



Joint ETUCE, OBESSU and EPA Statement
20 May 2020

In the aftermath of the COVID-19 Pandemic, Education personnel, School Students Parents' organisations share common demands for a safe return-to-school

Schools are at the heart of society. They bring together communities and people, way beyond the sole educational purposes. They must remain safe, well-equipped and managed, and supported by national and local authorities. Today, European education personnel, school students, and parents' organisations lay down their common concerns to ensure the COVID-19 crisis does not jeopardise the quality of education, and in turn, the public and common good.

The COVID-19 crisis has impacted entire school communities across Europe. While most countries implemented temporary, partial or complete schools closures, education personnel, students, and parents have adapted to the emergency situation, and strived to find ways to continue providing and accessing quality education. The ongoing pandemic has highlighted, more than ever, that education plays a vital role in society, and European school communities have risen to the challenge of transitioning into distance education, in spite of, and above, structural and logistical obstacles. At a time when many countries are looking at the gradual reopening of societies, including schools, ETUCE, OBESSU, and EPA have united to highlight concerns for the whole school community on return-to-schools policies, for the benefit of all.

The health, the safety and the well-being of the school community must be at the centre of return-to-school policies:

- The reopening of schools can only be considered, if safe for all. Schools are intrinsically social environments, and their infrastructures are, for the most part, ill-equipped for the necessary physical distancing required by health and safety authorities. Face-to-face schooling is important because of the necessary social interactions it allows, however in the time of the crisis school must ensure that such interactions are safe
- The reopening of schools requires a collective reflection, conjointly with all actors involved, on the necessary health and safety measures to keep students, their parents and families, and school staff safe.
- The concrete implementation of health and safety measures must be clearly defined, communicated, and all concerned actors should be provided with the information and equipment to maintain the required hygiene standards.
- Particular attention must be given to students and school staff who are themselves, or in direct contact with, vulnerable persons, whether because of their age, or medical conditions.
- Ensuring psychosocial and psychological well-being of school staff, students, their parents and families must be a key axis of the return-to-school policies, and adequate



support must be available to them. In this view, the importance of human interactions in physical classrooms should not be understated'

- The schedule for reopening of schools should consider the implications for families, in light of the principles of work-life balance - as outlined in the European Pillar of Social Rights, and in particular, avoid additional stress on family units.

The disruption of COVID-19 on education must be mitigated in light of the specificities of the sector:

- While transitioning to the reopening of schools, it is paramount that the impact of the prolonged distance learning period is tackled in a comprehensive approach, with consideration of the transitions' implications on workload of teaching staff, students, and their parents and families. Particular attention should be paid to safe return to vocational education and training and all forms of work-based learning, in particular to apprenticeship, in order to safeguard safe quality and fair apprenticeship in respecting the quality criteria on health and safety, pay and working conditions of the European Framework of Quality and Effective Apprenticeship
- Distance education has widened pre-existing inequalities, regarding, among other things, households' unequal access to quality digital tools, material, and online connectivity. The gradual reopening of schools will be central in addressing this gap, and should be the object of a thorough preparation, to ensure its timely schedule and sound implementation.
- Returning to safe school after distance learning should put an emphasis on the cooperation between the formal, informal and non-formal settings of learning in mitigating results on the school community and supporting learners and parents in these times.

Equal access to quality education must be ensured, during, and long after the COVID-19 pandemic

- The COVID-19 crisis has uncovered and amplified pre-existing inequalities. For the school community, the unequal access to digital tools and well-functioning connectivity equipment has resulted in many teaching staff, students, their parents and families' struggling in their daily school-related tasks. This situation should be urgently reflected upon and addressed.
- Additionally, while distance learning highlights students' various degrees of preparedness and autonomy to work outside of the classroom, as well as their parents and families' ability to support them in their school work, teaching staff should be supported to ensure that no student is left behind during the reopening of schools, and transition back to more traditional education settings.



Quality education is a shared concern for education personnel, students and parents. The COVID-19 crisis has undoubtedly disrupted our school systems. Now is the time for authorities to work hand in hand with the school community to ensure that students, parents, families and teachers can safely and gradually reunite.