The Return to School in 2021

By April 2020, 188 countries had closed schools due to the Covid-19 pandemic. About 91% (one and a half billion) of enrolled learners were affected. Throughout 2020 and into 2021 schools struggled to provide education using distance learning, partial opening of schools, and re-opening, then closing again when the infection reached a new wave.

Johns Hopkins University, the World Bank and UNICEF jointly provide ongoing information about how 200 countries are providing education at all grade levels, whether in-person, hybrid, remote or multiple means. Some provide none. The Covid-19 Global Education Recovery Tracker [https://www.covideducationrecovery.global](https://www.covideducationrecovery.global) is an interactive display featuring the type of education provided at different grade levels, countries and times since April 2021. Country profiles for about 200 countries provide statistics about Covid-19 in each country and how education is recovering.

Children’s experience during 2020 and 2021

UNICEF’s 2021 State of the World’s Children report *On my Mind* focuses on children’s mental health. The report declares that the pandemic is the wake-up call for the world to pay attention to the well-being of children including their emotional needs. The report starts this way:

Children around the world have been locked out of classrooms, sequestered in their homes and robbed of the everyday joy of playing with friends – all consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. Millions more families have been pushed into poverty, unable to make ends meet. Child labour, abuse and gender-based violence are on the rise. Many children are filled with sadness, hurt or anxiety. Some are wondering where this world is headed and what their place is in it. Indeed, these are very challenging times for children and young people, and this is the state of their world in 2021.

The report describes mental health as a positive state of well-being and asks schools to invest in a holistic approach that “means moving beyond focusing on the curriculum to foster child development and well-being in a warm school environment that makes children feel safe and connected and that empowers them to express opinions, support other students, and seek help when they need it”.

Electronic Newsletter October 2021
Editor: Marion Huxtable

International Network for School Social Work

[http://internationalnetwork-schoolsocialwork.htmlplanet.com](http://internationalnetwork-schoolsocialwork.htmlplanet.com)

Contact mhuxtable@olympus.net
The 259-page report does not mention school social work, and says very little about the workforce needed to ensure that the recommendations for mental health are followed. Failing to address the need for specialized helping professionals is an ongoing problem in reports from international organizations. Including case studies from school social work practice would enrich such reports by adding practical examples of implementing services for children’s well-being and mental health.

Recently the Global Social Service Workforce Alliance drafted a technical note commissioned for UNICEF on strengthening the social service workforce in schools to protect children. Schools need social workers to help deliver what UNICEF’s State of the World’s Children recommends.

**Returning to school**

So far, about one in three of the world’s schoolchildren were unable to use digital learning when their schools were closed. Even those who could participate online, have missed out on many of the experiences that can only be experienced first-hand. Many children have dropped out and school systems are unable to locate some of them. The disruption in learning is clear.

The Global Education Recovery Tracker shows how children are returning to school. European countries, Canada, Japan and some African countries are providing in-person education. Australia, the US, India, Vietnam and many others are offering some kind of hybrid of in-person and remote education. Children who are returning to in-person learning will have to deal with new conditions as well as trying to catch up with learning they have missed. Masks, vaccinations, Covid tests, more school closures, quarantines and stressed adults are some of the conditions children will need to adapt to. Many need to relearn social skills after a long absence from school. Some children will fail to show up for school and others will have a high rate of absenteeism. School social workers can offer their traditional skills of reaching out to children, motivating children and their families to return to school and helping children re-adjust to school. They help the most vulnerable children.

**What school social workers can do**

Many people are re-examining priorities during the pandemic. Social workers and education personnel are looking at ways to remake their professions and institutions. The education profession has the chance to prioritize children’s well-being, as well as academic results, as recommended by UNICEF. This is a good time to reinvent education and for creativity in school social work. School social workers are looking to the true meaning of social work that is well expressed by the Swedish term *skolkurator* that carries the sense of caring and the African humanistic philosophy of *Ubuntu* that implies that supporting children’s well-being is part of a community. School social workers are ideally prepared with the systems approach to help schools become places that promote well-being.

Here is a new story to use in your work. “My Hero is You” is based on how children’s lives have been affected by Covid-19. Developed by UNICEF it fits into any culture. Ario is a fantasy creature who helps children find hope and joy. Ario appears to be a surrogate for you, the school social worker, a wise helping professional. The story is available here in English, French, Portuguese, Braille, Arabic, Bengali, Chinese, Russian, Swahili and Spanish. Translation into other languages is permitted using a Creative Commons License.

https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/my-hero-is-you-2021