TWO YEARS AFTER
SAVING A GENERATION
Executive summary
Key Takeaways

- **LAC has endured one of the longest spells of school closures.** The region was hit disproportionately hard in health, economic, and educational terms. In the region, an entire generation of students – approximately 170 million – were fully deprived of in-person education for roughly 1 out of 2 effective school days to date.

- **The effects of the pandemic on the education sector of the region have been severe:**
  - The overall impact on the out-of-school population was limited by the end of 2021 thanks to protective policies, but more data are needed to fully assess this impact in 2021/2022 as millions of children and teenagers are at risk of dropping out for falling behind academically.
  - Expected and real learning losses are very high, and more severe for earlier grades, younger children, and children from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Average primary education scores in reading and math would fall to levels of more than 10 years ago, in a context where improvements were already very slow. About 4 in 5 sixth graders may not be able to adequately understand and interpret a text of moderate length.
  - Learning losses would translate into a decrease of about 12 percent in lifetime earnings for a student at school today.
  - Psychosocial health and well-being have also been greatly affected.

- **The incipient recovery must focus on returning to schooling and, especially, recovering and accelerating learning:**
  - The return to schooling agenda should encompass: (i) safely and sustainably reopening all schools; (ii) re-enrolling all students; and (iii) preventing dropouts.
  - The recovering and accelerating learning agenda must comprise: (i) prioritizing and consolidating curricula; (ii) assessing learning levels; and (iii) implementing at scale learning recovery strategies and programs.

- **In a nutshell, this agenda entails the urgent and comprehensive implementation of four commitments:**
  - A commitment to place the education recovery at the top of the public agenda.
  - A commitment to reintegrate all the children that abandoned school and ensure they stay in it.
  - A commitment to recover lost learning and ensure the socio-emotional well-being of children.
  - A commitment to value, support and train teachers.
More than two years have passed since the COVID-19 pandemic hit the Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) region leaving a gigantic trail of scars and wounds along the way. LAC was hit disproportionately harder in health, economic, and educational terms. The region has experienced, on average, more COVID-19 deaths per capita than any other region in the world. In fact, while being home to only 8 percent of the global population, LAC more than triples that share when it comes to COVID-19-related global deaths - 28 percent (Figure ES.1). LAC has also suffered from the largest hit in economic activity and presents the worst economic prospects in terms of recovery than any other region. The economic decline had serious repercussions for LAC, most notably through the sizeable impact on the labor market, especially from 2019 to 2020, where unemployment rate for the region grew, on average, 53.6 percent. Last but not least, LAC has suffered from an inordinate intensity of an unprecedented phenomenon: the closing of educational institutions. LAC schools have been fully or partially closed for a dismal 58 weeks, featuring as the third most affected region after South Asia and North America (Figure ES.2). In the region, an entire generation of students – approximately 170 million – were deprived of in-person education for roughly 1 out of 2 effective school days to date.

While the pandemic took a toll on education systems across the LAC region, notable efforts were made to continue delivering education remotely while schools were closed. To ensure teaching continuity, governments across the region were forced to combine a series of distance learning strategies. Most of the countries (or subnational entities in federal countries where education is decentralized) developed online platforms to ensure education delivery. This was the most universal delivery channel. The second most used delivery method was TV, with roughly 85 percent of the systems offering this modality. Other learning channels used - including radio programs, social networks, short-message service (SMS) via cell phones, or printed material - were a bit less prevalent, but still widely used. Moreover, many governments scaled up support to teachers and encouraged the involvement of parents and caregivers, as their participation and support for children’s learning during this lockdown period was essential.

Despite these commendable investments made to support learning continuity, the remote learning response faced several limitations, especially affecting the most vulnerable countries and groups. The distance learning response package faced several challenges, limiting its
reach, participation, and quality. Five types of constraints were particularly relevant in LAC: (i) the uneven state of connectivity in the region; (ii) the limited access to devices needed for distance learning, especially for vulnerable groups; (iii) the complexities in the implementation of the specific response strategy, subject to the different strengths, limitations, and requirements of each distance learning channel; (iv) the lack of teacher preparedness for remote learning; and (v) institutional constraints. In fact, recent data compiled for 12 countries in LAC show that roughly only 1 in 4 households have access to Internet (Figure ES.3) with noteworthy differences across countries. For example, while 40 percent of all households in countries like Panama and Colombia report having Internet access, such indicator is below 15 percent in countries like Guatemala and Haiti. The quality of the connectivity is also an important constraint for schooling and learning, and vulnerable groups such as Afro-descendant students have significantly lower access to the Internet and a computer at home, as compared to their non-Afro-descendant peers. Emerging regional evidence confirms that remote education delivery, especially with the multiple limitations mentioned above, has fallen short of ensuring engagement in education activities at home, and quality of learning. It has therefore become patent that, even under the best scenario, remote learning was far from being a perfect substitute to face-to-face education.

The relatively limited available evidence so far on the impact of the pandemic on schooling points to an important attendance shock during remote learning for all children and youth, stronger for the most vulnerable. Before the COVID-19 outbreak, the out-of-school population (OOSP), both in absolute terms and as a share of the school age population, was consistently decreasing over time across education levels. Evidence collected from the High-Frequency Phone Survey (HFPS) showed that, as of mid-2021, when most of the schools in the region were still fully or mostly closed, school attendance had decreased, on average, 12 percent from its pre-pandemic values (Figure ES.4), with important differences across countries. This decrease was sharper for lower-income groups.

By the end of 2021, as schools were reopening, the overall impact on schooling appeared limited in selected countries, with a very small increase in the 6-to-14-years-old OOSP population, but the risks of future dropouts for children and teenagers require continuous attention. By the end of 2021, in selected countries and using other indicators, the overall impact on attendance/
enrollments rates appeared limited. Reduced opportunity costs of schooling, cash transfer policies, automatic promotion rates, among other factors, may have played a role in this outcome. Yet, data for four countries, representing about 40 percent of the 6-to-14-years-old school age population of the region, reveal an average small increase in the 6-to-14-year-old OOSP. Additionally, the relatively slow economic recovery, limited engagement and attendance during school closures, mental distress and learning losses may lead to large shocks in dropouts in 2022 and beyond, which could reverse the overall trends in OOSP, for both children and teenagers and, especially, the most vulnerable.

While the ultimate effects on enrollment and drop-out may not be yet clear at this point, the pandemic is expected to have had a large impact on learning outcomes and skills development, eroding the already weak foundations of LAC’s education systems. Prior to the irruption of COVID-19, the region was already characterized by a deep learning crisis. According to results from the “best pre-pandemic” measure of student achievement in the region – ERCE 2019 results – the average student in LAC suffered from a profound lack of core foundational skills, namely literacy and numeracy. By mid-primary education (3rd grade), roughly half of the students in the region were below minimum proficiency levels (MPL) in both math and language; by the end of primary education, the situation worsened significantly: 69 percent of 6th-graders were below MPL in reading and a dismal 83 percent were below MPL in math. The arrival of the pandemic is expected to have led to a crisis within a crisis. A strong negative impact on learning is expected because of the limited reach, engagement in and quality of remote learning.

Simulations using observed data on the length of school closures to date forecast large learning losses for the region, confirmed by early evidence. Updated estimates using different assumptions on the extent of partial reopening and the effectiveness of remote learning show a loss of between 1 and 1.8 learning-adjusted years of schooling (LAYS), with a loss of 1.5 LAYS under an intermediate scenario. These learning losses translate to a significant decrease in earnings and productivity equivalent to a decrease of about 12 percent in lifetime earnings for a student at school today under an intermediate scenario. Under an intermediate scenario, mean ERCE scores are expected to decrease by around 6.3 percent (or 45 points) in both grades and subjects. The simulation results for 3rd and 6th grade imply that every country would have worse mean scores than in 2013. Put differently the mean scores in reading and math would fall to levels of more than 10 years ago (Figures ES.5 and ES.6), in a context where improvements were already very slow. In weighted terms, the proportion of 3rd and 6th graders not able to adequately understand and interpret a text of moderate length is expected to have increased, on average, from 37 to 50 percent and from 62 to 82 percent, respectively.
And increases in learning poverty are the steepest in the world. According to the very latest World Bank estimates, the proportion of “learning poor” may have increased from 52 percent in 2019 to 79 percent as a result of the pandemic. Recent evidence collected on São Paulo, and more recently on the Mexican State of Guanajuato, seems to further buttress the simulated estimates. While scores and score scales are not comparable, percentage decreases in primary education (ranging from about 8 percent to 19 percent) are comparable or even sharper; and grade 5 results for São Paulo are equivalent to scores from 10 years ago or more. While evidence is very scarce, transferable skills, which include skills like problem-solving, resilience, and communication skills and are shown to influence the ability to accumulate skills in the future, including foundational ones, have also been negatively impacted.

On average, early grades, younger children, and children from lower socio-economic status have been disproportionately affected by learning losses according to early evidence, setting the stage for a generational crisis and increased inequality. Results from São Paulo show much starker declines for grade 5 than for grades 9 and 12, and data from Mexico also show steeper drops in primary than secondary education. The still very limited evidence on pre-primary education also points to important losses. Data from Mexico also show steeper declines for lower-income students, with losses of 32 percent in math scores for lower-income students vis-à-vis 25 percent for higher-income students. And other evidence in the region and outside points to sharper decreases for the most vulnerable groups. Female students also appear to have been more impacted by learning losses, suggestive of unequal distribution of responsibilities in the household.

In combination with the impact on schooling, these learning losses lay the ground for a major generational crisis, if the right policies are not implemented, with a dual focus on schooling and learning recovery starting from a very young age. This is even more true for the most vulnerable students, who are at an especially great risk of dropping out in the near future without urgent learning support, with huge potential implications for inequality.

The pandemic has also affected psychosocial health and well-being of teachers and students, while showing the importance of digital skills. Recent evidence on the post-pandemic points to a deterioration of well-being of children and teenagers across education levels, hindering their readiness to learn and pointing to a mental health crisis within the crisis. At the same time, the pandemic also revealed large gaps in digital skills, while providing some opportunities for enhancing those skills. More than ever before, education systems and schools were pushed to adopt tools that implied a certain degree of digital ability. This caused great strain on teachers, students, and parents, while also enhancing exposure to these skills and opportunities for strengthening tools and strategies to develop these critical competences.

While recovery has started, the gravity of the crisis requires comprehensive and sustained action, and this report attempts to make a significant contribution to this crusade by providing clear directions to education policymakers in LAC, building on the response so far. The document builds on a previous similar effort one year ago, this time gathering three international organizations like the
### Figure ES.8. The four commitments of the education recovery in LAC

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Schooling: Leave no one behind and prevent dropouts</th>
<th>Learning and well-being: Recover and enhance foundational skills and well-being</th>
<th>Teachers: Value and support teachers</th>
<th>Advocacy and financing: Place education recovery at the top of the public agenda</th>
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<td>• Reopen all schools in a sustainable way.</td>
<td>• Consolidate curricula with focus on foundational (and transferrable) skills.</td>
<td>• Address human resource gaps and strengthen teacher professional development.</td>
<td>• Fund schools’ safety protocols, digital upgrades, and all programs and measures at scale.</td>
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<td>• Support inclusive information campaigns on school re-enrollment, deploy cash transfer programs and ensure learning materials, information, and services are accessible to all, especially those most vulnerable.</td>
<td>• Assess learning levels, with summative and formative assessments.</td>
<td>• Strengthen teachers’ pedagogical and digital skills.</td>
<td>• Mobilize multiple stakeholders in the delivery and financing effort.</td>
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<td>• Implement early warning systems to identify and monitor students at risk of dropping out.</td>
<td>• Scale up initiatives and programs to recover from learning losses, with focus on teaching at the level of the student and building on pre-existing and new strategies and programs.</td>
<td>• Support health and well-being of teachers.</td>
<td>• Look for efficiency gains in use and allocation of resources, through better data, technological innovations and institutional reforms for service delivery improvements.</td>
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<td>• Address psychosocial health and well-being of students.</td>
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<td>• Address digital divides, with a focus on connectivity, digital skills and institutional capacity.</td>
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World Bank Group (WBG), the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) which, partnering with the Inter-American Dialogue (IAD), join forces here to elevate the pitch (and underscore the sense of urgency) for the sizeable schooling and learning recovery agenda ahead. In fact, if urgent and sustained action is not taken, an entire generation may suffer profound and long-lasting consequences on their human capital accumulation.

The main policy recommendation is clear: recovery must focus on two essential strategies, returning to schooling and recovering from learning losses (Figure ES.7). The “return to schooling” aims at ensuring, as a first priority, that all schools re-open and that all children who were attending education prior to the pandemic can get back to, and stay in, school. Two key reasons substantiate the key rationale for this strategy. First and foremost, COVID-19 poses limited health risks for younger populations. Second, foundational skills are not adequately developed at home. Once students are in school, they also need to be learning and recover from the massive learning losses, therefore actions also need to be taken to offset those losses and accelerate (“recovery from learning losses and acceleration”). To be successful, this dual schooling and learning agenda will require addressing the psychosocial challenges triggered by the pandemic, as well as continuing to address the digital divides that have been hampering the response. Embedded in all these priorities is the support to teachers and principals, and ensuring adequate and efficiently used resources, to make their implementation possible.

Returning to schooling and recovering from learning losses entails the implementation of four commitments, aligned with this agenda (Figure ES.8) and the priorities put forward by the WBG, IAD, UNESCO and UNICEF. These commitments include: (i) a commitment to schooling – so as to ensure that no student is left behind and/or drops out; (ii) a commitment to learning and well-being— to prioritize foundational skills and foster appropriate levels of human capital formation along the way; (iii) a commitment to teachers – to make sure teachers are valued and supported throughout; and (iv) a commitment to advocacy and financing – insofar as the education recovery agenda is a responsibility of all and needs sufficient, and wisely used, resources for its implementation. The report provides an actionable roadmap to ascertain which are solid measures, programs, interventions and strategies to achieve the three first commitments, while flagging risks and opportunities to achieve the fourth commitment.

The first step to support a return to schooling is to get back to in-person education by finalizing the school
reopening process and make it sustainable. To ensure a safe return to in-person education, it is essential to apply context-appropriate health and hygiene protocols and to prioritize teachers in the vaccination process. School reopening strategies need to be coherent, flexible, and clearly owned by, and communicated to, all stakeholders. In the process of prioritizing school reopening, opening early childhood education and primary education institutions should be a top priority, for all the above.

Open schools are not enough to ensure schooling: countries need to make sure they have in place a set of smart policies to spur enrollment and attendance. While enrollment and attendance data are still limited, all efforts must be made to ensure re-enrollment and prevent dropouts in 2022 and 2023, and prevent current or future disconnects with schooling, building on what has worked so far, and with special emphasis on the most vulnerable children and youth. Three main interrelated reasons will make these efforts especially critical: (i) opportunity costs of schooling may increase again, following changes in the labor market; (ii) financial constraints may remain binding, or even increase as focus goes back to face-to-face education, because of the slow recovery; and (iii) learning gaps accumulated during school closures will become fully apparent. In this context, the focus should be on smart policies to spur re-enrollment and attendance. Building on good practices reviewed in this report, interventions should build on different incentives, with emphasis on keeping and enhancing the demand for schooling. These interventions could include information campaigns for re-enrollment; scaling up cash-transfers, softening their conditionalities; ensuring accessible materials and services for all; and targeting additional support for specific vulnerable groups, while ramping up policies to recover from learning losses. Examples of effective cash transfer policies can be found in many countries in the region, including Brazil, Mexico, and Colombia. These policies should be complemented by early warning systems to identify the students most at risk of dropping out.

First and foremost, the return-to-schooling strategy must be accompanied by an aggressive strategy to recover and enhance foundational skills. In view of the massive learning losses, and expected impacts on dropouts, this is an even more burning priority than schooling itself at this stage. This strategy must include three critical priorities: (i) curricular consolidation with a focus on foundational, and transferable, skills, stating what students should learn; (ii) assessment of students’ current learning levels to properly diagnose the breadth, depth, and characteristics of learning losses; and (iii) building on the curricular decisions and on the evaluation of learning losses, interventions that can help provide the needed (and presumably accelerated) learning recovery. Underlying institutional and service delivery constraints will also need to be addressed, and countries should as much as possible prioritize existing practices and programs, improving and scaling them up building on emerging lessons.

Countries should keep prioritizing foundational skills. Building on efforts made so far during the pandemic, they should focus on foundational, and transferable, skills in their curricula in the short and longer term, and proficieny in these skills should be measured. The pandemic may be an opportunity to reiterate the importance of transferable skills and how to enhance them across the life-long learning cycle, while refocusing teaching and learning on foundational skills.

Learning assessments should be urgently re-prioritized, with a focus on formative assessments. Complementary assessment efforts need to be urgently stepped up everywhere to diagnose the real learning levels of students, including recent learning losses, with a strong focus on formative assessments. In the last decade, countries like Brazil, Chile, Mexico, and Uruguay introduced assessments that are made available for the schools and teachers to administer, score, analyze, and use to improve pedagogical practices, and some other countries have taken initial steps along this line. Formative assessments have the potential to be integrated with pedagogical approaches, measure transferable skills and to be replicated and scaled up at a relatively low cost. At the same time, international, regional and/or national standardized assessments should continue to be fostered to generate comparable data for benchmarking learning losses, and inform educational policies, in the context of a strengthened evaluation culture where assessments work together to ultimately improve learning.

Learning recovery programs should be scaled up. Learning losses are expected to be widespread, and learning heterogeneity to have increased, requiring a scale-up of reforms, initiatives, and programs to recover. This can build on evaluated pre-existing programs (Figure ES.9), and new programs introduced as a response to the pandemic, to the extent that they start being monitored and evaluated. All programs should focus on foundational literacy and numeracy skills. Good monitoring and evaluation systems and strengthening institutional capacities to implement at scale will be critical.
Countries willing to implement learning recovery programs at scale will need to pay attention to critical questions and features which are conducive to scalability. While information on unit costs is missing for most types of programs, based on critical features to adapt and scale up and evidence of results, programs like “Teaching at the right level” may be especially promising to both recover and accelerate, but other programs may be less demanding in terms of training requirements. Targeted instruction has strong potential to also accelerate learning in the long run. Supporting a prompt recovery in early childhood education will help tackle lack of readiness to learn.

Recovering and enhancing schooling and learning will also require a strong focus on psychosocial health and well-being. Countries should put in place diagnostic assessments to provide timely data on the effects of the pandemic on psychosocial health and well-being and design strategies to address them. Some countries such as Chile and Ecuador have strived to promote balanced recovery approaches which include aspects related to well-being.

Recovering and enhancing learning will also require a strong focus on digital divides. At the same time, efforts to connect families and schools should continue, with focus on both the access and quality of the Internet access, which are still very uneven in the region. This needs to be combined with proper equipment and devices and the enhancement of digital skills of students and teachers and entail the needed institutional strengthening. Periodic assessments of digital skills should be supported.

Teachers need to be supported throughout the recovery effort. Scaling up diagnostic assessments and learning recovery programs will require sufficient teachers and strengthening teacher professional development. Teachers, tutors, and other implementers need to be trained and supported on how to target instruction, by teaching at the right level of students. Teachers’ digital skills also need to be strengthened to make the best use of technological solutions, including through digital competencies frameworks. Finally, as first responders, teachers also need to be trained to provide psychosocial support to students and their own health and well-being need to be supported.

Finally, countries also have an important advocacy and funding agenda ahead of them with opportunities for partnerships and efficiency improvements. A broad-based commitment and response are essential to avoid that the exogenous shock suffered by the 170 million students in LAC that went through a real educational turmoil end up becoming an educational tragedy with large economic and social implications. The region needs to protect education budgets first. The schooling and learning recovery package has a “price tag”. Improving school safety has a cost and so implementing at scale programs to support attendance and recover from learning losses. It is estimated that $47 billion is required to connect the region to the Internet for educational purposes by 2030. Notwithstanding the primary role of ministries of education and public funding, the response can also build on the many partnerships and alliances between ministries, the public and private sector, and governments and civil society developed during the crisis. Further strengthening and developing these partnerships for education is an opportunity provided by the crisis. Finally, there is also potential for efficiency improvements, to complement additional funding efforts. Countries can build on data and technology to improve service delivery through strengthened information and monitoring and evaluation systems, platforms to enhance targeted learning or, yet innovative and sustainable uses of remote and hybrid learning. While the agenda of needed institutional reforms is much larger, the pandemic crisis and response has also shown how important it is to support principals and align incentives and capacities across stakeholders to implement successful responses. Countries could also capitalize on these efforts to use resources more efficiently.

Figure ES.9. Examples of learning remediation and recovery programs in LAC
The COVID-19 pandemic caused the LAC region to suffer a triple curse. It was the region with the largest number of COVID-19-related deaths per million people. It was also the region with the largest economic downturn and with the worst medium-term economic prospects. Last but not least, it was among the top regions with the longest spells of school closures to date.

The pandemic has had a sizeable impact on learning outcomes and skills development, eroding the already weak foundations of LAC’s education systems. It is estimated that the average student in LAC lost, to date, between 1 and 1.8 years of schooling, adjusted by learning. Average primary education scores in reading and math could have fallen to levels of more than 10 years ago.

The main policy recommendation is simple: recovery must focus on two essential strategies, returning to schooling and recovering from learning losses. This dual agenda should focus on four key commitments: (a) placing the education recovery at the top of the public agenda; (b) reintegrating all the children that abandoned school and ensure they stay in it; (c) recovering lost learning and ensure the socio-emotional well-being of children; and (d) valuing, supporting, and training teachers.