



IDEA anti COVID-19 # 18

The Covid-19 pandemic and socio-economic inequality in education¹

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Summary

- In response to the Covid-19 pandemic, schools have been closed since 11th March 2020 and have been obliged to switch to remote teaching. This new situation may, among other effects, further deepen the considerable existing inequalities in education, which are already higher in the Czech Republic than in most other European countries. In this study, we look at various factors that may affect how remote teaching can be related to socioeconomic educational inequalities in the Czech Republic. For the sake of clarity, we distinguish between factors relevant to schools, families, and pupils. The aim of this study is not to describe the current situation but to outline who is most at risk of losing out as a result of remote teaching and where possible measures should be targeted in order to prevent deepening inequalities in education further. In this study, we focus on primary and lower secondary schools, with an emphasis on the lower secondary years.
- **Schools:** Only a small proportion of schools were technically prepared to face up to the demands of remote teaching. Only 19 % of primary schools had an online school information system that could be accessed by parents and pupils, while 50 % at most used some kind of online teaching platform.
- **Teachers:** In terms of ICT skills, fewer than half of all teachers were prepared for teaching remotely, which is below the average across OECD countries. Moreover, almost a quarter of teachers lack mutual support from their colleagues, in particular when introducing new ideas in school. However, these factors – which are essential for a smooth, swift transition to remote teaching – are not substantially different in schools with higher proportions of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds. That said, schools in socially disadvantaged areas do suffer from

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a greater lack of teaching staff, in particular a lack of highly qualified teaching staff, which may indeed pose a problem in the current situation.

- **Households:** Technical equipment, in terms of computer hardware and an internet connection, may play the most significant role in households, together with parental support for children's learning. Although it may not seem that many households seriously lack technical equipment these days, 6 % of households with children still have no computer or tablet at home, and around 3 % have no internet connection. A small share of pupils will also have access only via a mobile phone with a limited data allowance. More often than not, these are pupils from the most deprived socioeconomic backgrounds. This group of pupils is also disadvantaged in terms of the support they receive from their parents. As many as 16 % of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds lack support from their parents for their efforts to learn, compared with 8 % of pupils from households with higher socioeconomic status. These factors at the household level may contribute to deepening inequalities in education, in particular, if the remote teaching situation continues for a longer period of time. Their impact may also be worse if they are combined with unclear or complex instructions for the remote teaching from the teachers, which would necessitate greater involvement or help from parents.
- **Pupils:** Technical skills of pupils should not be a substantial factor contributing to social inequalities in education. More than 90 % of pupils have command of the necessary ICT skills, regardless of their socioeconomic background. A little more than half can resolve problems or install new software on their own; in this, pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds do slightly worse. What is crucial, however, in particular for school pupils in the lower secondary years, is their motivation, ambition, application, and self-confidence, all of which may be even more significant in the context of distance learning. In these socio-emotional ("soft") skills, pupils from households with higher socioeconomic status have a substantial advantage.
- The recommendations for public policy that arise from our findings are different for different time frames. **If schools are shut for a relatively short period of time**, pupils who do not participate in the on-going remote teaching, whether because they lack the necessary technical equipment to do so, are under-supported by their families or are not interested in participating, are most at risk. Failure to participate for a few months could lead them to fall behind in the long term and further reduce their motivation and aspirations. It is essential to make teaching accessible to pupils without technical equipment but also to attempt to engage incommunicative pupils through more intensive communication with their parents. In case of less strict restrictions, schools can collaborate with social workers. Once schools have reopened, it is worth considering both catch-up tutoring and summer courses to repeat material for the pupils at the greatest risk of falling behind. **If schools are shut for a more extended period of time**, then the gaps between schools will widen. It will be necessary to come up with innovative measures to help schools that are struggling with remote teaching. That will require high-quality data and a readiness to act on the part of the regional authorities, to identify the schools in need and provide them with help, or a strong centralised management.
- Last but not least, plans should be made for how to **react to further waves of the pandemic**, which could lead to additional school closures in future. Numerous countries are making targeted investments into ICT technology and teacher training, while in the Czech Republic before any further waves strike, it is also crucial to activate support network for schools (e.g. regional teams). That system could then support schools both while they are open and, in case they were to be closed again, could monitor and assist those in need flexibly and effectively.