

Upcoming new school year 2021/2022: rising concerns in Slovakia about the consequences of new school closures

ESPN Flash Report 2021/55

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The closure of schools during the first and second waves of the COVID-19 pandemic has led to significant gaps in access to (quality) education. Slovakia is one of the EU countries where schools were closed for longest in the 2020/2021 school year. Experts and policy-makers have agreed that priority should be given to continuity of education despite the potential arrival of a third wave. In August 2021, the Ministry of Education launched the campaign Open schools, to support vaccination as a way to begin the new, 2021/2022 school year normally.



Description

On 16 March 2020, all schools and school facilities closed in Slovakia, when the government declared a state of emergency because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The schools remained closed for more than two months and reopened shortly before the summer holiday: pupils in the first stage of primary school (first to fifth grade) returned to school on 1 June 2020 and older pupils followed them on 22 June; the summer break started on 1 July.

In the 2020/2021 school year, the second wave of the pandemic led to the closure of schools for pupils at the second stage of primary school (grades six to nine) and all students at secondary school in October 2020, to reduce travel to schools by students studying outside their place of residence. Kindergartens and the first stage of primary schools closed in January 2021. All schools reopened in April 2021.

Access to education and its quality during the pandemic were discussed widely in Slovakia. The Educational Policy Institute, the analytical unit of the Ministry of Education, estimated that almost 7.5% of all children at primary and secondary school remained without access to remote learning during the first wave of the pandemic (Ostertágová & Čokyna, 2020). Schools with a high number of socially disadvantaged children, including children living in marginalised Roma communities, and specialised schools for children with disabilities were most affected. Of children attending specialised (primary and secondary) schools, 18.6% did not

participate in remote learning at all (the degree of participation varied according to the type of disability). At primary schools with a high number of children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, 23.8% of pupils did not have access to remote learning (compared with 3.1% of children in schools with low numbers of vulnerable children). In the case of secondary schools with a high number of children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, 13.9% of children were not involved in remote learning (as compared to 2.9% in schools with low numbers of vulnerable children). Non-governmental organisations working with vulnerable children also warned that poor children did not have appropriate conditions for education at home (eduROMA, 2020; Teach for Slovakia, 2020).

In the 2020/2021 school year, amid the second wave of the pandemic, older pupils in the second stage of primary school and those at secondary school were the most affected by school closures: they “lost” six months, during which they depended solely on distance learning and online communication with their peers and teachers. According to a survey conducted among teachers, approximately 10% of children in the second stage of primary school did not participate in remote learning (Ostertágová & Rehúš, 2021) (this information is not available for other pupils and students). The overwhelming majority of teachers think that these children learned and achieved less than they would have under normal conditions. Expressed in months, it is estimated that they now lag behind by, on average, two months.

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The arrival of the third pandemic wave, characterised by the more infectious Delta variant, was acknowledged by the Ministry of Health in July 2021 (Slovak Spectator, 2021), and concerns have been raised about access to education and its quality in the 2021/2022 school year. One of the reasons is that Slovakia was one of the EU countries with the longest duration of school closure in the previous year, according to the UNESCO global monitoring map of school closures (UNESCO, 2021), and the government has repeatedly been criticised for overlooking the effects of the pandemic management on the educational needs of children.

The Ministry of Education has tried to address these problems through various interventions. In 2021, it allocated €40 million under the Operational Programme "Human Resources" to the purchase of technical equipment for teachers and students, including notebooks and tablets (Ministry of Education, 2021). Half of this amount came from the European Social Fund and the other half from the additional allocation for Slovakia under the REACT-EU initiative. The ministry also supported the organisation of summer schools for children who were lagging behind during the school year and needed help to catch up, providing €500,000 in 2020 and €380,000 in 2021. For example, in 2020, 244 primary schools organised summer schools with financial support from the ministry, i.e. 10% of all primary schools in Slovakia (Čokyna & Rehúš, 2021).

Recently, the focus of the Ministry of Education has been on vaccination, as in mid-August only 38% of the population aged 12+ were fully vaccinated (children aged between 12 and 17 may also

be vaccinated). In August 2021 it launched the campaign Open schools, supporting vaccination of all eligible persons as a way to begin the 2021/2022 school year normally and avoid repeated school closures. During the campaign, representatives of the ministry visited the regions and municipalities and explained the advantages to the education system of vaccinating the entire population aged 12 or above. The ministry is also launching a call centre that will contact representatives of municipalities with the lowest vaccination rates, as well as paediatricians, to persuade them to join the campaign.



Outlook and commentary

Experts in Slovakia repeatedly warned against the negative consequences of schools remaining closed for a very long time, including learning loss, lack of socialisation, and mental health problems. As regards learning loss, children living in vulnerable conditions faced the most serious problems (Ostertágová & Čokyna, 2020; Teach for Slovakia, 2020). However, the school closures have more general effects: Hellebrandt (2020) estimates that school closures and the characteristics of remote learning in Slovakia may reduce the future lifelong earnings of children by between 0.3% and 0.9%. An average pupil, who will earn an average wage in the future, would lose between €2,500 and €8,000 during their working life. Taking into account all children in kindergartens, primary and secondary schools, the overall earning loss would be between 0.45% and 1.45% of GDP.

While it seems that education was not a priority for public policy during the first and second waves of the pandemic, the situation has changed recently. The Ministry of Education recognises that school closure has significant negative consequences and that keeping schools open should be a policy priority. There is consensus that progress in vaccinating the population is a necessary precondition for this.

Further reading

Čokyna, J., Rehúš, M., 2021: *Letné školy ako opatrenie na zmiernenie dopadov pandémie COVID-19 na vzdelávacie výsledky žiakov a žiačiek*. Centrum vzdelávacích analýz.

eduROMA, 2020: [Aký je rozdiel medzi chudobnými rómskymi online a offline žiakmi a žiačkami?](#)

Hellebrandt, T., 2020: [Koľko stratia deti na budúcich príjmoch kvôli zatvoreným školám? Útvar hodnoty za peniaze](#), Ministerstvo financií SR.

Ministry of Education, 2021: [Press release](#).

Ostertágová, A., Čokyna, J., 2020: *Hlavné zistenia z dotazníkového prieskumu v základných a stredných školách o priebehu dištančnej výučby v školskom roku 2019/2020*. Inštitút vzdelávacej politiky.

Ostertágová, A., Rehúš, M., 2021: *Správa z reprezentatívneho prieskumu o priebehu a dopade dištančnej výučby v školskom roku 2020/2021*. Centrum vzdelávacích analýz.

Slovak Spectator, 2021: [Third pandemic wave has already arrived in Slovakia](#)

Teach for Slovakia, 2020: [Chudobné deti odstrihnuté od internetu](#)

UNESCO, 2021: Total duration of school closures

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