Back to school in the COVID-19 era with OECD's Andreas Schleicher

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Intro [00:00:02] Welcome to OECD podcasts, where policy means people.

Clara Young [00:00:08] It's September, and for many OECD countries, it's back-to-school time. Except that this year, back to school is a whole different proposition because of COVID-19. Since the virus began circulating in January 2020—and perhaps even earlier—

it's been a roller coaster ride for students, teachers, parents and administrators around the world. Overall, 188 countries temporarily closed their schools in the first half of 2020. This affected more than 1.5 billion young people. And some schools that reopened have had to switch back to remote learning, sometimes just days later as the virus transmission in classrooms sped up. What are the trade-offs between getting kids back to school and keeping communities healthy? How can schools adapt to COVID? And will this virus radically change the way we learn and teach?

Clara Young [00:01:01] I'm Clara Young. And here to discuss all this and more is Andreas Schleicher, who is the director for education and Skills at the OECD. Thanks for speaking to us, Andreas.

Andreas Schleicher [00:01:11] Thanks Clara.

Clara Young [00:01:13] Now, there's intense focus right now on how to open the new school year. And what's making people nervous is that back to school is happening as the infection rate remains high or is going up. Even Korea, which has been a model country in terms of testing, tracking and tracing, has put schools back online in Seoul and other hard-hit areas. And that's because students and teachers are testing positive. So is it safe to go back to school, Andreas?

Andreas Schleicher [00:01:42] Yeah, I think we can reconcile safety and health and education in schools. There may be individual schools closures necessary. I think that's quite clear, as conditions require. But overall, I'm quite confident. In fact, even before the summer break, we've found a number of countries that were able to manage this quite well with social distancing in place and good training of staff and good awareness amongst students. I do think that it's possible. The cost of not doing this—to individual students, to society—is very high.

Clara Young [00:02:17] Let's talk about the costs. What risks do we run by having a disrupted school year and by closing schools?

Andreas Schleicher [00:02:27] For students who don't have the right technology at home, who do not have the parents, it create a good supporting environment, who do not have access to great people helping them, and most importantly, will have never learned how to study on their own, I think this has been devastating. We think about for individuals, we talk about maybe a 3% dent in lifetime income. This is a heavy, heavy cost. And it is incurred particularly to the most marginalised students. In a way, this crisis has exasperated [exacerbated] the many inequalities that we already have in education.

Clara Young [00:03:07] So what are we doing about that?

Andreas Schleicher [00:03:10] In the home environment, a lot has happened. Many young people have now at least technology at home. The systems have also become more responsive to the technologies that are actually available. Like in some countries, computers may not be there, but mobile phones are. And television has played an important role. You can look to Spain. Some countries have been very creative in creating a broader mix of technologies. It's not so much, I think, the hardware. It's very much about the software and the people, really, I think. It's about building this kind of personal fabric between students and teachers. And yeah, that's really the crunch point.

Clara Young [00:03:49] I think that some of the findings that are coming out are that student engagement when in the online classroom is difficult.

Andreas Schleicher [00:03:58] Yeah, that's exactly the point. Learning is always a relational process. It's about those personal interactions. The one thing that young people will take away from this whole experience is did I have a teacher who realised my passions, my dreams? Did I have that kind of patient support and an understanding? And when students feel it, they're going to go out of their way in learning. But where students feel this is just about broadcasting, whether by a teacher or by a computer, they're going to disengage and break once again. The most marginalised students are most at risk of losing out in this.

Clara Young [00:04:33] Right. What are some techniques that are working and what are the things that are not working in remote teaching?

Andreas Schleicher [00:04:40] If you have a teacher just delivering a lecture on Zoom, that's not very effective. That's basically old teaching using new technology. And I think you need to change your pedagogy. You need to capitalise on the opportunities of technology, making learning more and more interesting, more engaging, more granular, more personal, and then bringing the personal aspect, the support, the coaching, the mentoring on it one-by-one basis. And I think if you use that combination, you're going to be a very effective teacher. Technology can amplify good teaching, but it doesn't replace core teaching.

Clara Young [00:05:16] It's possible that the pandemic could make us more ready to experiment and to take on new technologies. Do you see that happening?

Andreas Schleicher [00:05:28] Yeah. That's not just possible. That is actually happening. I see more technological innovation, but also more social innovation in schools. In the last few months and many years.

Clara Young [00:05:38] Could you tell us about that? Like some interesting examples?

[00:05:42] Well, the most obvious one is the use of technology in the question of the what and how we learn? Basically, it's not just about the accumulation of subject matter content. It's really, can you set your

own learning goals? Can you manage your learning process? Do you have the many cognitive abilities, the resilience actually to work through hardships. Can you work on complex problems? Can you study for a sustained period of time? Many schools and teachers have understood that actually learning is boundaryless [boundless, without bounds], like we can actually combine learning in school and out of school. Typically schools are very good to keep students inside and the rest of the world outside. And I think this pandemic has inverted that. The connections with society has become so important. Many schools have really done that well. And I'm pretty sure a lot of this will remain after the pandemic.

Clara Young [00:06:36] Let's get back to some of the safety aspects of reopening schools. What are you picking up on? About best practices for going back?

Andreas Schleicher [00:06:47] Well, actually this is perhaps the aspect I've been most surprised that. I would have expected that social distancing is going to be easy in university and high school. [And that] it's going to be really tough in primary school. And actually I've seen pretty much the reverse. I think young children understand very well when you instruct them and you explain that to them, they adhere to those kinds of safety protocols, the health protocols. That, I think, is quite well-established, even wearing masks in social spaces. But you need to do a lot around that. You have capacity constraints. Classes will be smaller. And certain subjects obviously are much more risky than others. Singing and dancing is obviously more complex than maths and science. So you see changes in the curriculum. I think the hardest challenge is local capacity. You need to have school leaders and you need to have teachers who take individual responsibility. They need to understand there is a problem with health. I need to intervene. I need to take maybe have to put a classroom in quarantine. I may have to help support a teacher and so on. So I think there is [are] huge demands on schools have been run like factories and a one size fits all method and that no longer works. Now, you really need schools that are very closely related to the community. And part of this is building trust. You know, you can reopen a school, but whether parents come and students come very much depends on whether you can make a compelling case that you actually reconcile the education and the learning with the safety and the health of students, teachers and the environment.

Clara Young [00:08:29] I think schools have also been using all kinds of organisational techniques, like a staggered recreational time, staggered mealtimes, staggered classes, all that.

Andreas Schleicher [00:08:40] Yeah, and I think, again, you know, there are now well-established practices on how to implement social distancing in schools to ensure that they're—you need to coordinate public spaces to limit congestion, all of those things. But, again, schools have been quick in most countries to figure out how to do this.

Clara Young [00:08:59] I read that in Denmark, there were some schools that were giving classes in graveyards so that the students could have a place, space and air. In India, I think, in some poor areas. Teachers were using loudspeaker systems to teach. So I think teachers have really been coming up with new ideas to try to deal with the pandemic.

Andreas Schleicher [00:09:23] Yeah, you know, 9% of learning is now planned for out of the school building. And I think it's actually as high as that. It's actually a great experience. You know, if you think about science, you know, scientists observe, it's about observing nature, you know, experimenting. And I

think the outdoors can be in a fantastic environment to support some of this. Some of it's going to be more difficult in winter time. But I actually think, again, you know, there has been a lot of creativity out there.

Clara Young [00:09:50] Now, what about resources to help teachers and students with mental health issues? You know, there's a lot of anxiety. There's isolation.

Andreas Schleicher [00:09:58] You know, it's very high on the agenda when you actually survey schools. We have some data on this. It's about 70% to 90% of schools across countries who have actually arrangements for this in place. At the very same time, very few schools and school systems have been able to hire a specialist capacity for that.

Andreas Schleicher [00:10:18] So most of this really rests on the shoulders of teachers, you know, as a teacher. You're no longer just an instructor anymore. You're now also, you know, a coach, a mentor, a psychologist, a social worker.

Clara Young [00:10:29] Right. And are they getting training?

Andreas Schleicher [00:10:31] There's a lot of training available. But again, much of that is online. So it depends on teachers, you know, accessing those kinds of resources. But I think in a fair number of countries, provision for that has developed quite a bit. I think the bigger challenge is that, you know, teachers are often not well-connected amongst themselves. They want with a high degree of professional autonomy, but not really in a collaborative culture. So I think that's, in my view, the bigger part. Not the training, but that you cannot share your experience. You cannot, you know, consult with colleagues who you have a pretty high number of teaching hours. So that leaves you relatively little time to do other things than teaching.

Clara Young [00:11:11] What about students who fell behind during the school closures? The International Labour Organisation survey found that 65% of young people, they said that they have learnt less since the pandemic and 9% think that they're going to fail. What should be done for students who are falling behind?

Andreas Schleicher [00:11:31] Well, you know, that's my biggest concern and worry. It's going to be very, very hard for young people to catch up. Some countries like Germany have, you know, during the vacation put a lot of provision in place that was prioritised for the most marginalised students who have fallen behind. I also think when schools are reopening and have capacity constraints, it's really important to give priority to those students who need that personal support most. But the reality is, you know, when students come back, you'll find a lot more diversity in student needs. Classes have already been heterogeneous. There was a lot of diversity and now that's going to be amplified. So whether those children will catch up, you know—unfortunately, statistically, past experience suggests that's not good news. I think the reality is what happens in school kids tends to reinforce, not moderate social disparities.

Andreas Schleicher [00:12:26] So I think there's a lot that school districts need to do to redouble their effort with extra time with extra support for their students who struggle most. Some students have completely tuned out. You know, if you look to countries like Italy and Spain, these are double-digit figures.

So who have basically got lost, in a way which is worrisome. And it's not just that they lost learning. They may have lost trust in school. You know, for many of those young people, school was a place of stability. They may not have had it in their home, not in their own society. But every morning they went to school. And if that place closes, you're left with nothing. And I think to get those people back really depends on teachers.

Clara Young [00:13:10] Not all is bad, though. There seems to be evidence that young people are taking initiatives in terms of their education, especially those over the age of twenty. 44% of the people surveyed by the International Labour Organisation pursued new training courses since the start of the pandemic. And young people have also been volunteering in great numbers. So, can we build on this? Is this the beginning of something new?

Andreas Schleicher [00:13:35] Well, I think so. You know, what we have seen is that what matters most in education is agency. You know, your capacity to shape your own future, your capacity to imagine, to build something of intrinsic positive worth. Your capacity to navigate ambiguity, to manage tensions and dilemmas. To take responsibility. To mobilise your cognitive, social, emotional, resources. And I think a lot of this is happening. You know, I expect after this pandemic, many people, many young students will go through their teachers and say, well, hey, you know, I learned how to study on my own. Why can't we do more of this in the regular classroom?

Andreas Schleicher [00:14:14] And you're going to see, hopefully, many teachers who will say, well, you know, teaching doesn't have to be all a one size fits all model. I have learned how to teach and educate in a different way, I've become a designer of innovative learning environments. And they're going to go to the school principal and say, why can't we do that more regularly? So, yeah, I think the pandemic has enabled a lot of innovation, technological, social innovation. But to make that sustainable and systemic, I think it's going to be a huge challenge. There's a big risk that we just, you know, slip back into old practice and things return to normal. Education is still, you know, a heavy industry. Decisions are made at the top, rolled out to schools. Schools are not well-connected. You know, everybody looks upward and very few people look outward. And I think that is a big impediment now. But again, you know, I think the pandemic is shaking things up. And hopefully we're going to see better connections among teachers, among schools and among education systems.

Clara Young [00:15:12] Well, thank you very much for speaking to us, Andreas.

Andreas Schleicher 00:15:16 Thank you Clara.

Clara Young [00:15:17] And thanks for listening to OECD podcasts. I'm Clara Young. To find out more about what we've been talking about, have a look at the OECD's latest Education At a Glance and two new OECD reports, The impact of COVID-19 and The Economic Impacts of Learning Losses. To listen to other OECD podcasts, find us on iTunes, Spotify, Google podcasts and soundcloud.com/OECD.