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FEATURED Q&A

Will Latin America's Schools Be Able to Reopen Safely?



Governments in Latin America, including Chilean Education Ministry officials, pictured above, are working on plans that involve social distancing for when students return to schools. // File Photo: Chilean Government.

Q Countries in Latin America are starting to discuss the reopening of schools, which, along with most public places, have been closed for nearly two months during the Covid-19 pandemic. Is now the right time for schools in the region to reopen? What should public officials do to ensure that the health of students and staff is protected as classes restart? Do primary and secondary schools, as well as higher-education institutions, have enough government funding and resources to both educate students and protect their health?

A Ariel Fiszbein, director of the education program at the Inter-American Dialogue: "Most countries in Latin America (the exception being Nicaragua) have closed schools in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. In spite of the ongoing efforts to scale up distance-learning approaches, students and their families are struggling to maintain a normal learning environment. The reopening of schools will most likely be a gradual process depending on the evolution of the pandemic and local conditions. Countries will need to develop detailed plans that will typically entail the gradual and possibly partial reopening of schools with rotating attendance in order to enable some social distancing. The state of school infrastructure will be a critical factor. Unfortunately, schools with poor sanitary facilities (for example, no or intermittent running water) and limited space to allow for social distancing will face serious difficulties. Addressing those difficulties will require special efforts to upgrade school infrastructure to accompany

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Salvadoran Att'y General Objects to Bukele's Decree

El Salvador's attorney general challenged a decree that President Nayib Bukele issued to extend restrictions related to the coronavirus pandemic.

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Mexican Gov't Tightens Grip on Electricity Market

The Mexican government issued new rules for the operation of the country's power grid. Industry groups say the rules favor state electric utility CFE over private developers.

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POLITICAL

Brazil's New Health Minister Resigns After Four Weeks in Office

New Brazilian Health Minister Nelson Teich resigned after just a month on the job. Teich had opposed President Jair Bolsonaro's touting of hydroxychloroquine to fight Covid-19.

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Teich // File Photo: Brazilian Government.

POLITICAL NEWS

Brazil's New Health Minister Quits After Four Weeks in Office

Brazil's new health minister, Nelson Teich, resigned Friday after just four weeks on the job as the number of coronavirus cases and related deaths spirals upward in the South American country. Teich, an oncologist, did not say why he was stepping down, but in recent days he publicly opposed President Jair Bolsonaro's efforts to promote the anti-malaria drug hydroxychloroquine to fight Covid-19, *The Wall Street Journal* reported. Teich also opposed Bolsonaro's efforts to ease social-distancing measures in Brazil. The country now has more than 241,000 confirmed cases of Covid-19, the fourth-largest number of cases in the world, after the United States, Russia and the United Kingdom, according to Johns Hopkins Univer-

sity. More than 16,000 people are reported to have died of the disease in Brazil. Bolsonaro, who has downplayed the threat of the virus and has pushed for businesses to reopen, fired Teich's predecessor, orthopedist Luiz Henrique Mandetta, over similar disagreements. "Life is full of choices, and today, I chose to leave," Teich said Friday in stepping down. Earlier in the week, Bolsonaro allowed some businesses, including gyms and hair salons, to reopen, declaring them essential. The move appeared to take Teich by surprise. "Was this announced today?" he asked reporters who asked him about Bolsonaro's decree. "No, it didn't go through the ministry, it's not our attribution," he said. "It's the president's decision." Most governors and mayors in Brazil have kept businesses closed through local restrictions. Meantime, São Paulo Mayor Bruno Covas has said the city's health system could collapse as demand surges for hospital beds, *BBC News* reported today. The public hospitals in Brazil's largest city have reached 90 percent capacity and may run out of space in two weeks, he said.

NEWS BRIEFS

Argentina Gets Counteroffers From Creditors in Debt Talks

International creditors delivered Argentina's government three counteroffers late on Friday as the country seeks a deal on restructuring \$65 billion in foreign debt, *Reuters* reported. The Economy Ministry said it was studying the offers and "their implications for ... restoring the sustainability of public debt." Argentina's government has said its debt is unsustainable after two years of recession and now amid the economic fallout of the Covid-19 pandemic. [Editor's note: See related [Q&A](#) in the May 13 issue of the Advisor.]

Two Chilean Gov't Ministers Quarantined

The Chilean finance and presidency ministers are both in quarantine after coming in close contact with lawmakers who tested positive for the coronavirus during negotiations with Congress, the ministers said Sunday, *Reuters* reported. Finance Minister Ignacio Briones and Secretary General of the Presidency Felipe Ward both said on Twitter that they had tested negative for Covid-19 but would remain in isolation until a second test confirmed it. At least 23 legislators who were in contact with those infected will also begin a quarantine period.

Hochschild to Restart Production at Two Peruvian Mines

Precious metals miner Hochschild Mining said today it would restart production at its Inmaculada and Pallancata mines in Peru, looking at full output from these locations in the coming weeks, *Reuters* reported. Hochschild operates two mines in southern Peru and one in Argentina. It said it would reissue its 2020 forecast once full production is achieved and the overall impact of suspending operations due to Covid-19 lockdowns was clear.

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procurement of the necessary cleaning supplies and protective equipment. Teachers and directors will need to be prepared to provide remedial education and socioemotional support to students in their return to classes. Moreover, capabilities for distance learning should continue to be upgraded as the emergency may well continue throughout this and the next academic year. All of this strongly suggests that budget demands will be significant. Countries are experiencing the largest negative shock on human capital accumulation in modern times. Attention to immediate needs should not result in underinvestments with dramatic negative long-term effects."

A **Michael C. Lisman, education lead in the Bureau for Latin America and the Caribbean at the U.S. Agency for International Development:** "Getting education back on track is a top priority, with major implications for Latin American and Caribbean econo-

mies. Public health and safety concerns continue to drive decisions on the timing and implementation of school reopenings, but even factors beyond virus control, including sanitation, school meal availability and adequate teacher presence, will require careful examination. Many reopening decisions will need to be made on a phased or even school-by-school basis. Assuming most countries in the region seek some degree of straightlined budgets to cover recurrent costs such as salaries, the challenge will be working quickly and efficiently with what is available. It is anticipated that multilateral lenders and international donors will provide some help to lower-income countries, where possible. All line ministries should take a fresh look at their engagement with private-sector entities across the spectrum, such as nonstate schools, contract teachers and ancillary service providers. Such entities can often be more nimble and can fill needed gaps. Access is understandably the priority at first, but teaching and learning must be

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Salvadoran Attorney General Challenges Presidential Decree

El Salvador's attorney general on Sunday challenged a decree that President Nayib Bukele issued the previous evening to extend coronavirus restrictions after declaring a state of emergency without the approval of Congress, El Faro reported. The country's Legislative Assembly had approved an emergency declaration in March to respond to the Covid-19 pandemic, but after an extension last month, the measure was set to expire on Sunday, Reuters reported. Legislators had planned to discuss a second extension when they reconvened today. However, Bukele on Saturday night issued a decree to prolong the state of emergency 30 more days, which includes suspension of classes, restrictions on movement and bans on large gatherings. Lawmakers last week had blocked the extension, arguing that the administration had not made public a roadmap of its response to the pandemic or any coronavirus-related expenditures, El Faro reported. "All presidents in the democratic history of our country have had the power to declare a state of emergency and have exercised it, without legislative approval," Bukele wrote Sunday on Twitter. "Will a president be prevented for the first time from exercising that vital power?" Lawmakers and civil society groups urged an investigation to determine whether Bukele exceeded his power, a recurring allegation over the past few months. [Editor's note: See related [Q&A](#) in the April 30 issue of the Advisor.]

ECONOMIC NEWS

Mexico Tightens Grip on Electricity Market

The Mexican government on Friday issued new rules for the operation of the country's power grid, affecting dozens of renewable energy projects, The Wall Street Journal reported. Energy companies and local industry groups

blasted the new rules, saying they favor Mexican state-owned electricity utility CFE over private developers and roll back the opening of the power market to foreign investors. The Energy Ministry said on Saturday that the reason for halting solar and wind plants' entry into operation was the plunge in demand due to coronavirus lockdowns, which raised the need for a more "reliable and continuous" power supply, The Wall Street Journal reported. Industry associations said the new rules will affect 28 solar and wind projects that were set to go online, as well as 16 more under con-

struction, which together total \$6.4 million in investments, much of it from foreign firms, the Associated Press reported. "This represents a frontal attack on legal security for investments in Mexico and causes serious consequences for the country, including the loss of jobs and investor confidence," Mexico's Business Coordinating Council wrote on Sunday. "This does not just discriminate against renewable energy, it also allows authorities to artificially inflate the price of electricity and arbitrarily displace any private sector power generation project," it added.

COMINGS & GOINGS

Marriott Group Appoints New Leadership for the Americas Division

The Marriott Group has appointed new leadership to head the Americas division after former President Dave Grissen stepped down, the company said, the Caribbean Journal reported in May. Grissen, who had worked at Marriott for 36 years, oversaw all of the Americas' lodging business for the group, including more than 5,640 properties. Marriott has appointed Liam Brown to take over as president for North America, and Craig Smith will assume the role of group president, which includes overseeing all non-North American operations, including Latin America and the Caribbean, according to the report.

NetApp Names Former Microsoft Latin America Head as its President

Cloud data services firm NetApp has named César Cernuda as president, reporting to CEO George Kurian, effective in July, NetApp said in a statement on May 12. Cernuda, who most recently served as president of Microsoft Latin America and vice president of Microsoft Corporation, will lead NetApp's global go-to-market operations, spanning sales, marketing, services and support, according to the statement.

Affronti Takes Over as YPF Chief Executive

Argentine state-controlled oil company YPF has named oil industry veteran Sergio Affronti as its new chief executive, Argus Media reported in early May. The announcement came after oil prices crashed in March and coronavirus-linked lockdown measures have driven down demand for most oil products. Affronti replaces Daniel González, who had served as YPF's chief financial officer before being named chief executive in April 2018. The appointment is part of a shake-up at the company after President Alberto Fernández took office in December. Affronti's career began at YPF, and he has since held several international positions, including when the company was controlled by Spain's Repsol and as country manager for Repsol in Ecuador, Argus Media reported.

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addressed. Most countries of the region are opting for a policy of 'automatic promotion' (meaning moving all students up a grade level), which is not ideal, but probably warranted and backed by relevant international evidence. In this unprecedented scenario, equipping schools and teachers to efficiently assess and address the learning and psychosocial needs of their students will become the overarching goal. Formative assessment data is crucial to being able to develop and provide flexible, differentiated and remedial instruction."

A **Timothy Scully, emeritus director of the Institute for Educational Initiatives at the University of Notre Dame:** "On March 16, the Chilean Ministry of Education suspended in-person classes throughout the country. Since that time, the country's educational establishments have been struggling with the challenges of engaging distance learning with students at all levels. This is especially challenging in contexts where many under-resourced households experience the lack of adequate access to personal computers and poor Internet connectivity. These challenges will only be reinforced by the economic impact of Covid-19 on those families in lower-income categories, as a recent ECLAC study predicts that the poverty rate is anticipated to rise by 50 percent due to the crisis. Chile's Ministry of Health has yet to determine the exact protocols if schools wish to reopen, but the sheer infrastructure challenges are daunting. And even if schools were prepared to receive students, it's not at all certain that parents and guardians will allow their children to return to school any time soon. In a recent survey of elementary and secondary school parents undertaken by the Chilean Association of Municipalities, 96.3 percent of those asked said they would not send their children back to school

during the current semester (that is, before mid-July), and nearly 40 percent reported that they would not send their children back until 2021. Add to this the deep reticence to returning to in-person instruction expressed repeatedly by the leadership of Chile's largest teacher unions, and it is easy to see that we are probably a ways off before any serious consideration of a reopening."

A **Maria Soledad Bos, education lead specialist at the Inter-American Development Bank:** "When considering the reopening of schools, four key sanitary criteria must be kept in mind to allow students and teachers to return to class safely. First, ensure social distancing. This can entail gradual or staggered reopening of schools, where different groups of students take turns to return to school, reducing the number of students there at the same time. Schools can also increase the space between students' desks, avoid group activities and restrict the number of students in hallways and bathrooms. Second, schools should be kept clean and sanitized, including a first deep cleaning and disinfection upon students' return to school. Regular cleaning of all classrooms, furniture, common areas and especially frequently touched surfaces should be intensified. Third, ensure that students and teachers arrive and stay healthy at school by checking the health status of students upon entering school as well as communicating to parents and students the importance of staying home if they do not feel well. Fourth, ensure access to handwashing stations, with constant and sufficient access to soap and water or other hand-cleaning items."

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