

School closures costly for children and nation, say experts



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Each child who experiences school closures stands to lose future earnings by an average of 3% over their lifetime, according to OECD findings. – The Malaysian Insight file pic, July 25, 2021.

MALAYSIAN children will bear huge future losses in the form of lower earnings with every passing day of schools remaining closed, educationists said.

The country, too, will lose in terms of gross domestic product (GDP) in the future, they said, citing findings by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

LeapEd Services executive director Nina Adlan Disney said school closures have put the nation's future at stake.

Each child who experienced school closures stands to lose future earnings by an average of 3% over their lifetime, according to the [OECD findings \(http://www.oecd.org/education/The-economic-impacts-of-coronavirus-covid-19-learning-losses.pdf\)](http://www.oecd.org/education/The-economic-impacts-of-coronavirus-covid-19-learning-losses.pdf), she said.

“Beyond that, OECD also estimates the domino effect will result in a 1.5% reduction in GDP for countries until the end of the century,” said Disney, whose social enterprise-run LeapEd Services collaborates with the Education Ministry on school transformation initiatives.

Schools are again closed, this time until August 31 when they will be reopened in stages. This was announced by the [Education Ministry \(http://www.themalaysianinsight.com/s/327929\)](http://www.themalaysianinsight.com/s/327929) on July 17 and will apply to all schools and institutions registered with the ministry.

Schools were closed for a good part of last year due to the Covid-19 pandemic. They reopened in stages in March this year but were shut again when the nationwide movement-control order began on June 1.

Lessons, meanwhile, have been conducted online amid numerous complaints from parents and teachers about the difficulty of virtual teaching and learning, especially for poorer pupils who lack devices and internet access.

Disney said the government should look at allowing schools in low-risk Covid-19 areas and a high vaccination rate to be reopened early.

“It has been heartbreaking to see the learning gap getting wider among pupils,” she said.

She also suggested the government have a “recovery curriculum” that addresses the widening vulnerability gap.

She said the ministry must take a differentiated approach that takes into account the specific needs of each school and its community.

“Some schools are small in size with small Covid-19 risks. For instance, there is an Orang Asli school that only has an overall 130 pupils,” she said.

A silver lining during the pandemic, she said, was the reduced reliance on exams.

“We have to be more creative in how we assess how much the students know and how much they need to learn better,” she said.

“We need to reexamine our precepts, for example, move away from standardised testing, and move towards a less ‘teacher-centric approach’.”

In other words, the pandemic has presented the government an opportunity for an education “reset”.



Experts say there is an urgent need for a strategy to help students from underprivileged backgrounds who have fallen behind due to online teaching and learning. – The Malaysian Insight file pic, July 25, 2021.

Parent Action Group for Education Malaysia chairman Noor Azimah Abdul Rahim agrees, saying she supports a differentiated and targeted approach to teaching and learning based on the needs of each student community.

Noor Azimah said that OECD has already found the Malaysian education system to be three years behind top-performing countries.

For example, in the Programme for International Student Assessment (http://www.oecd.org/pisa/publications/PISA2018_CN_MYS.pdf) in 2018, Malaysian students scored lower than the OECD average in reading, mathematics and science.

Noor Azimah and Chan Soon Seng from Teach For Malaysia agreed that pupils should not be made to repeat a year of school.

Chan said this was advised by OECD as well, as repeating a school year (<http://oecdedutoday.com/repeating-school-year-not-the-answer-to-covid-learning-losses/>) does not guarantee pupils will catch up on learning.

Citing Andreas Schleicher, director of OECD Directorate for Education and Skills, Chan said there will also be a huge economic cost.

“Both from the operation cost of an additional school year for entire cohorts of pupils as well as the delayed labour market entry cost,” the Teach For Malaysia chief executive officer said.

“Schleicher argues that these resources can be better spent on targeted support for students most affected by the pandemic.

“There is much more that can be done to reopen schools in a safer fashion than has been done in the past.”

He said the United Nations Children’s Fund and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation have jointly stated that “[schools \(http://www.unicef.org/press-releases/statement-reopening-schools-cannot-wait\)](http://www.unicef.org/press-releases/statement-reopening-schools-cannot-wait) should be the last to close and the first to reopen during the pandemic”.

Of urgent need is a strategy to help pupils from underprivileged backgrounds who have fallen behind due to online teaching and learning.

“The reality is that we will not be able to close the digital divide in the short term. Overall learning loss will increase,” said Chan.

“The longer schools are closed, the wider the gap will be for those who can and cannot access online learning.”

He also urged the government to try to reopen schools as soon as possible, adding that schools should be considered as an essential service.

“Beyond learning, schools also serve a broader social support function. For children from low-income households, schools provide meals,” Chan said. – July 25, 2021.

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