

# 7 Brazil (São Paulo): São Paulo State Department of Education

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Type of intervention: governmental (with partnerships with private and non-profit organisations)

Website: <https://centrodemidiasp.educacao.sp.gov.br>

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## General description

The State of São Paulo has one of the largest school systems in Latin America, with 3.5 million students, 5 100 schools and 190 000 teachers. Despite the complexity related to its size and diversity, it was the first state in Brazil to implement consistent measures to respond to school closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Three features stand out in the measures taken by the State Department of Education (DE/SP): 1) agile planning; 2) mobilisation of key actors and funders; and 3) rapid implementation. In a period of 41 days (16 March to 27 April 2020), the DE/SP was able to put together effective measures to provide learning and social support to students and their families. What made this possible was the combination of strong leadership and the collaborative work of a dedicated executive team and a network of influential donors.

On 13 March, the State Governor announced general measures to flatten the contamination curve. For the DE/SP, this meant suspending school activities a few weeks after the beginning of the school year, which runs from February to December in Brazil. The Secretary of Education assembled a small group of advisers to design a strategic plan for education continuity.

There was a transition period until complete closure on 23 March, during which teachers, students and families received information about preventive healthcare and social support. After that date, and until 27 April, they were on early school vacation. To gain time in the planning process, the secretary negotiated two new decrees, approved by the State Education Council, which anticipated all students' and teachers' coming holidays for the year and thereby granted the DE/SP 30 days to plan for educational activities and education continuity.

Partnerships with companies and non-profit organisations were key to launching the strategic plan for education continuity, which included several activities, from the distribution of printed materials to free access to online platforms:

- **Nutrition and social support.** Public schools in São Paulo usually offer one free meal to all students on a daily basis. But during school closures, the DE/SP had to rethink its strategy and decided to target students living in extreme poverty. On 25 March, the DE/SP launched a social support programme called “Merenda em Casa” aimed at providing food to students from families in the lowest quintile of income distribution by transferring a cash allowance using a platform called PicPay. As of early May 2020, 732 000 students whose families are registered in the Cad Unico (national welfare database) receive the allowance. For students whose families do not receive Bolsa Família, a national cash transfer programme, the allowance is doubled by donations from Comunitas, a national non-profit organisation that promotes public-private partnerships.
- **Printed materials.** The DE/SP mobilised its team of K-12 curriculum experts to create educational kits that could be distributed to students, particularly early grade students. The kits contain textbooks, literature and guidelines for parents and caregivers on health and education. The DE/SP also enlisted the local police to help distribute the educational kits to students at home.
- **Online pedagogical resources.** On 3 April, the DE/SP announced the creation of the Education Media Centre (Centro de Mídias da Educação de São Paulo) to produce and broadcast educational content to all students in São Paulo. The media centre first produced an app which offers free access to several private online platforms for six months. The app is data-sponsored, meaning that students do not need to use their mobile data when using it. The DE/SP negotiated discounts and tax incentives with Internet providers to sponsor data packages for students.
- **TV content.** The Education Media Centre also produces and broadcasts educational content on open TV in partnership with TV Cultura, offering video classes exclusively on four channels. The aim of the partnership with TV Cultura was to ensure that the video classes were produced and broadcasted professionally. The DE/SP identified teachers with experience teaching on line, and invited them to produce and record the video classes. On 27 April, TV Cultura began broadcasting video classes to all students.

The Education Media Centre is now producing training programmes for teachers, and around 200 video classes per week covering all K-12 curriculum. Classes can be viewed on open TV and the Internet simultaneously, which allows for interactions between teachers and students. They are recorded and can be accessed at any time. The Education Media Centre will continue to operate throughout the school year to create new blended learning experiences for students and teachers.

One factor that allowed the São Paulo Education Media Centre to be set up quickly was the Secretary of Education's experience in leading an initiative in 2007 that broadcasted live classes on TV to small villages along the Amazon River, the Centro de Mídias de Amazonas.

## Main problems addressed

The plan addressed the following main problems:

- Vulnerability of low-income families regarding nutrition, health and housing conditions.

- Teachers' and students' lack of access to the Internet and to digital devices. In São Paulo, only 40% of students reported having computers at home, but 94% had access to a smartphone.
- Teachers', administrators' and students' lack of experience using technology for teaching and learning.

## Mobilising and developing resources

The DE/SP relied on pre-existing partnerships with civil society organisations to implement the education continuity strategy. Partnerships have been a tradition for the DE/SP since 2011, when the Pact Compromisso por São Paulo was established, bringing together different civil society sectors around a common agenda for improving public education in the state. Prior to the pandemic, foundations were already funding projects, such as the design of a proposal for a new teachers' career and professional evaluation, the use of technology for learning, and the transformation of selected schools into full-time schools (*escolas de tempo integral*). Non-profit partners continue to help fund the production of online educational content, free access to paid learning platforms and the hiring of education experts in learning assessments.

In addition, the state renegotiated pre-existing contracts with commercial suppliers, such as for school meals and transportation, in order to redirect financial resources towards sponsoring students' access to the Internet and the contract with the TV station in order to broadcast the media centre's video classes.

The DE/SP issued a public request for proposals asking for educational content, devices for teachers and students, and software, or any other product or service that contributed to education continuity from potential partners and donors. The public request is necessary according to federal law which regulates partnerships between companies and non-profit organisations with the government.

The DE/SP estimates that the value of all the donations received to implement its strategy for education continuity was approximately USD 40 million in services and products from foundations and companies, which corresponds to 0.6% of the total annual budget for public education in the state.

## Fostering effective use and learning

The initiative is carrying out a very proactive communication campaign on TV and social media to keep teachers, families and students engaged in learning activities.

The Secretary of Education holds daily online meetings with as many as 128 000 people, explaining the overall strategy and answering questions. The general message is "we cannot leave any student behind" and need to overcome obstacles as they arise.

Teachers are now creating virtual spaces for all of their classes in order to keep close contact with their students, answer questions about the content of the video classes and propose assignments.

## Implementation challenges

- The DE/SP did not have a robust technology infrastructure to host the Education Media Centre. It established a partnership with Amazon Web Service for free service for six months.
- Teachers were not prepared to teach on line: the Education Media Centre offers training courses on remote learning to all teachers.

- Some students were out of reach. The DE/SP established a task force to reach parents by phone or any other possible way, including home visits. The task force involved regional directors (the department has 91 across the state), school principals and teachers. Each teacher was trained to create a virtual classroom (using Google Classroom) and was requested to report if they could not communicate with a student via email. The school principals would then call the student's family to see how they could engage the student in learning activities and schedule the distribution of printed materials.

In 2019, the DE conducted a new registration process requiring updated contact information of every student and family. It also created Google email accounts for every student and teacher. That proved to be key in reaching out to members of such a large school system. However, some new teachers and students were not yet in the official database and completing the database was one of the logistical challenges.

## Monitoring success

In the first week of the Education Media Centre, more than 1.3 million students used the app or reported watching the classes on TV. During this time, teachers were expected to send questions and exercises to their students and check on their engagement.

Although the initiative uses multimodal strategies to provide learning (TV, app with free Internet, distribution of printed textbooks), the DE/SP expected to reach, two weeks after the start of the TV broadcast, around 80% of students.

Another marker of success is the number of partnerships established by the DE/SP, which mobilised more than USD 40 million in services and products, representing 0.6% of the annual budget.

## Adaptability to new contexts

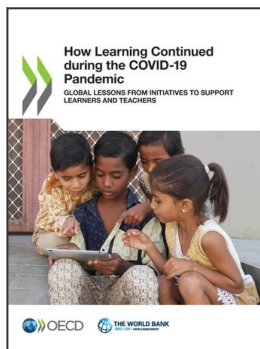
- This solution could be implemented in large and diverse school systems, located in regions with high levels of economic activity.
- The DE/SP method is already being replicated in other states in Brazil, such as Paraná. The Council of Secretaries of Education created a [webpage](#) to disseminate information about what different states are doing.
- Smaller states find it hard to negotiate partnerships with donors because they do not have the same scale and visibility as the state of São Paulo.
- The DE/SP is planning to continue to use the media centre after schools reopen to provide blended learning and broaden learning opportunities (in school and on line), and offer new courses to high school students. According to the Secretary of Education, the pandemic accelerated innovations that the DE/SP was already planning to implement.

**Box 7.1. Key points to keep in mind for a successful adaptation**

1. Strong political will and leadership is key to mobilise resources and achieve rapid implementation.
2. Developing partnerships with companies and non-profit organisations is strategic to avoid delays due to bureaucratic procedures.
3. To reach the maximum number of students and their families, school districts need to offer multimodal learning activities.
4. Establishing honest and frequent communication with all stakeholders (i.e. teachers, principals, administrators, students and families) is vital to support the technical and emotional demands of the rapid changes imposed by the pandemic.

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