



LOCAL
CASE
STUDY

SECONDARY MUNICIPAL SCHOOL GOSTIVAR



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Local Case Study:
**Secondary Municipal
School “Gostivar”**



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The fight against COVID-19 will last for years and will necessitate a coherent systemic approach. What had started as public health crisis inevitably triggered educational and socio-economic implications in the society. Hence the need to develop *reports on measures adopted to tackle the crisis caused by COVID-19 and their impact on health and education sectors and socio-economic policies at national and local level*, which will not focus on one sector, but will contribute to development of comprehensive systemic solutions.

Even at times of declared state of emergency, citizens should be in the centre of crisis management actions, while adequate solutions must be designed at community level. By the nature of their work, CSOs are very close to their communities, especially to marginalized groups. In order to create the most adequate response to emerging conditions due to the pandemic, CSOs are encouraged to network their capacity and to self-mobilize within the structural dialogue at local and national level. On that account, the EU-funded project “CSO Dialogue – Platform for Structural Participation in EU Integrations” announced an open call for development of 6 reports concerning measures adopted to tackle the COVID-19 crisis and their impact on health and education sectors and socio-economic policies at national and local level. The purpose of these research papers is to identify and to assess adequacy of measures adopted by the Government of RNM during the declared state of emergency, to support researchers and civil society organizations operating at local and national level, to increase the pool of evidence-based information and to strengthen capacity of civil society organizations for participation in sector policies at times of crisis, but also to strengthen and to promote the structural dialogue between institutions and the civil society.

We believe that reliable institutions and informed, consulted and conscious citizens and civil society organizations are able to re-design the approach, to evaluate the crisis and to anticipate the recovery. Through the prism of impacts from implemented policies, this publication contributes to mitigation of consequences from the COVID-19 crisis for citizens.

The project “CSO Dialogue – Platform for Structural Participation in EU Integrations” is implemented by the Foundation Open Society – Macedonia, in partnership with the Center for Civil Communications (CCC), Eurothink – Center for European Strategies and Reactor – Research in Action, and is financially supported by the European Union.

One of the project’s overall objectives is to increase the civil society impact in the country’s accession to the EU, by means of evidence-based policy creation and development of policy briefs on key sector and reform policies within the EU accession process. For more information about the project, visit the website: www.dijalogkoneu.mk.

INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this local case study is to provide a detailed outlook on the challenges the Secondary School "Gostivar" faced with as the pandemic started. It provides an account on the process of implementation of the measures adopted by the Government of the Republic of North Macedonia for dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic. The study examines the effects of government adopted measures from the perspective of stakeholders and beneficiaries such as students, teachers, and the school administration. As a result, the study provides answers to the following questions:

1. What were the main challenges that students and teachers faced with?
2. How did the disruption affect the overall educational process in the school?
3. Were the school and the municipality consulted during the preparation of the measures by the Ministry of Education and Science and/or the government? What was the role of local civil society organizations and the Union of High School Students during this period?

The study examines the methodology through which government measures were implemented and provides a critical overview of the distance learning process while highlighting its advantages and disadvantages. It also conducts an analysis of the communication channels among students, teachers, and the school administration. Finally, the study provides an overview of particular lessons learned and gives recommendations for improving learning and teaching standards in high schools across the country.

The choice for the Municipal High School in Gostivar for a case study is motivated by the specificity of the city of Gostivar as an environment rich in diversity and as a city where the local government is led by a mayor who comes from the commonly known "political opposition." These characteristics of the city provide an optimal combination to generate both specific and general findings. Thus, overall findings can be largely generalized and applied to other urban contexts, while specific findings provide additional value and specificity to the analysis itself.

Based on our observations, we could determine that the Municipal High School Gostivar is an important educational institution in the local community and beyond; which also serves as a regional center that offers high school education for students from surrounding municipalities. The school teaches in three languages: Albanian, Macedonian, and Turkish, while overall, the organizational life at school is based on a harmonious relationship among all entities. The school is often involved in donor projects and has a good cooperation with civic organizations and other local and regional initiatives. During our communication with the representatives of the school, we encountered openness, a harmonious working atmosphere, and readiness to adapt to modern educational trends.

Findings are based on 10 semi-structured interviews with teachers and administration as well as two focus groups with students. Additionally, an interview was conducted with a representative from the municipality of Gostivar responsible for the Education Sector. Out of 10 interviews at the school, three were conducted with the school administration while seven were conducted with teachers. In order to ensure ample inclusiveness while selecting the sample, special attention was paid to the diversity of the interviewees by gender, age, ethnicity, and classes they teach. As a result, the sample consisted of five female and five male teachers from different age groups, who teach different classes. Four of them were of Macedonian ethnicity, four of Albanian ethnicity, and two of Turkish ethnicity. The focus groups, on the other hand, included a total of 15 students, of which seven were male and eight were female. The first focus group was conducted in Albanian language and included seven students of Albanian ethnic origin, while the second focus group was conducted in Macedonian language and included four students of Macedonian ethnic origin and four of Turkish ethnic origin. Data obtained from the interviews and focus groups are anonymous. Correspondingly, direct quotations in the text are translated into English and linguistically adjusted to authentically present the original ideas to native speakers of English language.

Additionally, the local study draws information from the document review conducted through the national study. Finally, findings presented in this report, although based on this specific school, may be useful in drawing more general conclusions and recommendations, especially for schools facing similar challenges.



FINDINGS

As the teaching process was halted due to the pandemic¹, the Municipal High School Gostivar faced one of the most challenging systemic disruptions so far. The school administration and teachers faced a situation characterized by a huge uncertainty. Moreover, the school was unable to create an alternative teaching plan, particularly due to the uncertainty created by the pandemic. Similarly, no one in the country was confident enough to navigate and steer the education system forward, which resulted with a major systemic disruption and put both teachers and students in a rather challenging position. Hence, the disruption of the teaching process provided for the weaknesses of the education system to surface, along with those matters which were knowingly put under the carpet over the years. Suddenly, schools' lack of digital equipment and the limited ICT literacy among teachers, supplemented with the dominant and omnipresent socio-economic inequity among families and students, brought the system to a complete collapse. As a result, neither the state nor the municipality were able to mend the system and find an overnight solution to resume with an inclusive online teaching and learning.

The school reported that they had been informed timely and that the measures were helpful, although in most cases they created unreasonable pressure on employees. Also, regarding communication with the ministry, school administration noted that communication was predominantly one-sided and that they were never consulted or participated in any decision-making. This was particularly pronounced with the curriculum shortening guidelines, which according to most interviewees, were designed irrationally, for which there have been several criticisms from teachers.

¹ 23rd March 2020, the Government of the Republic of North Macedonia adopted a decree with legal force on the application of the laws on primary and secondary education during times of emergency and provided for teaching in the primary and secondary schools to be organized from a distance, i.e., from home by using electronic means. In accordance with the Plan on teaching in primary and secondary schools in the school year 2020/2021, this kind of teaching continued the following school year that started with a month delay i.e., in October 2020.

“The Guidelines were sent to us via e-mail. At 12 noon we would receive an e-mail telling us what should be implemented by the day after. That put us in a very unpleasant situation since we did not have enough time to analyze and organize ourselves to the best of our ability.”²

“Realistically [regarding policymaking], there is no way that we can communicate [with MES and other policy-makers] and get some kind of feedback. No-one will consider a request or a suggestion if you do it by letter or email. If we want somebody to pay attention to us, we should go on a strike.”³

The education sector in the municipality of Gostivar provided that they maintain regular communication with school directors under their administrative jurisdiction and that they are up-to-date with all the challenges that schools face with. Similar to the school, they noted that communication with the Ministry of Education and Science is one-sided and that they have not had the opportunity to be involved in creating the documents regarding distance learning. Additionally, because the municipality is run by the so-called “opposition mayor”, communication with the Ministry of Education and Science was disrupted, especially at the beginning of the pandemic. This proves for a poor cooperation between the local and central government. Additionally, they note that as far as government measures are concerned, they were directly sent to school directors and mayors, but not through them. On many counts, they claimed that they usually find out about documents from school directors, a while after they are issued.⁴

Findings further indicate that the civil society sector, although traditionally active in the city of Gostivar, was not able to significantly impact the new situation because they, just like everyone else, were caught by surprise by the pandemic. The local division of the Union of High School Students noted that at the beginning of the pandemic, similar to the municipality, they had limited communication with the Ministry of Education and Science, which then intensified with the new composition of the Government, somewhat after the July 2020 parliamentary elections. The Union of High School Students advocated for a combined (hybrid) form of teaching and came up with several suggestions on how learning could be organized; however, suggestions were not accepted and teaching continued to be delivered entirely online. Additionally, a number of local CSOs, in cooperation with the municipality, were involved in aiding socially disadvantaged students through providing ICT devices (phones, tablets and laptops). Similarly, several workshops for psychological support for young people and people with disabilities were organized. Also, a local organization delivered IT trainings for some of the school’s teaching staff.

2 Interview No.: 1 with a representative of school management, performed 2.3.2021.

3 Interview No.: 3 with a representative of school management performed 2.3.2021.

4 Interview No.: 11 with representative from the municipality Gostivar performed 29.4.2021.

CONDITIONS DURING THE FIRST COUPLE OF MONTHS AFTER THE DISRUPTION (MARCH - JUNE 2020)

Interviewed teachers at the school unanimously agreed that during the first few weeks after the interruption of teaching with physical presence, they faced a formidable challenge in terms of finding the adequate alternative to digitally deliver classes. A key challenge in the first instance was the lack of ICT skills among teachers, but also the scarce access to ICT equipment and the internet, overall.

*"There were several technical challenges, mostly for older teachers. You know, children grew up with technology and social media, but for me and my peers all that was new and adapting was difficult."*⁵

*"The first two weeks we didn't know what to do and how long the disruption would last. Then we understood that we will be going online... First, we banned telephones and tablets, but then, all of a sudden, we were asked to teach via telephone or the computer. That was a huge contrast!"*⁶

*"At the beginning, we were all in a big chaos. There was no coordination and everyone did what they thought was best to do."*⁷

During this period, students also noticed that professors had a hard time coping with the new situation and that the whole process seemed "amateur" and chaotic. They reported that in the first few weeks, more than half of the students did not get involved due to technical difficulties they faced with, but primarily due to poor or no internet connection and lack of adequate devices for attending classes. The initial expectations were that the interruption would only last for a short period and that there wouldn't be a real need for distance learning, hence, most students did not give much effort for the learning and teaching process to be successful.⁸

5 Interview No.: 6 with a professor performed 10.3.2021.

6 Interview No.: 8 with a professor performed 15.3.2021.

7 Interview No.: 5 with a professor performed 9.3.2021.

8 Focus group No.: 2 performed 31.3.2021.

Additionally, students themselves faced challenges, who despite possessing better ICT skills, still did not have the sufficient experience for attending and coping with online classes. Moreover, it was evident that some of the students had never used ICT technology for more serious purposes, other than using social media for fun and entertainment.

“At the beginning, it was very hard because students never used Internet for learning. During the first two months, online teaching was not taken seriously from either side (teachers and students).”⁹

“Some of the students had never used e-mail before, something that we had been using for a long time, despite our limited computer skills.”¹⁰

Apart from the obvious challenges related to the lack of ICT skills, there was evidence of socio-economic challenges as there were many cases where students did not have adequate tech equipment and/or internet access. Similarly, some of the teachers who are parents to children attending school, attested that scarcity of computers within a household made it impossible to deliver classes and at the same time allow their children to attend classes through their school. Moreover, teachers also noted that many students had difficulties finding adequate space within their homes to attend classes, at the same time when other family members were working from the same house or apartment. Although the Ministry of Education and Science had repeatedly requested statistical information on the number of students who were unable to attend classes due to lack of appropriate equipment, the school did not receive any state support to be able to help the most vulnerable cases. Despite the lack of direct material support from key institutions, the school had received modest donations in IT equipment from private individuals and companies, which were distributed to students of families with lower or no income. Specifically, priority was given to students with good academic record and high desire for learning.

Respondents noted that at the beginning there was a great deal of uncertainty about how long the interruption of physical education would last and how it would continue digitally. Additionally, teachers complained that at first, they did not have clear guidelines on how to move forward. Soon after the school break, they realized that they would need to improvise in order to stay in touch with the students.

⁹ Interview No.: 9 with a professor performed 16.3.2021.

¹⁰ Interview No.: 10 with a professor performed 16.3.2021.

"At the beginning it was unclear how teaching will be delivered. We were all at home waiting for guidance from the ministry. Initially we were told that we can utilize social networks, Viber or Messenger. We started using them to communicate with students. We were told to form groups with students and to assign tasks... But that was all, literally, improvisation - salvage what could be salvaged, teach, and keep the morale high! [...] It was important for us to be in contact with students and keep them engaged."¹¹

"We found ourselves in somewhat of an anarchy - standard rules did not apply any longer, and we had no direction how to move on."¹²

"There was a great deal of disagreement at the beginning. We were getting various information. Guidelines were being replaced with new ones as we were moving on and there was a lot of misinformation along the way."¹³

It was evident that in the first few weeks after the interruption, despite attempts to maintain contact with students, the teaching process was massively disrupted. This happened particularly due to a general uncertainty that prevailed, but also because of the lack of clear guidelines and insufficient technological availability for implementing distance learning. Additionally, other challenges related to the organization and dynamics of distance learning began to surface.

However, after the initial shock, teachers started to seek for alternative ways to deal with the new situation. Although there were no precise guidelines from MES and BDE, teachers started delivering classes with the help of alternative communication channels. The school-organized-trainings for teachers helped ensure a minimally uniform approach.

"The first two weeks were really stressful. We tried to maintain contact. Honestly, I found it difficult in the beginning, but as time went by, I started to feel confident. I accepted the new way and started initiating almost the same effect as with physical teaching. I think that by the end of the year, more than 90% of students got involved and performed their tasks."¹⁴

"It wasn't that stressful! I adapted quickly. I was satisfied with the student feedback. I am happy with what we achieved. This school year was even better, we operated perfectly, I have not missed a class, we had enough time and we were doing fine."¹⁵

¹¹ Interview No.: 9 with a professor performed 9.3.2021.

¹² Interview No.: 2 with a representative of school management performed 2.3.2021.

¹³ Interview No.: 6 with a professor performed 10.3.2021.

¹⁴ Interview No.: 7 with a professor performed 11.3.2021.

¹⁵ Interview No.: 5 with a professor performed 9.3.2021.

“We talked to each other as colleagues on how to improve, improve our skills, and keep contact with students on daily basis.”¹⁶

“All directions we had were immediately shared with other teachers. Regarding support, our IT staff provided trainings and technically supported us all the time. We supported each other a lot by sharing experience and knowledge. [...] We received some direction from outside, but that changed very frequently and often the directions were contradictory. They would give one direction, then they would change it.”¹⁷

THE STATE OF THE SCHOOL IN THE NEW SCHOOL YEAR (2020-2021)

Distance learning took on a significantly more integrated form with the start of the new school year, partly through the introduction of the National Distance Learning Platform.¹⁸ According to most teachers, the platform was introduced at a very late stage and although soon after it proved to be unusable, everyone agreed that it provided better organization of teaching and learning, including assessment and attendance management. Moreover, teachers started the new school year feeling much more confident to utilize online tools, which is partly due to the experience gained along the way and the training that was delivered before the start of the new school year. Additionally, the teaching process received support through the newly established school procedures as well as the documents from MES and BDE, which provided directions on how teaching and assessment should be carried out.

Such observations were confirmed by both focus groups with students who noted that despite the initial chaos, with time, and especially with the start of the new school year, teachers became much more familiar with their ICT skills for teaching.

Nonetheless, despite the evident progress, almost all interviewed teachers noted that the summer break was not utilized for preparing for the new school year.

¹⁶ Interview No.: 8 with a professor performed 15.3.2021.

¹⁷ Interview No.: 4 with a professor performed 9.3.2021.

¹⁸ National Distance Learning Platform: <https://schools.mk/>



"During the summer, we were wondering every day how things will work out in the new school year. Everyone was focused on elections: after elections, we'll see! [...] Things would have been much better organized if the political situation was different."¹⁹

Teachers presented their remarks on the organization of the training for using the national platform, which was conducted at the last moment before the beginning of the new school year. Additionally, the training program was insufficient for teachers who had difficulties using ICT equipment. They noted that the training took place at the school premises, which due to network overuse, internet connection was weak.

The school management noted that despite the lost physical contact with students, efforts were made to stay in touch with them, especially with those who showed more need for psychological support. In this regard, school administrators claim that communication between the school and students had improved over time. The school psychologist noted that, unlike any time before, their role in providing support to both students and teachers had been enormously accentuated. However, despite such efforts by the school administration, students noted that insufficient social contact during the pandemic had significantly affected their lives and their emotional wellbeing. Some of them pointed out that they were demotivated and that they did not feel supported by the school or any other social institution. This condition not only negatively affects their school progress and their overall learning; it also affects their day-to-day life, especially during teenage years when children are by and large emotionally vulnerable.²⁰



DISTANCE TEACHING AND ITS ACCOMPANYING CHALLENGES

A major negative characteristic of distance learning is the lack of interaction between teachers and students. Namely, because students usually do not turn their cameras on, teachers do not have enough feedback from students to understand the extent they accept and understand the teaching material. This shortcoming is especially present in classes with first year students, where teachers did not have a chance to get to know students in person. Additionally, some of the teachers noted that such teaching creates an apathetic attitude among most students, and results with them being passive during classes.

¹⁹ Interview No.: 4 with a professor performed 9.3.2021.

²⁰ Focus group No.: 1 conducted 10.3.2021.

“Students are in their teenage years and do not want to sit in front of the computer, so you cannot maintain their attention... As teachers, we find it difficult to keep their attention and discipline. To implement successful online teaching, parents must supervise them... If they don't wake them up in the morning, they will not connect on time. [...] We need to collaborate with parents a lot, since they don't have an understanding what their children are really doing at school.”²¹

“Students got used to the situation and they manage to find ways to play the system. Simply, they know the way each professor operates and how much verbally and mentally they need to be present. [...] If for the day they are assigned seven classes, they will fully attend only three, while for the rest, they will take breaks. It is especially difficult to keep their attention if the professor holds a lecture. This realm can go on for a short while, but not for the whole school year. [...] Online teaching works well when students are invested; nevertheless, different dynamics is required for mandatory education.”²²

“Students can also find an excuse with the Internet connection or that they have a technical problem and we will never know whether it was true or not.”²³

Some students agree that switched off cameras are a major limiting factor for maintaining a normal educational environment. They note that if all students' cameras are turned on, it would provide for a more effective communication and higher level of attention and commitment by students. They also say that there is peer pressure not to turn on cameras and hardly anyone dares to break the ice: “it's like a traditional dance where everyone plays the same way and no one dares to turn the camera on.”²⁴ On the other hand, another group of students noted that there may be objective and subjective reasons for this phenomenon. According to them, often, technical possibilities do not allow for cameras to be on (poor internet connection), or students do not feel comfortable in front of the camera because they are at home and in the background, there may be other family members.²⁵

“Sometimes students are ashamed to switch on the camera. They are teenagers and ashamed of the changes in their physical appearance, so sometimes it's understandable why they do not want to switch the camera on. Also, it very much depends on their motivation to follow the professor. Teachers should be proactive and make effort to motivate students to get involved.”²⁶

21 Interview No.: 10 with a professor performed 16.3.2021.

22 Interview No.: 9 with a professor performed 16.3.2021.

23 Interview No.: 8 with a professor performed 15.3.2021

24 Focus group No.: 2 conducted 31.3.2021.

25 Ibid

26 Interview No.: 4 with a professor performed 9.3.2021

These issues become more prevalent when it comes to assessment. Teachers complain that they do not have full insight into the engagement of students, especially those from the first year with whom they have not had any previous classroom experience. Ultimately, teachers were very much aware that students find different methods to manipulate with the assessment process.

*"Assigning grades is the number one problem. I'm not grading objectively now... They copy from each other while I'm trying to grade the activity during classes... I have no insight in who does what. I try to individualize the tasks to see how they progress and what kind of feedback I will receive... But, I know I'm missing a lot."*²⁷

*"We are knowingly letting students move on while assigning passing grades, in order to avoid class exams."*²⁸

Additionally, online teaching exposes another ubiquitous issue during the pandemic. Namely, students vigilantly and worryingly talked of teachers who are insufficiently engaged in teaching their classes. Apparently, everyone in the school is aware of these teachers "who are not doing their job properly."²⁹ Although in a small number, compared to the majority who diligently complete their teaching tasks, they still negatively affect the teaching process and the overall student satisfaction. The school management notes that these teachers have permanent contracts, most of whom are several years before retirement. Nonetheless, the school has practically no mechanisms to encourage them to be more engaged; nor to penalize them if there are complaints from students.³⁰

Many teachers also note that curriculum reductions seemed hasty and rather "mechanical" without considering the importance and relevance of each class and the connection among classes in the curriculum. Moreover, despite the guidelines for shortening the curriculum, most teachers made further modifications to the curricula and tried to correct any inconsistencies which rose from those cuts, in order to deliver a more consistent curriculum. On one hand, most teachers agreed that shortening classes to 35 minutes is a good move that provides a more focused attention to students in a shorter period of time. Yet, some other teachers noted that sometimes they struggle to cover all the material in just 35 minutes, especially if they want the class to be interactive and involve as many students as possible.

Shortening classes is one of the factors which, according to some students,

27 Interview No.: 5 with a professor performed 9.3.2021

28 Interview No.: 1 with a representative of school management, performed 2.3.2021.

29 Ibid

30 Interviews No.: 2 and 3 with school management representative performed 2.3.2021.

had a negative impact on the quality of teaching because often, those 35 minutes are not enough, especially if teachers do not use the time rationally. Several students complained that some of the teachers spent too much time updating their attendance or on conversations unrelated to the teaching content. Students also complained that there are still teachers who read their lessons from notes, without adding any personal or creative element to the class.³¹ Additionally, they note that more attention should be paid to stimulating withdrawn students, who in conditions of online teaching are often neglected and do not actively participate in the learning process³²

DISTANCE TEACHING AND ITS ADVANTAGES

Distance learning also comes with a solid number of positive characteristics, which have so far been neglected and insufficiently accentuated in public discourse. Namely, teachers noted that despite the lack of interactive communication, there is high potential for collaborative learning if students are encouraged to conduct research online and come up with data related to the teaching material.

“Online teaching can be more interactive than regular teaching because students can explore the Internet [for contents] and broaden their horizons.”³³

“Those who are devoted to studying onsite can learn online as well. Students at some point realized that online education can benefit them and they are really trying now.”³⁴

In addition to teaching students how to use the internet to broaden their horizons, teachers often point out that online teaching and learning can have a positive effect on enhancing creativity in the classroom. Despite earlier attempts to digitalize teaching, most teachers have not previously used any ICT tools; yet, online teaching has now significantly improved their digital skills and has provided them with an accelerated opportunity to fully digitalize the teaching process.

“I am personally happy with the platform because it gives many options for

31 Focus group No.: 2 conducted 31.3.2021.

32 Focus group No.: 1 performed 10.3.2021.

33 Interview No.: 10 with a professor performed 16.3.2021.

34 Interview No.: 5 with a professor performed 9.3.2021.

“foreign language teaching. Information is accessible immediately via the Internet browsers. In that sense, I like technology because everything is a click away. It is easy to animate the students as well. [...] We are lucky that all this happened now when technology is so advanced. If this happened during the 90-ies [when technology was not that advanced and accessible] it would have been impossible to teach.”³⁵

“I try to be creative! I play videos, allow them to watch synopsis of plays and we follow-up with a discussion. That holds their attention [...] Sometimes I say to myself, if we were delivering onsite classes, I would have been more limited. My hands are untied now, and I have more space for creativity. This suited me and I will miss this kind of teaching.”³⁶

There are similar optimistic observations by the school administration and management who noted that, due to the new situation, professors are more engaged and pay more attention to preparing for teaching. They are also more up-to-date and consistent with their teaching, attend staff meetings, and are generally more cooperative with the school administration and management. The assumption is that now, due to the new situation, teachers are out of their “comfort zone,” and they feel an indispensable need for more collaboration at the school level. The school administration and management also noted that because teachers could be observed by parents, they are also more professional in communicating with students.

35 Interview No.: 4 with a professor performed 9.3.2021.

36 Interview No.: 5 with a professor performed 9.3.2021.



CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this study was to provide an overarching outlook on the process of online learning in the Municipal High School – Gostivar, from the perspective of students and teachers. This local case study provides an added value to the national study and delivers a more detailed presentation of key challenges during the teaching and learning process since the pandemic started. Additionally, the study outlines the main difficulties and challenges of online teaching and learning and emphasizes the positive aspects of online teaching, which are seldom neglected in this realm.

Findings indicate that the school faced considerable difficulties at the beginning of online teaching. It shows that teachers were left to fend for themselves and had to improvise in order to stay in touch with students and conclude the school year. Most importantly, the study showcases that all of this was taking place while many teachers did not possess the necessary ICT skills. Similarly, a significant number of students did not have adequate access to the Internet or ICT devices, to be able to attend classes with ease. The study also finds that, over time, many of these problems had been overcome. Yet, online teaching and learning still remains characterized by several significant difficulties, which primarily focus on the process of online learning rather than any other specific technical matter. These include the issue with students not turning their cameras on during class, which by far hindered class discussions, as well as the value of assigned grades relative to the work conducted and completed by students. However, despite these issues, distance learning has imposed a drastic improvement in the use of ICT skills among teachers and has introduced many innovations in teaching that could find use in the future. In sum, findings indicate that in the past year, teachers have gone beyond their comfort zone and have significantly improved their creative approach to delivering classes.

This whole challenging experience from the start of the pandemic, in addition to being a shock for the entire education system, it is also an opportunity for a significant reform in education. Although this study draws on information from just one school, it can provide a wider range of recommendations for improving secondary education on a national level. Additionally, because high schools depend on several central and local stakeholders, recommendations from this study apply to schools and external stakeholders, including the the Ministry of

Education and Science and the civil society sector. In the future, it is necessary for all stakeholders to do their best to make a great use of any momentum created by any kind of disruption, similar to the one caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, and accelerate reform in the sector. For example, digitalization of teaching and learning is a never-ending process and it is always a good time to invest in, especially in times of massive disruptions.

1. The government and the Ministry of Education and Science must allocate significant resources to improve the information and communication infrastructure in schools. After the end of the pandemic, when students will return to school, they must have access to stable and fast internet connection. Additionally, significant investments in IT equipment must be made, not only within schools, but also in portable equipment for teachers and students whose families face with financial difficulties. Such investments should go hand in hand with the ones in physical infrastructure, which are often insufficient to allow for decent teaching and learning conditions for onsite classes.
2. The Ministry of Education and Science, but above all, Civil Society Organizations, should be involved in continuous teacher training programs, not only to build capacity for digitalizing teaching and learning, but to also ensure greater creativity during teaching and inclusive and collaborative learning. Similarly, teachers should attend systematic trainings and be encouraged to improve individually through a system of awards and grants.
3. Systemic mechanisms for quality enhancement of teaching and learning need to be adopted. Findings indicate that there are teachers whose quality of classes are far below the expected threshold. The school management claims it has no mechanisms to improve, support, or ultimately sanction such an occurrence. As a result, high schools should adopt and implement a systematic digital mechanism to allow students to anonymously evaluate teachers, while results of such an operation should be publicly announced each semester. These evaluations would give students a voice and would provide greater motivation for teachers to continuously improve.
4. It is necessary to allow for a two-way communication at all levels. While rapid and insufficiently inclusive policy-making in times of emergency is somewhat expected to occur, the overall education system needs to focus on more inclusive policy-making based on a comprehensive regulatory impact assessment. The current one-way (top-down) communication should be replaced by a two-way communication where all stakeholders, especially students and teachers, will have the opportunity to actively participate in the creation of public education policies. Additionally, such a two-

way communication should provide for greater involvement of parents in the process as well.

5. Schools should take a proactive approach to fundraising through the local community and international donors. Findings indicate that the difficulties faced by schools and students during the pandemic encouraged for a greater initiative by schools to reach out to donors and for a far greater solidarity by citizens and businesses. This tendency for direct assistance and cooperation between local stakeholders and schools should be continued and further encouraged as it can contribute to solving certain technical or infrastructural shortcomings. Similarly, it could enhance the cooperation between the local community and schools, which is key for increasing accountability, transparency, and inclusiveness.
6. School conditions imposed by COVID-19 could be used to generate approaches to alternative and innovative solutions. For example, weather permitting, teachers can arrange outdoor meetings to get to know their students and to maintain and strengthen their relationships with them, which is key to student engagement and commitment.

