

12 Colombia: Learning at home

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Website: <https://www.redacademica.edu.co/estrategias/aprende-en-casa>

General description

Bogota has the largest school system in Colombia and its teachers' payroll is the second largest for public entities in the country. Bogota has a population of 7 743 955, and a total of 2 190 public and private schools. The Secretary of Education of Bogota is in charge of 399 schools, which represent 743 562 students and 34 764 teachers distributed in 20 districts, 2 of which are rural. Official enrolment records for 2020 indicate that 87.8% of students belong to the most vulnerable socio-economic groups and 50.2% of these students belong to the poorest families. In addition, a considerable number of students in Bogota belong to minority communities that are in even more vulnerable conditions, such as victims of the armed conflict (70 659 students, or 8.9% of all students enrolled), various ethnic groups (8 710 students, or 1.2% of all students enrolled), migrants from the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela (36 107 students, or 5.2% of all students enrolled) and students with disabilities (20 112, or 2.5% of all students enrolled). Every public school student receives free transportation and at least one meal and is exempt from tuition fees. These characteristics of the student population made the continuity of education during the COVID-19 public health crisis a difficult challenge for the governmental entities in charge.

On 17 March 2020, the president of Colombia declared a national public health emergency. The Mayor of Bogota, Claudia Lopez, was the first to mandate quarantine measures for the whole population, resulting in school closures. The Ministry of National Education's response to the public health emergency was to suspend all national school attendance, declaring early school vacation from 16 March to 19 April. In

contrast to the ministry's approach, the Municipal Secretary of Education of Bogota did not bring forward the school vacation, but instead, decided to implement a strategy of educational continuity "Aprende en Casa" (AeC) (Learn at Home).

The AeC strategy comprises five components:

1. The creation of a web portal with curated education resources to support learning at home. This site (Edusitio) includes over 600 resources, such as class videos for all subjects and grades, webinars, social media interactions and resources for reading aloud with "BlibioRed en Mi Casa," a project in association with the Ministry of Culture.
2. Educational television and radio programmes which are broadcast twice a day on national TV channels and radio stations with content for all ages and subjects.
3. Aprende en Casa Toca Tu Puerta, which distributes printed educational materials for homes with no Internet access, including books, worksheets, games, and brochures for games and activities and a "Kit en Casa", which includes science study guides, games and family activities for preschool and primary students.
4. Programa de Alimentación Escolar en Casa, which offers school meals distributed to each house through different strategies.
5. "Mesas de Apoyo Técnico y Pedagógico," support offices available from 7 a.m. to 4 p.m. for the entire education community looking for advice on technological or pedagogical issues.

These activities are designed to continue education and support homes in Bogota as they become spaces for learning, co-responsibility, autonomy, self-care and protection, reinforced by diverse pedagogical measures and guidelines established by the different educational institutions and the secretary's outlines. The AeC strategy was the first educational continuity initiative in the country. It was designed and implemented primarily by the Undersecretary of Quality and Relevance in the Municipal Ministry of Education (SED) with support from other units. They were able to respond in record time for the continuity of education in the city of Bogota and that response served as an example for the rest of the country.

Since then, the strategy has evolved in response to the different challenges and necessities for the continuation of education in the city.

As a first response, the SED quickly convened a series of meetings with representatives of public and private school principals and teachers, and with local education directors, to discuss the best possible measures that should be taken by the education sector as a response to the public health crisis. Those various meetings and discussions shaped Aprende en Casa as a strategy – not to adapt the educational system, but as a transformation that relies on the continuity of the learning process and students' development at home, with the guardians/parents as the main mediators with ongoing communication with their teachers. This strategy aims to support learning for every actor of the educational community, not only the students, but their families, teachers, principals and administrative school staff. Given the highly innovative nature of the strategy, it uses constant feedback for continuous adjustment. Various meetings with the key members of the education community have been taking place since its implementation on 15 March. These adjustments represent three main phases of the implementation of the strategy.

Phase 1: Emergency response (15-19 March)

The Aprende en Casa strategy was officially launched on 15 March with Circular 005¹ (Care and Protection Guidelines for Students during the COVID-19 pandemic through the Aprende en Casa strategy). It mainly focused on the deployment of virtual tools to support online learning.

Digital resources for online learning

The existent website “Portal Educativo Red Académica” was underutilised. It was restructured – it already contained more than 600 resources – and was enriched with additional guidelines and flexible curriculum strategies mainly for the teachers to use. A group of pedagogical specialists along with teachers and the secretary’s staff designed and created more resources and updated its content. An editorial committee was created in partnership with the Institute for Educational Research and Pedagogical Development, which met twice a week, organised the content by topic and used a common language for all resources on the site.

The Ministry of National Education then relaunched the webpage “Aprender Digital” that grouped together different partner entities, and the web portal “Colombia Aprende”, already in use, and organised the resources into nine areas: 1) natural sciences and environmental education; 2) social studies, history, geography, political constitution and democracy; 3) 21st century skills; 4) physical education, recreation and sports; 5) ethics and life skills; 6) humanities, Spanish and foreign languages; 7) mathematics; 8) STEM+A; and 9) technology and informatics.

School nutrition

Simultaneously, the School Nutrition Programme (Programa de Alimentación Escolar) had to be modified and adapted to guarantee each student’s meal. For most public school students, the school meal is an essential one in their day. Thanks to a significant redesign effort to align delivery and public health measures, and renegotiate contracts and conditions in record time to carry out a first distribution through the education institutions before the nationwide quarantine was imposed, 646 832 nutritional supplements were given to 187 000 students, 161 708 students received school meals and 25 383 food kits for preparation at home were handed out to each family directly by each educational institution.

Phase 2: A new education dynamic (19 March-3 April)

After multiple meetings and discussions with teachers and principals, and an analysis of visits to the websites and comments by users, it was decided that the strategy had to become a flexible school strategy, not just a curriculum strategy, that brought the entire education community together to transform school practices, making the home the new learning space. This new learning space is a specific environment, but the aim was not to reproduce the school at home. The website offers tailored content for five groups of users: 1) teachers; 2) students; 3) guardians or parents; 4) principals; 5) counsellors.

TV and radio education

In response to the city’s Internet access gap and the lack of technology in many students’ homes, the SED rapidly designed and implemented a wider spectrum of education delivery channels which included TV programmes, radio and the use of social media. This last resource is accessible for those that do not have Internet access but who have mobile phone plans that include Facebook, TikTok, WhatsApp and Instagram.

In partnership with the national television channels, the SED negotiated two hours of education broadcasting in the morning and two hours in the afternoon on weekdays for “Aprende en Casa con Canal Capital”. Those programmes are also posted on the Portal Red Académica website, and available for download 24/7. The TV station had no prior experience with children and teenagers as an audience and lacked experience with educational programming. The partnership then expanded to include the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Technology and Communications, and the Ministry of Culture, and the channels “Señal Colombia” and “RTVC Play”. A broad programme of educational television was launched, entitled “3, 2, 1 Edu-Acción contenidos para todos” (3, 2, 1 Edu-action, content for all) and offering content all day for all ages. At the same time, “Profe en tu casa”, a programme directed by teachers following the

Ministry of Education's pedagogical guidelines, was also broadcast. The broadcasting of both programmes was reinforced by a second signal that could be synchronised with regional TV reaching rural areas. The educational TV strategy was supplemented with guidelines and a communication strategy to instruct the education community on how best to use its content.

In addition, the SED developed a partnership with Colmundo Radio and DC Radio to broadcast a programme three times a week from 11:30 a.m. to 12:00 p.m. with educational content for the whole family. The objective of the programme, following the strategy to transform the home into a new learning space, is to encourage reading and writing. Well-known public figures (actors, musicians and artists) read books aloud, followed by conversations with experts and reading and writing challenges so students can continue learning on their own at home. The use of Facebook Live through the Secretary of Education's Facebook group page has been also used to broadcast webinars, virtual classes and short educational videos.

(Out-of-) school nutrition

To continue the School Nutrition Programme on 25 March, the basic approach of the programme had to be modified, since the food distribution through schools ended up in crowd concentration and was inappropriate. First, families had to request the school meal by filling out an online form or by phone. This allowed one of two options: 1) delivery of a "basic food basket" to be cooked at home (for rural populations), equivalent to one meal a day for a month; 2) a food bonus of 50 000 Colombian pesos per home to be redeemed in 365 markets. In addition, the SED designed a guide for the families to consult on the web portal: How to maintain healthy nutrition at home.

Phase 3: Closing gaps (since 3 April)

Both the TV and the radio strategy were focused on reaching homes without Internet access. It became evident that this was not enough. Complaints from homes without any Internet connection spurred the third phase of the strategy: *Aprende en Casa Toca Tu Puerta* (Learning at Home Knocks on Your Door), which aims to support education continuity for the approximately 50 000 homes without Internet access.

Addressing the digital gap

One of the components of this strategy was a partnership with Claro, the telecommunications company. This has now been signed and is currently being implemented, which will provide Internet data access and mobile data for those homes. Another component is the procurement and donation of devices for students as well as the design and implementation in each education institution of a protocol that will support lending computers to students who need them.

In addition, the strategy includes the distribution of physical supplies, books, and pedagogical toys and games, as well as activity adaptations, thanks to donations and active agreements from the programme's partners. The education institutions' guides, workshops and activities provided by the teachers were printed by the SED and distributed to each house. Family welfare funds and Maloka Museum (a science museum in Bogota) distributed 2 000 scientific development kits.

To follow, evaluate and assess the *Aprende en Casa* strategy as a whole, there have been multiple meetings with principals, teachers, educators and experts to discuss and receive constant feedback. To complement that feedback, the Evaluation Office has produced two detailed reports along with the SED's Pedagogical Professional Fellowship strategy (*Profesionales de Acompañamiento Pedagógico*). Those professionals are in continual communication with teachers, directors and counsellors, which allows for permanent direct feedback from the educational institutions on their needs, challenges and successes. The mayor of Bogota's #Yomequedoencasa survey, completed on 23 April, also provided valuable insight to evaluate the city's perception of the AeC strategy.

Main problems addressed

The main challenges faced by the strategy were:

- a wide inequality gap in terms of Internet access and devices
- a lack of skills in the use of ITC and virtual education among educational institutions and teachers
- the absence of self-learning capacities among many students
- a breakdown in communication between parents and teachers
- nutrition, health and housing challenges for a majority of low-income families.

The constant evaluation, feedback and collaborative assessment of the implementation of the strategy; its challenges; the unexpected necessities; and the degree of the education community's overall engagement led to a continual transformation of the strategy to meet those necessities. The combination of online (Portal Web Red Académica, social media interactions, virtual classes, videos) and offline resources (radio, TV programmes, printed guides and books, WhatsApp communications) offered a broad spectrum of educational content. It was a key factor in guaranteeing education continuity.

Mobilising and developing resources

The strategy could rely on the Secretary of Education of Bogota's educational website "Portal Educativo RedAcadémica". Although it was restructured, it already had more than 600 educational resources. At the national level, the Ministry of Education's website "Colombia Aprende" was another available resource.

The AeC strategy had to develop new resources in accordance with the three different stages presented above:

1. First, it developed a flexible curriculum, mainly with digital resources, and made use of the already existing web portal "RedAcadémica", which was enhanced and restructured, primarily for teachers as an emergency response. The development of resources focused on continuing education and teacher-student communication. This phase also included the development of new ways to distribute school meals through the schools and by assigning bonus credits to be redeemed in local markets.
2. Second, as a new education dynamic that aimed to guide the entire education community and reorganise education in all of its management areas, the digital resources were designed or reorganised according to five groups of users: 1) teachers; 2) students; 3) guardians or parents; 4) principals; and 5) counsellors.
3. Third, to reach homes without Internet, new educational television and radio programmes for the family were designed and launched on national channels and radio stations.
4. Fourth, as an attempt to close gaps in Internet access by reaching all homes without an Internet connection or technological/computer devices, the distribution of physical education resources such as books, guides, games and activities, and the purchase, donation and lending of computer devices for students were organised.

Fostering effective use and learning

Beyond the continued provision of nutrition and the multimodal provision of educational content, Aprende en Casa supported the use of the educational resources by providing teachers with curricular flexibility and by facilitating communication between teachers, students and families.

- **Curricular flexibility.** Some of the public teachers have embraced curricular flexibility as an obligation to innovate and think of new ways of teaching. The design of inter- and transdisciplinary activities for skills development has become a well-received alternative to traditional methods. The traditional way of evaluating has also been transformed, with the “grade assignment” being replaced by valuing students’ desire to learn and effort to do so. Between the second and third phases of the strategy, there has been a significant improvement in the quality of teachers’ planning and use of educational resources. Teachers’ skills in using ICT in teaching (use of apps, of different virtual platforms) and in incorporating their students’ home reality into their teaching content have developed. Some have even become YouTubers. The printed guides designed by teachers have also improved and have combined the use of videos, workshops and challenges, and drew on TV and radio programmes as well as newspapers. Yet, it is still necessary to reinforce teachers’ training on ICT skills for a better and more effective use for teaching and learning.
- **Communication.** The strategy made the use of communication media and virtual platforms much easier. As a result, teachers significantly increased their use of such channels and communication with their students and their families is more intense than ever before. Public teachers have mainly used WhatsApp (64% against 45% for private teachers), email (62% vs. 60% for private teachers) and virtual classrooms (21% vs 46% for private teachers). In spite of the gap in the use of these different communication channels, this highlights a valuable effort to maintain student/family-teacher communication. WhatsApp has been the most used app, especially for students without Internet access or appropriate devices for other online platforms. Parents’ WhatsApp groups, classroom groups and teachers’ groups have allowed a constant flow of information. Despite the broad communication about Aprende en Casa, only 50% of the country’s public schools were aware of it and 25% of the private schools. Forty per cent of the students in public schools actually watch the educational programmes broadcast on national TV.

Implementation challenges

The implementation challenges encountered were:

- budget availability
- human resources for technological needs
- the connectivity gap
- logistics to distribute the resources and school meals
- taking into account the mandatory public health measures
- difficult dynamics in some homes (violence, abuse, lack of routines and healthy habits)
- communication challenges between students and teachers
- difficulties reaching vulnerable populations (migrants, victims, indigenous peoples, rural communities, people with disabilities).

The overall budget assigned to the SED had to be adjusted, since the Aprende en Casa strategy had to use resources that were destined to other projects, which meant a cut for the future execution of planned public policies. SED staff have been overworked for the past two months and the project surpassed their capacity (time- and skills-wise), so it has led the SED to partner with other public and private entities. Abusive and violent dynamics in some homes has made the SED re-evaluate what needs to be taught as a priority. This is a very valuable question that needs to be resolved, and implies that more focus is needed on instilling healthy habits and the development of social and emotional skills along with continuing to transform the traditional curriculum and teaching strategies.

The mobilisation to close the Internet access gap, bringing together public/private and civilian efforts, has been a great opportunity to prioritise with hopefully lasting positive effects.

Monitoring success

To follow, evaluate and assess the Aprende en Casa strategy as a whole, there have been multiple meetings with principals, teachers, pedagogues and experts to discuss and receive constant feedback. In addition, the Evaluation Office has elaborated two detailed reports along with the SED's Strategy of Pedagogical Professional Fellowship, which are in constant communication with the teachers, principals and counsellors of each educational institution, the mayor of Bogotá's #Yomequedoencasa survey completed on 23 April, and the 24-hour Mesas de Apoyo Técnico y Pedagógico (Support Offices for Aprende en Casa on technological and educational matters).

Success is measured based mainly on: the number of visits for each profile on the web portal; the average number of viewers for each webinar or live video; the number of books, guides, texts and activities delivered; the number of school meals and food bonuses delivered and redeemed; the number of support requests made to the Mesas de Apoyo Técnico y Pedagógico (support offices for the AeC) and the topics of those requests; the reports issued by the local education directors from each school; and teachers', principals' and students' feedback.

The strategy has undergone a thorough evaluation, which shows the engagement of the entire education community (30 April-15 May):

- The Portal Red Académica has had 11 532 367 visits, compared to 3 914 680 in 2019. The section Aprende en Casa has had 4 641 163 visits. The breakdown of visits according to profile and content is as follows: 28% students, 24% families, 37% teachers, 13% principals, 9% counsellors and 7% diversity (blind population content, ethnic and disability differentiated content).
- Certain schools' own web portals had 1.2 million visits.
- WhatsApp was used for 18 teacher videos (#EntreProfes) with 9 100 reproductions.
- Through the "Canal Capital" national TV channel, there has been 20 000 downloads of pedagogical guides of the streaming programmes, 10 000 users of these streams and 4 000 daily TV viewers on average.
- There have been 7 different radio programmes, with 5 000 reproductions via Facebook.
- "Aprende en Casa Toca Tu Puerta": The physical distribution, mainly for rural localities, of 1 839 education supplies kits and 3 200 pedagogical guides from 5 schools were delivered to 20 000 preschool and primary students.
- The partnership with Claro Telemovil provided 50 000 families with an Internet connection.
- A hundred phablets, 80 computers, 20 tablets and 350 devices for teachers were distributed and a protocol for borrowing school computers was implemented for 164 914 devices.

Support requests to the Mesas de Apoyo Técnico y Pedagógico (support offices for the AeC) have decreased significantly, which suggests there have been fewer inquiries and difficulties in education continuity while using the different resources.

Adaptability to new contexts

This solution is mainly appropriate for countries with Internet access gaps and deep socio-economic inequalities.

This strategy has been adapted and implemented in other Colombian cities. However, it is not scalable as a whole for rural areas. The television, radio and "Aprende en Casa Toca Tu Puerta" are the lines of work that can be replicated in even more complex contexts. (Enseña por Colombia has implemented a project for rural radio stations, based on a podcast called Aprende la Onda [available on Spotify], with satisfactory levels of engagement).

This initiative is meant to be sustained after the COVID crisis as it could be a transformative practice for education. On 9 May, the directors, experts and advisers of the SED had a one-day workshop on reinforcing the AeC strategy, projecting different possible scenarios. There is common agreement that the strategy provides new opportunities to finally engage families in their children's learning process, to practice co-responsibility in education (relieving the burden that the school has carried), to teach the proper use of ICTs and to close the Internet access gaps in Bogota and Colombia.

Box 12.1. Key points to keep in mind for a successful adaptation

1. Make a thorough diagnosis of the population's education community in order to determine:
 - a. The percentage of students' homes with Internet access or a mobile hotspot.
 - b. The percentage of students' homes with technological devices in good condition.
 - c. The percentage of diverse students (disability/minorities) and their particular needs.
 - d. The number of technological devices per home and per student.
 - e. Teachers' training and skills in the effective use of ICTs for teaching, engaging and evaluating.
 - f. Teachers' communication channels with the families.
 - g. The socio-economic gap of the educational population.
 - h. The governmental budget and capability for designing relevant resources for in-home education, and for developing, implementing and assessing action plans to mitigate health risks (including infrastructure adaptation, technological development, teacher training and student assessment).
2. Identify the existing resources and formulate a process that can be nurtured and materialised with what is available.
3. Gather all the key actors of the education community to collectively propose strategies and inspire them to assume the challenge as an opportunity to innovate and for creativity.
4. Avoid transferring the school experience to the student's home. Rather transform the home as a learning space in itself. This means a curricular flexibility that prioritises learning focused on the student's reality and context.
5. Identify all the communication channels used by the principals, teachers, counsellors, students and parents and reinforce them.
6. Secure the existing public and private alliances and negotiate new ones in order to cover the needs that overwhelm the local governments' resources.
7. Create a strategic team to monitor the strategy, its success and challenges.

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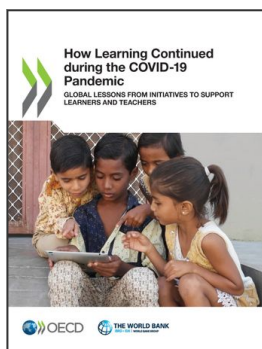
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Notes

¹ “Orientaciones de cuidado y protección de los estudiantes frente al Covid-19 a través de la estrategia ‘Aprende En Casa’”. And two days later on 17 March, Circular 006 2020: Lineamientos para la continuidad en la prestación del servicio educativo en la modalidad no presencial, en el marco de las orientaciones del cuidado y protección de los estudiantes frente al Covid-19.



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