



# Teaching on the front line: *National teacher responses to the COVID-19 crisis*

March 2021



International  
Task Force on Teachers  
for Education 2030

# Key findings on national teacher responses to COVID-19 school closures

- The vast majority of countries required teachers to adopt **remote teaching** across all regions during school closures. In higher-income regions such as Europe, online learning was emphasized in 92% of countries while engagement with radio and television-based instruction was most common in lower income regions including Central and Southern Asia (91%) and sub-Saharan Africa (73%).
- **Contract teachers**, who work outside of regular civil service collective agreements, received full pay after school closures in 78% of countries globally, yet in sub-Saharan Africa this fell to 70% of countries.
- While more countries implemented **hybrid learning** – combining in-person and remote teaching and learning – once schools began to reopen, more countries reporting in Central and Southern Asia (58%) and sub-Saharan Africa (44%) were introducing in-person teaching only.
- Globally, one third (33%) of countries responded to school reopening by recruiting additional teachers. **Recruitment efforts**, however, were least common in lower-income regions, including Western Asia and Northern Africa (26%), Central and Southern Asia (25%) and sub-Saharan Africa (24%), where a greater need for teachers already existed.
- Various **forms of support** were provided to teachers to ease their transition to remote and hybrid teaching including instructions, content, specialised training, professional and psychosocial support and ICT tools. Yet 1 in 10 countries around the world reported no support for teachers, increasing to 1 in 5 in sub-Saharan Africa.
- To enhance teachers' and students' **health and safety**, countries globally implemented measures to reduce classroom size and foster physical distancing, including hybrid teaching (49%), imposing teaching shifts (31%) and adding teachers (14%). Moreover, half or fewer countries in sub-Saharan Africa (50%), Latin America and the Caribbean (48%), Central and Southern Asia (44%) and Oceania (43%) reported schools had sufficient resources including soap and personal protective equipment, and infrastructure such as clean water and WASH facilities.
- Globally, most countries (67%) encouraged teachers to interact with students and parents by using **texting/messaging apps** among other tools, including in 65% of countries in sub-Saharan Africa.

As the COVID-19 pandemic reached its height in April 2020, 190 countries around the world enacted country-wide school closures. These measures affected at least 1.6 billion students and more than 100 million members of the global education workforce, including 63 million primary and secondary teachers ([UNESCO, 2020](#)). Governments, school leaders and teachers were pressed to create innovative responses so that teaching and learning could continue.

Teachers everywhere were on the frontline of the crisis. The International Task Force on Teachers for Education 2030 or Teacher Task Force (TTF) released a [Call for Action on Teachers](#) urging governments, education providers and funders to recognise their crucial role in the COVID-19 response and recovery. Among the priorities it listed were preserving teachers' employment and wages, prioritizing their health and safety, and providing them with support and training.

This fact sheet sheds light on national teacher responses in primary and secondary education to ensure teaching continued during the pandemic. It addresses remote teaching practices, protection of teachers' employment, school reopening, teacher recruitment, teacher support, health and safety and monitoring of pupils. It is based on data from the [Survey on National Education Responses to COVID-19 School Closures](#) conducted in 2020 by UNESCO, UNICEF and the World Bank and administered by the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS).

## Types of remote or distance education used during school closures

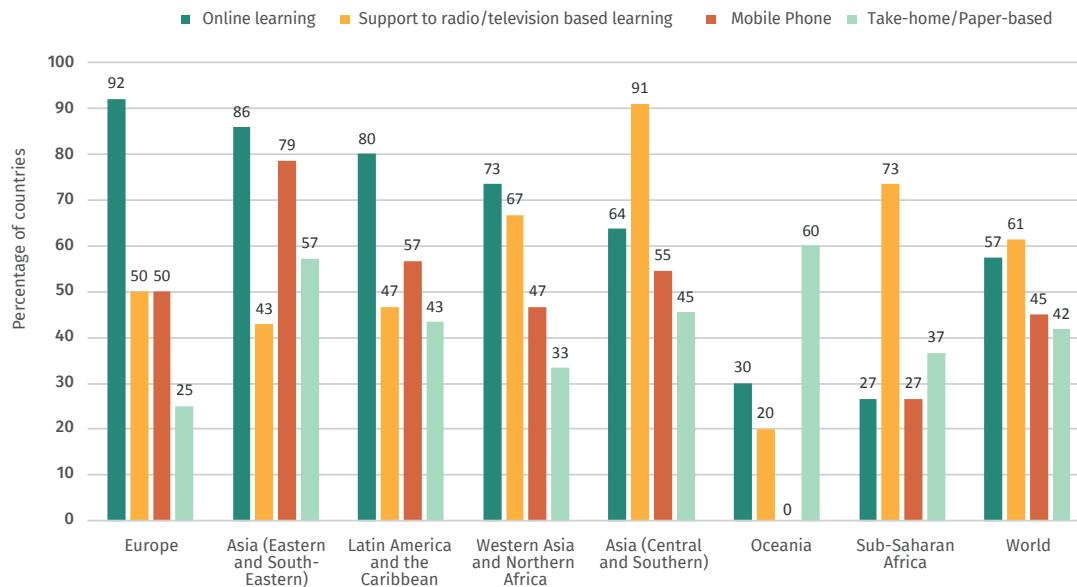
When schools closed, various forms of remote or distance education involving high-, low- and no-tech solutions became the main vehicle for teachers to continue delivering lessons.

→ During initial school closures, a majority of countries asked primary teachers to continue teaching using online technologies, including in Europe (92%), Eastern and South-eastern Asia (86%) and Latin America and the Caribbean (80%). Exceptions include the Netherlands, where decisions were made at the school level and the Philippines and Thailand where online classes were delayed. (**Figure 1**).

→ For different reasons, notably the lack of household internet, just 27% of countries in sub-Saharan Africa introduced online teaching wherever possible including Botswana, Republic of Congo, Guinea, Nigeria, South Africa and Senegal. In Oceania 30% of countries introduced online teaching.

→ Teacher support to radio or television-based learning was introduced in 91% and 73% of countries in Central and Southern Asia and sub-Saharan Africa to ensure the widest reach to pupils.

**Figure 1: Percentage of countries where primary teachers were required to continue teaching, by type of distance education and region, 2020**



Source: UNESCO/ UNICEF/ World Bank, 2020.

→ Globally, 45% of countries asked teachers to use mobile devices in their teaching. It was most frequent in Eastern and South-eastern Asia (79%) as a complement to online learning.

→ Take-home or paper-based instruction was least commonly asked of teachers — being reported by 42% of countries — yet it emerged as the most common vehicle to continue teaching in Oceania (60%).

→ In other regions, ‘contract teachers’ stopped receiving payments in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Nepal, San Marino and Yemen, while salaries were reduced in Lebanon and Viet Nam.

→ Teachers in the Syrian Arab Republic and in Sao Tome and Principe received a supplement in addition to their regular pay.

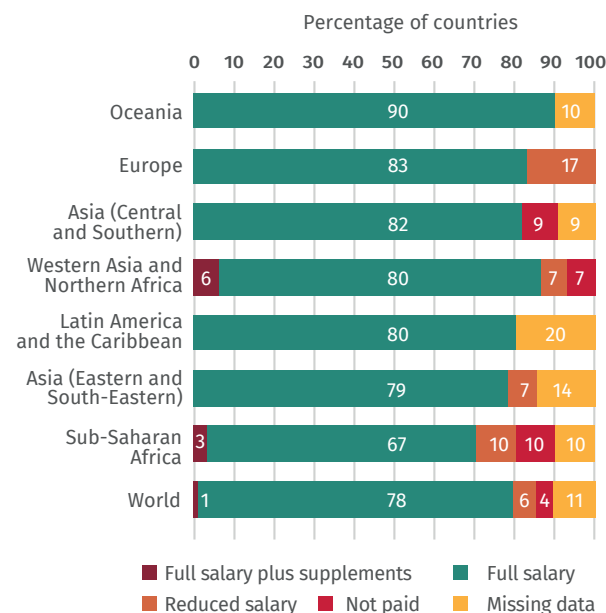
## Protecting the employment and salaries of teachers

School closures can affect [teacher’s pay and benefits differently](#). For example, public sector teachers working within civil service collective agreements are more likely to receive regular payment and benefits after closures, whereas ‘contract’ and private sector teachers’ pay and other benefits are more often subject to interruption or reduction. Interrupting the payment of contract teachers has negative effects on education as teacher attrition entails costs for recruiting and training new teachers once schools reopen.

→ Globally, about 8 in 10 countries paid ‘contract teachers’ in full after school closures ranging from 90% in Oceania to 70% in sub-Saharan Africa (**Figure 2**).

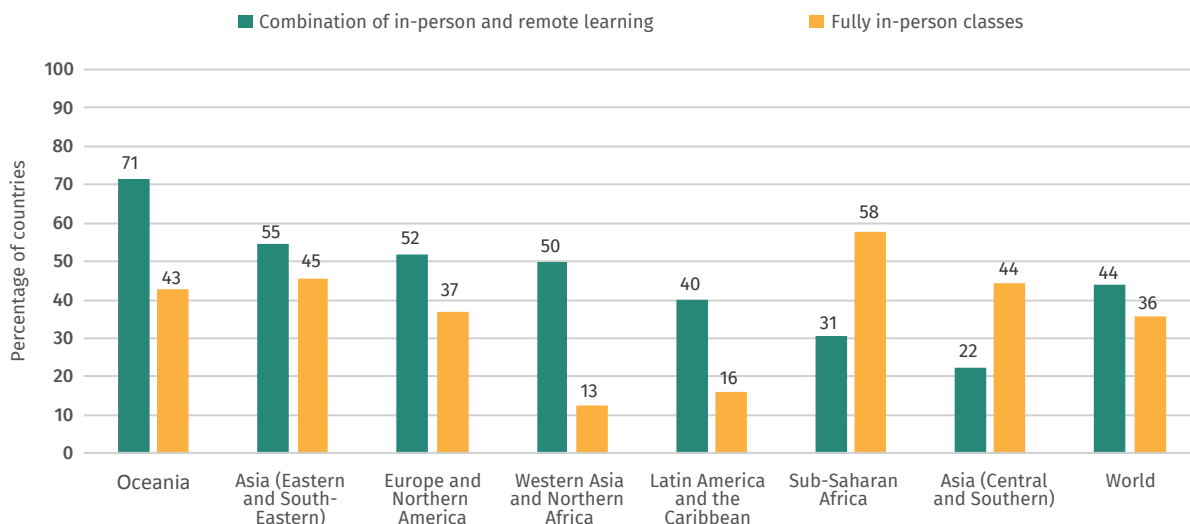
→ In sub-Saharan Africa, ‘contract teachers’ were not paid in Burkina Faso, Guinea, and Togo, while payments were reduced in Ghana, Kenya and Sierra Leone.

**Figure 2: Status of contract salary payments, by region, 2020**



Source: UNESCO/ UNICEF/ World Bank, 2020.

**Figure 3: Percentage of countries conducting a combination of in-person remote learning and fully in-person classes, by region, 2020**



Source: UNESCO/ UNICEF/ World Bank, 2020.

Note: Figures do not add up to 100% since some education systems remained closed or on academic leave or data is missing.

## Reopening of schools and teaching formats used

During the third quarter of 2020, several countries' education systems were on academic break planning for reopening, whereas others had already reopened using hybrid or fully in-person learning. Teaching face-to-face represented a second significant transformation including health and safety protocols, small group learning and managing new routines.

→ Globally, 44% of countries reported implementing a combined hybrid approach of in-person and remote learning when schools reopened, while 36% of countries relied on fully in-person teaching (Figure 3).

→ Hybrid approaches were more common than in-person teaching in most regions, most frequently in Oceania as reported by 71% of countries and by 55% and 52% of countries in Eastern and South-eastern Asia and Europe and Northern America.

→ In contrast, the majority of countries in lower-income regions including sub-Saharan Africa and Central and Southern Asia implemented fully in-person classes, as reported by 58% and 44% of countries, compared to 31% and 22% that offered a combination.

## Teacher recruitment to fill teacher gaps and reduce class size

Teaching became more time-consuming with the shift towards remote teaching, coupled with a lack of devices, skills and confidence to provide remote

education effectively. With an increased need for human resources and the possibility of greater absenteeism and attrition, countries may decide to hire additional teachers above the normal cyclical recruitment process.

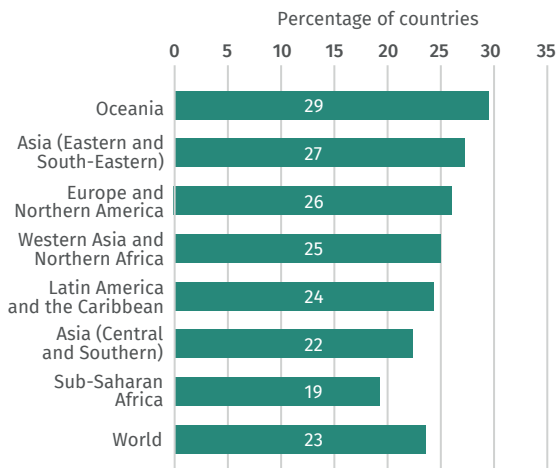
→ Globally, less than one quarter of countries reported measures to recruit new teachers for the purpose of reopening of schools in the 3rd quarter of 2020, suggesting that most countries will not recruit beyond basic needs due to cyclical turnover (Figure 4).

→ Measures to recruit more teachers for reopening were most common in Oceania (29% of countries), Eastern and South-eastern Asia (27%) and in Europe and Northern America (26%); they were less common in Central and Southern Asia (22%) and in sub-Saharan Africa (19%), where teachers numbers were already insufficient in several countries.

→ New recruitment measures to offset increased attrition were enacted in Qatar, while in South Africa, additional recruitment was introduced to ensure substitutes during the absence of teachers on leave due to heightened health risks. In identifying potential recruits, the Gambia planned calling back retired teachers.

→ Various countries introduced measures to recruit additional teachers to reduce class size and facilitate physical distancing due to health and safety concerns. This includes Ireland, Japan and Luxembourg, which are promoting small group learning. Sao Tome and Principe aims to reduce its pupil-teacher ratio from 50:1 to 36:1 while Equatorial Guinea and Kenya both aim to recruit teachers based on recommended school capacity and shift work.

**Figure 4: Percentage of countries recruiting new teachers, by region, 2020**



Source: UNESCO/ UNICEF/ World Bank, 2020.

## Support provided to teachers

Support to teachers as they adopt remote teaching is critical. It is also needed as teachers return to in-person and/ or adopt hybrid methods, which for many represents a second significant change in teaching. Teachers require detailed guidance to successfully use and support remote education such as radio, television and online learning platforms. They also need content for remote teaching, such as open educational resources (OERs) and sample lesson plans, as well as specialised training.

Earlier [data](#) having shown that the pandemic exacerbated the digital divide; countries can therefore provide teachers with ICT tools and free internet. Given the impact on teachers in the form of health risks and increased workload (often paired with personal

childcare responsibilities), countries can further offer professional and personal support through group chats and online forums to share ideas and content to help reduce stress, as well as for teachers to provide support to colleagues.

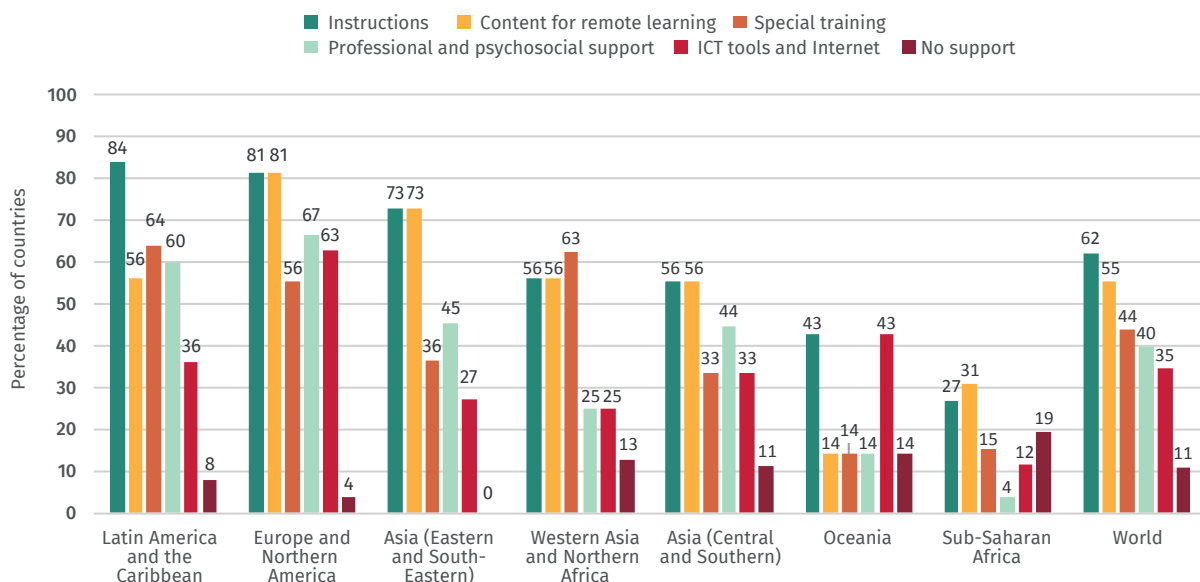
➔ Instructions on distance education was the most frequent response globally (62%), provided by three-quarters or more of countries in Europe and Northern America (81%), Latin America and the Caribbean (84%) and Eastern and South-eastern Asia (73%) (Figure 5) compared to 27% in sub-Saharan Africa.

➔ Content for remote learning was provided by 81% of countries in Europe and Northern America and 73% in Eastern and South-eastern Asia, but only by 31% of countries in sub-Saharan Africa and 14% in Oceania.

### Specialised teacher training in ICT-based instruction

Regarding the types of specialized training teachers received, responses show that training focused mainly on enhancing ICT skills for remote teaching. Training provided particularly covered online learning/ communication platforms established by the Ministry, as in Belize, Estonia, Libya and Uruguay; and/or licensed from the private sector (e.g., Google Classroom, Microsoft Teams and Zoom), as in Bhutan, Honduras, Mexico and Mongolia. In Belgium, it also focused on the use/ creation of OERs, while in Lao PDR it included the use of online video. In countries with fewer resources, training concentrated on television-based instruction, as in the Solomon Islands, and the use of radio, as in Liberia. Some countries also mentioned training on specific pedagogical skills particular to remote teaching, including how to engage with students remotely, as in Mauritius.

**Figure 5: Percentage of countries that offered additional support to teachers, by type and region, 2020**



Source: UNESCO/ UNICEF/ World Bank, 2020.

→ Special training was offered in 44% of countries and most frequently in Latin America and the Caribbean (64%) and Western Asia and Northern Africa (63%). It was offered least in sub-Saharan Africa (15%) and Oceania (14%).

→ Professional and psychosocial support was provided in 40% of countries, ranging from 67% in Europe and Northern America to just 4% in sub-Saharan Africa.

→ Provision of ICT tools and internet was most common in Europe and Northern America (63%) followed by Oceania (43%), and in about one third of countries in Latin America and the Caribbean and across all sub-regions of Asia. In contrast, just 12% of countries in sub-Saharan Africa reported providing ICT tools and internet including Cameroun, Republic of Congo and South Africa.

→ No professional support to teachers was provided in 1 out of 10 countries globally increasing to 1 in 5 in sub-Saharan Africa, including Angola, Eritrea, Mozambique, Nigeria and Sao Tome and Principe. Elsewhere, no support was provided in Algeria, Guatemala, Pakistan, Suriname Vanuatu and Yemen.

→ Globally, combining distance and in-person teaching to reduce class sizes (49%) was the most common response to ensure teachers' safety, followed by imposing shifts (31%) while the addition of teachers (14%) was reported least (Figure 6).

→ The combination of distance and in-person classes was reported most frequently in Latin America and the Caribbean and Central and Southern Asia, as reported by 80% and 78% of countries, compared to only 29% of countries in Oceania.

→ Imposing shifts to foster physical distancing protocols was reported most frequently in Central and Southern Asia by 67% of countries compared to just 27% in Eastern and South-eastern Asia.

→ The addition of teachers to reduce class size was reported most often in Europe and Northern America by 26% of countries, in contrast to just 8% in Latin America and the Caribbean and none in Oceania.

→ About 63% of countries around the world reported having enough resources, commodities and infrastructure to ensure proper sanitation in schools and protect teachers. However, this varied from 89% of countries in Europe and Northern America to fewer than 50% in sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, Central and Southern Asia and Oceania (Figure 7).

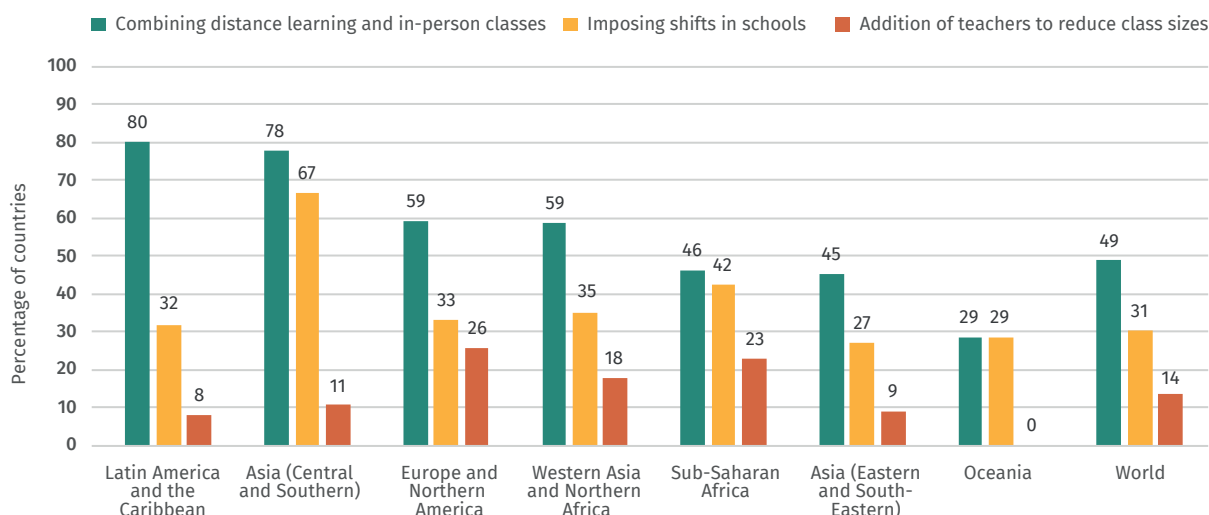
## Measures to ensure teachers' health and safety during school reopening

Countries have enacted different national health and safety measures to protect teachers. These included combining distance learning and in-person teaching, imposing shifts in schools to reduce the number of staff and students present at the same time, and the addition of teachers to reduce class size. For in-person teaching to begin, ensuring schools have adequate resources (i.e., soap, masks, personal protective equipment) and infrastructure (WASH facilities) are also important.

## How teachers reached students

In the transition towards hybrid and remote forms of instruction, teachers were encouraged to maintain interactions with students and/or their parents. This communication helps teachers to check that students are on track, answer questions and provide feedback, and boost student motivation and morale. Different means are available to teachers, yet many require access to ICT and internet, and all demand an investment of time.

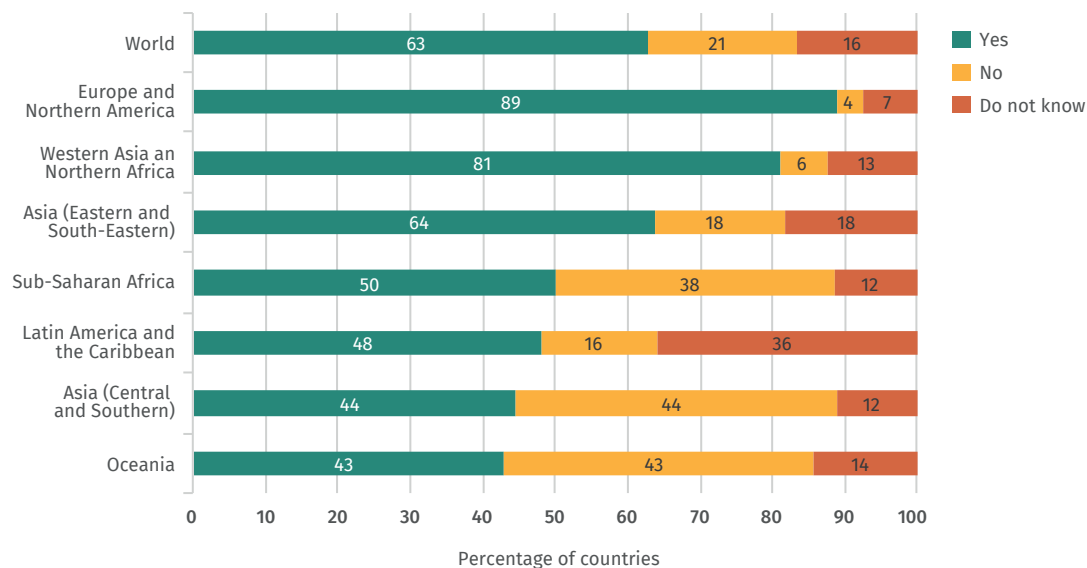
**Figure 6: Measures to ensure teachers' health and safety during school reopening, by region, 2020**



Source: UNESCO/ UNICEF/ World Bank, 2020.



**Figure 7: Proportion of countries with adequate resources, commodities and infrastructure to ensure teacher and student safety, by region, 2020**



Source: UNESCO/ UNICEF/ World Bank, 2020.

→ Globally, texting/WhatsApp-type applications on mobile phones were most encouraged, as reported by 67% of countries. Telephone calls (64%), emails (53%) and home visits (23%) followed (Figure 8).

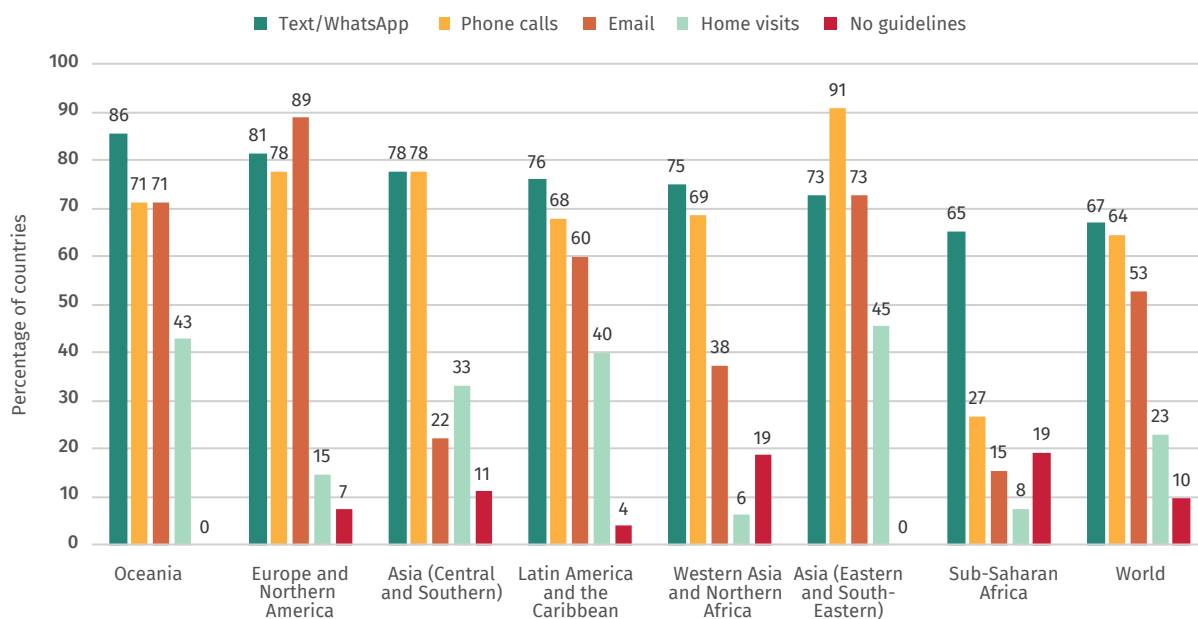
main means of communication, as reported by 65% of countries; and about one in five countries (19%) gave teachers no instructions on interacting with students and their parents

→ Teachers were encouraged in at least 7 out of 10 countries to make phone calls and use email in Europe and Northern America, Eastern and South-eastern Asia and Oceania.

→ Globally, home visits were least commonly encouraged to maintain continuous communication with learners as reported by 23% of countries. Yet it was most frequently encouraged in Eastern and South-eastern Asia (45%), Oceania (43%) and Latin America and the Caribbean (40%).

→ In sub-Saharan Africa, text messaging was the

**Figure 8: Types of interactions encouraged between teachers and students and their parents, by region, 2020, 3rd quarter**



Source: UNESCO/ UNICEF/ World Bank, 2020.

## Conclusions and recommendations

Consistently considered as the most important school level input to ensure education quality, teachers have been significantly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. While the transition to online learning has brought new opportunities for innovating teaching and learning, it has also brought challenges. Most teachers have experienced heavier workloads due to the move towards on-line teaching; they have had to deliver lessons remotely and adapt content, train themselves in new technologies and establish new working routines.

As countries move towards reopening schools and introducing models of blended learning combining in-person and remote education, teachers need to be supported. **Governments need to provide teachers with guidelines, content, tools and professional and psycho-social support to build capacity and ensure teachers are prepared and equipped to maintain teaching and learning throughout the pandemic.**

The reopening of schools also requires that education authorities provide measures to ensure students' and teachers' health and safety. Where possible, hybrid learning, staggered shifts and hiring additional teachers to support smaller class sizes that meet national health and safety norms are key. The enhancement of school-level resources, particularly, personal protective equipment and sanitizers and ensuring adequate infrastructure - including more classrooms, clean water and WASH facilities - are also important.

The hiring of new teachers and the protection of salaries, working conditions and employment rights should be central to building the sustainability of the teacher workforce and ensuring pupils do not feel the negative effects of a lack of trained teachers. Consideration of how this affects pupils at different educational levels, and particularly the most disadvantaged, is critical to developing comprehensive teacher responses, leaving no one behind.

**Further reading:** While this fact sheet focuses on teacher-related data, a more comprehensive examination of national responses is available in the Report titled: [What Have We Learnt?: Overview of findings from a survey of ministries of education on national responses to COVID-19 \(UNESCO, UNICEF and World Bank, 2020\)](#).

The International Task Force on Teachers for Education 2030 (also known as Teacher Task Force) is a global and independent alliance. Members are national governments, intergovernmental organizations, non-governmental organizations, international development agencies, civil society organizations, private sector organizations and UN agencies that work together to promote teacher-related issues.

The Teacher Task Force Secretariat is hosted by UNESCO's Headquarter in Paris.

For more information, see:  
[www.teachertaskforce.org](http://www.teachertaskforce.org)

Published in 2021 by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO),  
7, place de Fontenoy, 75352 Paris 07 SP, France

©UNESCO 2021

Cover: Drazen Zigic/Shutterstock.com  
Designed by Antonio di Vico

This publication is available in Open Access under the Attribution-ShareAlike 3.0 IGO (CC-BY-SA 3.0 IGO) license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/igo/>).

By using the content of this publication, the users accept to be bound by the terms of use of the UNESCO Open Access Repository (<http://www.unesco.org/open-access/termsuse-ccbysa-en>).

The present license applies exclusively to the text content of the publication. For the use of any material not clearly identified as belonging to UNESCO, prior permission shall be requested from: publication.copyright@unesco.org or UNESCO Publishing, 7, place de Fontenoy, 75352 Paris 07 SP France.



The designations employed and the presentation of material throughout this publication do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of UNESCO and the International Task Force on Teachers for Education 2030 concerning the legal status of any country, territory, city or area or of its authorities, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries. The ideas and opinions expressed in this publication are those of the authors; they are not necessarily those of UNESCO and do not commit the Organization.