNESCO Global monitoring of school closures caused by COVID-19

Note: Estimates are weighted by the number of students in pre-primary to upper secondary education in each country.

Countries with the greatest number of days of full school closures

In recent months, the status of school closures has evolved considerably. Some countries closed all schools initially but then eventually reopened schools. Others have had full school closures for almost the entire year since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Figure 3 summarizes the 20 countries with the highest number of days of full school closures since March 11, 2020, in descending order. The data reveal that more than half of the top 20 countries are concentrated in

the Latin America and the Caribbean region, and the number of days of full school closure ranges from 148 days in Jordan to 211 days in Panama. It is important to note that the total days of instruction differ among countries and therefore the highest number of days of full closures may not translate to that largest share of instruction days missed.

FIGURE 3
Countries with the highest number of days of full school closures (March 2020 – February 2021)



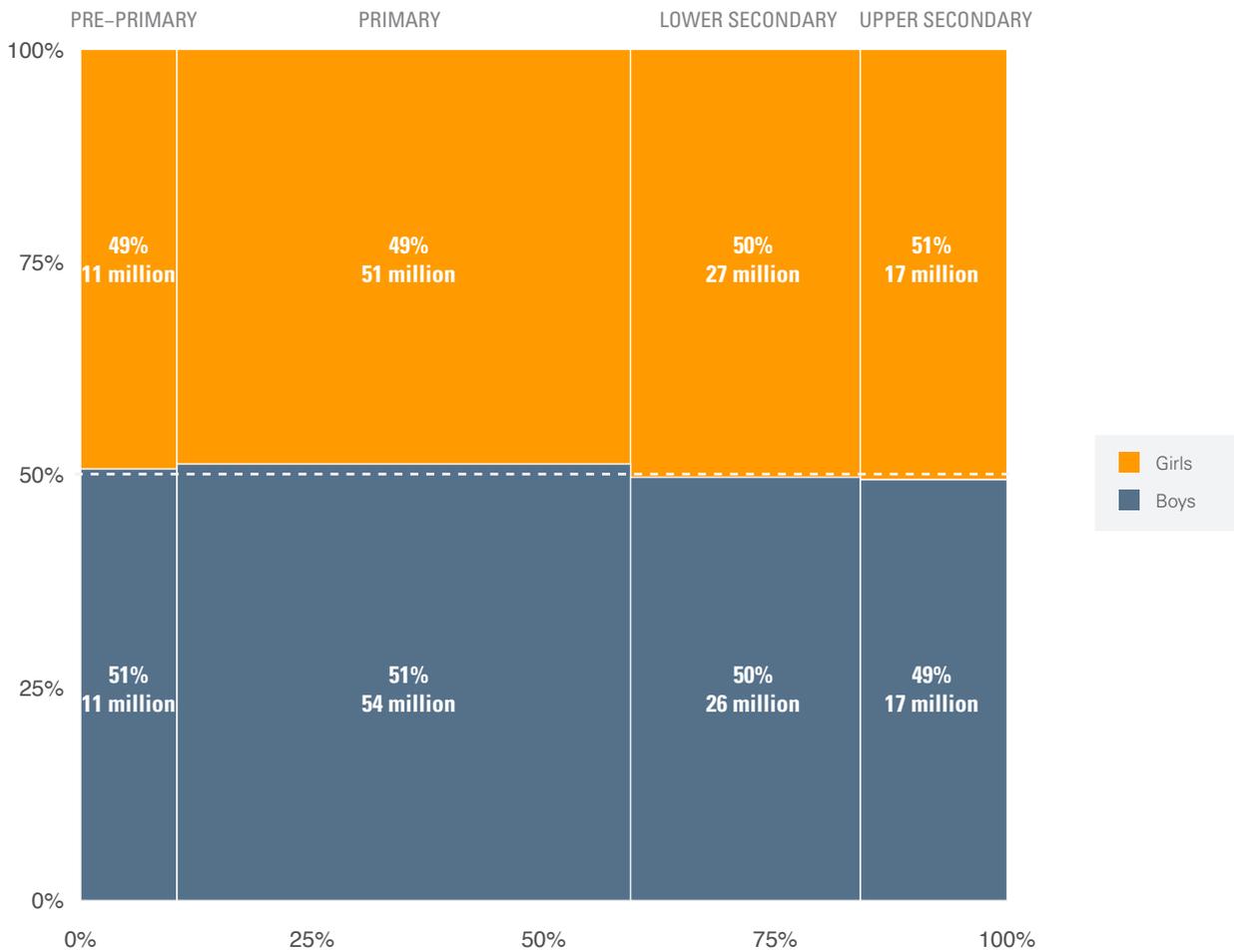
Source: UNESCO Global monitoring of school closures caused by COVID-19
Note: The analysis covers schools from pre-primary to upper secondary level.

The number of students affected by school closures

Globally, 214 million pre-primary to upper secondary education students in 23 countries missed at least three-quarters of classroom instruction time (Figures 4 and 5). Primary school students constitute the majority of the world's schoolchildren, so they are also the majority among those who missed at least three-quarters of classroom instruction (105 million), followed by lower secondary school students (53 million).



FIGURE 4
Students who have missed at least three quarters of classroom instruction time since March 2020, by sex and education level



Sources: UNESCO Global monitoring of school closures caused by COVID-19; UNESCO UIS database on student enrollment

Among these 214 million students, 78 per cent missed almost all in-person classroom instruction time. For the purposes of this report, a country is said to have missed “almost all” in-person instruction time if between March 11, 2020 and February 2, 2021 the country had (i) 10 or fewer fully open school days and (ii) 12 or fewer partially

open days. Globally, 168 million students in 14 countries missed all in-person classroom instruction since March, 2020. Brazil, Bangladesh, Mexico and the Philippines have the largest number of students impacted by these full school closures.

FIGURE 5
Number of students (in millions) who have missed at least three-quarters or almost all classroom instruction time since March 2020, by country



Sources: UNESCO Global monitoring of school closures caused by COVID-19; UNESCO UIS database on student enrollment

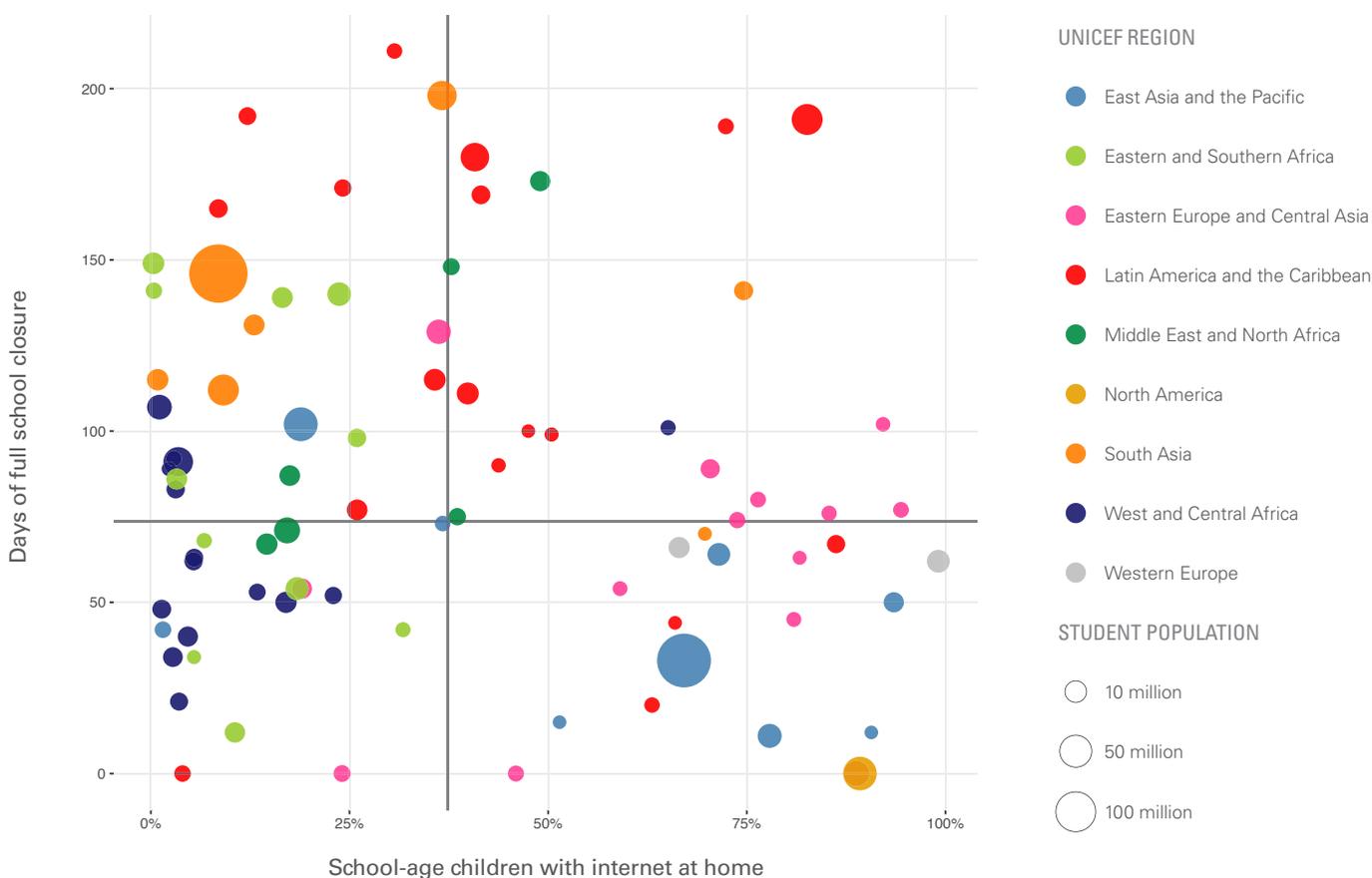
Note: The analysis covers students from pre-primary level to upper secondary level. The enrolment figures in 2020 are extrapolated using the latest number of students enrolled.

School closures and digital connectivity among the school-age population

Recent data show that over 90 per cent of education ministries worldwide have implemented some form of remote learning approaches that involve radio, television or the internet (UNICEF, 2020; UNESCO, UNICEF and World Bank, 2020; Dreesen, *et al.*, 2020). While no remote learning technology can completely replace the classroom learning experience, some technologies have features that allow them to better emulate classroom settings. TV and radio require programs to be pre-recorded and make live, interactive lessons difficult. In contrast, digital technology such as the internet, personal computers, tablets and mobile phones may be more suitable for emulating classroom-like interactions.

Using the data from the recent UNICEF report on digital connectivity (UNICEF, 2020b), Figure 6 shows the relationship between the duration of school closures and the share of the school-age population with a fixed internet connection at home. The data indicates that there are many countries with long-duration school closures that also have low rates of internet connectivity at home (the top left area of Figure 6). Many students in these countries missed out on both in-person classroom instruction and learning opportunities that used internet-based technologies, putting them at a severe risk of falling behind in their education.

FIGURE 6
The relationship between the number of full school closures and internet connectivity at home



Sources: UNESCO Global monitoring of school closures caused by COVID-19; selected Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey, Demographic and Health Surveys and national household surveys from 2010-2020

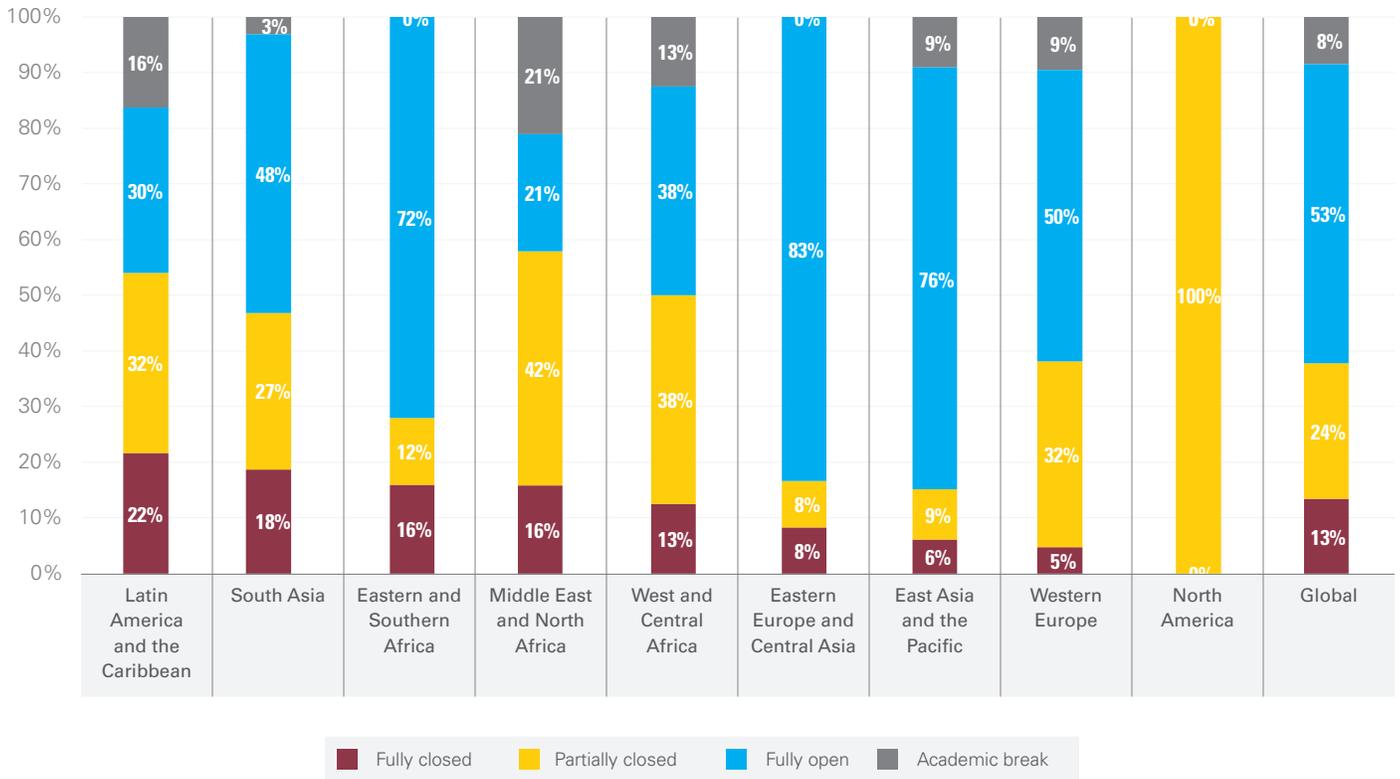
Note: The vertical and horizontal red lines indicate the averages for the x- and y-axes, respectively. The analysis covers children from pre-primary level to upper secondary level.

School closures: Where we stand today

As of February 2, 2021, the latest data³ indicate school closures due to the COVID-19 continue to be in place in many countries. Almost a full year since the pandemic

was declared, only half of countries have fully opened schools. 37 per cent of countries have schools either partially or fully closed.

FIGURE 7
School closure status, by region as of February 2, 2021



Source: UNESCO Global monitoring of school closures caused by COVID-19

Note: The analysis covers schools from pre-primary to upper secondary level.



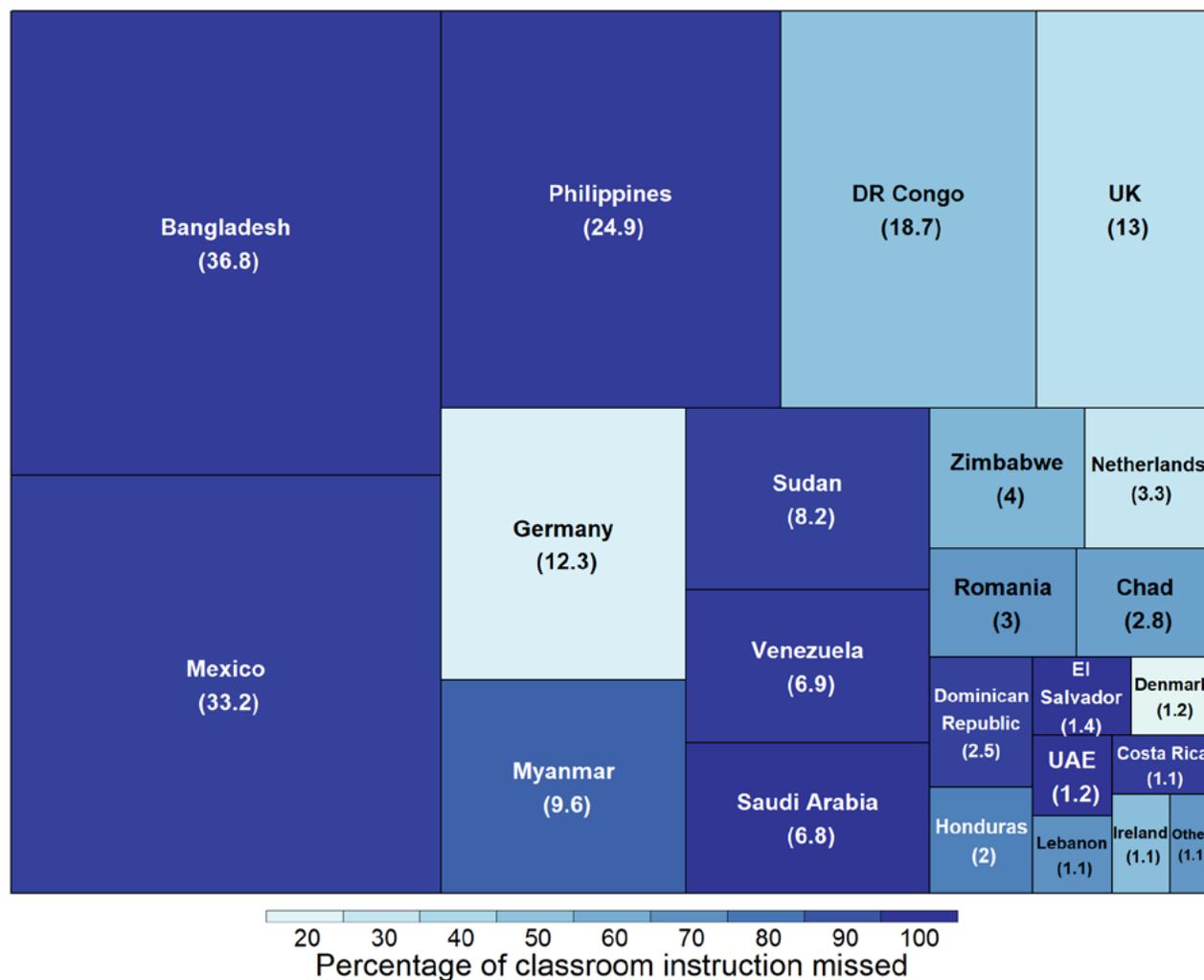
There are remarkable regional differences in school closure status. The Latin America and the Caribbean region has the highest share of countries with full school closures (22 per cent), followed by Western Europe (18 per cent), Eastern and Southern Africa (16 per cent) and the Middle East and North Africa regions (16 per cent). Eastern Europe and Central Asia (5 per cent), East Asia and the Pacific (6 per cent) and West and Central Africa (8 per cent) have comparatively lower shares of countries with full school closures.

A partial school closure approach was adopted in the North America region, as well as in the Middle East and North Africa region (42 per cent) and the South Asia region (38 per cent).

At the opposite end of the spectrum, in West and Central Africa, East Asia and the Pacific, and Eastern and Southern Africa, only 17 per cent, 24 per cent and 18 per cent (respectively) of schools in these regions are closed.

Of the 27 countries that still have fully closed schools in February 2021, 10 have had schools fully shut for more than 95 per cent of the time period since March 2020. In total, around 196 million students in these 27 countries are missing in-person classroom instruction due to school closures. On average, schoolchildren in the 27 countries where schools are currently fully closed have missed about 80 per cent of classroom instruction between March 2020 and January 2021.

FIGURE 8
Percentage of students impacted in countries with fully closed schools as of February 2, 2021



Sources: UNESCO Global monitoring of school closures caused by COVID-19; UNESCO-UIS, 2021

Call for Action



Despite overwhelming evidence of the impact of school closures on children, and despite increasing evidence that schools are not drivers of the pandemic, too many countries have opted to keep schools closed, some for nearly a year.

Schools are essential for children's learning, health, safety and well-being. For the most vulnerable children, school closures have deprived them of their one nutritious meal a day; children living in violent or dysfunctional family settings who rely on school to provide a safe, nurturing environment have also been cut off from this safety net (Borkowski *et al*, 2020; WHO, 2020). In many countries, schools also play essential role in immunization and health support.

As schools reopen, governments must nurture the development and well-being of every student when they return to the classroom, with comprehensive services including remedial learning, health and nutrition, and mental health and protection measures. Authorities must also ensure all children return to school when classrooms reopen.

The UNESCO-UNICEF-World Bank Survey on National Education Responses to COVID-19 School Closures highlighted the need to not only monitor and mitigate students' learning losses but to also recognize the need to provide teachers with the training and support they need to transition to new modalities of instruction. The report also revealed gaps countries may face in education financing in the current or next fiscal year (UNESCO, UNICEF and World Bank, 2020). A more recent World Bank report shows that education budgets declined after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 65 per cent of low- and lower middle- income countries compared to only 33 percent of high- and upper-middle-income countries (GEMR/World Bank, 2021).

Quality education ensures each child can reach their full potential. Moving forward, it will be crucial to ensure adequate education financing to build inclusive and responsive education systems that are resilient in the face of future disruptions. Reopening schools also gives us a unique opportunity to transform and reimagine education.

As we enter the second year of the COVID-19 pandemic, and as cases continue to soar around the world, no effort should be spared to keep schools open or prioritize them in reopening plans. Children cannot afford another year of school closures.

Methodology

The report uses two major data sources: UNESCO's monitoring of school closures (UNESCO, 2021), and the UIS database on student populations (UNESCO UIS, 2021). The numbers presented in this report use March 11, 2020 as a reference point because this was the date the World Health Organization officially deemed the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak a global pandemic. February 2, 2021 was the most recent date for which data from UNESCO's school closures tracker was available. The number of instruction days between March 11, 2020 and February 2, 2021 was calculated by summing the days when schools were fully open, fully closed and partially closed based on the UNESCO data. Weekends and academic breaks are not considered as instruction days.

The definition of school closure status used in this report is in line with UNESCO's methodology:³ schools are considered fully closed when the closures affect most or all of the schoolchildren enrolled at pre-primary, primary, lower and upper secondary levels. Partial closures refer to situations in which schools are either closed in some of a country's administrative units, for some grade levels, or are operating with limited capacity. Finally, a status of fully open means that classes are held in-person for all schoolchildren and at all grade levels.

The 10 countries where "almost all instruction time was missed" between March 11, 2020 and February 2, 2021 had 10 or fewer fully open school days and 12 or fewer partially open days during the period studied. This cut-off was decided based on the distribution of days of full closure and partial closure. The number of students affected is calculated based on the latest number of students in the UIS global database.

Global and regional averages for the number of days by school closure status are weighted by the total student population across pre-primary to upper secondary education levels.



³ https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/en_methodological_note_-_unesco_map_on_covid-19_caused_school_closures_reopening_final.pdf

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