

10 Colombia: Educational Alliance

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Type of intervention: non-governmental, public-private partnership
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General description

Alianza Educativa (AE) is a non-profit organisation established in 2000 by four leading private educational² institutions in Colombia to contribute to the transformation of education in the country, and in particular to close equity gaps in education. AE currently manages 11 charter schools in some of Bogotá's most vulnerable communities. Its 11 000 students face social and emotional risks such as poverty, violence, micro-trafficking and teenage pregnancy.

On 16 March 2020, the Colombian government announced that all schools would be closed as part of the efforts to contain the COVID-19 pandemic. In response, AE organised a comprehensive strategy for education continuity: "Learning from Home" (Aprender en Casa), a strategy to provide distance education services to its students within the guidelines of curricular flexibility set out by the Ministry of National Education.

With this strategy, AE not only responded to the technical challenges involved in ensuring educational continuity, but also focused on the adaptive challenges brought about by the new reality of teaching with physical distancing requirements, through capacity building and shifting mindsets and beliefs.

Main problems addressed

AE has faced several challenges of a technical nature, widely documented and shared by most public educational institutions, including:

- printing and distributing guides for academic work at home
- reaching students who do not have Internet
- technological and digital challenges for teachers
- difficulty in talking to students and families who are isolated.

Those challenges are hard to tackle, but since the solutions are technical, they simply require logistical organisation and financial resources to provide solutions that are known to address them.

In addition to working on those challenges, AE has addressed several adaptive challenges, for which there are no easy solutions, as they require changes in behaviour and mindset. They involve focusing on the development of capacities and skills beyond technical expertise: for example, setting up a new co-ordination mechanism for fast and effective decision making, finding new ways to organise work, rethinking the pedagogical model to learning from home, or transforming one's vision of the classroom.

Mobilising and developing resources

In a short period of time, AE set up the Learning at Home strategy, designed to respond flexibly to the context of each student. Using various resources, AE quickly addressed the technical challenges by deploying this strategy in three phases:

1. Phase 1. During the first four weeks, all students received printed academic workbooks and materials. They were also made available on the organisation's website. More than 500 teachers were mobilised to design and develop them. During this phase, a key objective was to contact all students and follow up on their emotional well-being.
2. Phase 2. From the fifth week onwards, the learning objectives became the main focus. Instruction advanced with a combination of individual student work activities and synchronous online sessions. Mechanisms for contacting and following up with students were improved, and evidence of academic work began to be collected to provide students with feedback (and to create a feedback loop for the programme). A team of AE psychologists also improved its support for students with high psychosocial and emotional risks.
3. Phase 3. From the seventh week on, additional adjustments were made. All schools benefited from the same learning management system to host the synchronous sessions and content, the multimedia material for asynchronous sessions, and the links for surveys and student reports. The study schedule included more time for socio-emotional learning, and new sessions were created with activities for students and families. The institutional evaluation system was also adjusted, reorganising academic periods and defining guidelines with different options to help students get back on track if, due to problems of access during quarantine, they could not study for some time.

Fostering effective use and learning

AE established an adaptive capacity to foster effective learning.

First, working groups of teachers, co-ordinators and principals were set up to encourage collaboration and ensure the quality of the academic materials.

Second, another group reviewed the pedagogical model so it could be adjusted to learning from home. For example, the role of interactions in the learning process, as well as the models for formative assessment and feedback to students were reviewed to make them more effective.

Third, a special group worked on adjusting the weekly schedules and time allocation for each subject. This was one of the biggest challenges, because it meant giving up significant academic time in basic areas such as mathematics, Spanish and science and opening up more space to support socio-emotional, family and well-being development.

Fourth, all teachers were given the freedom to try out different tools and strategies for creating content and for conducting synchronous and asynchronous sessions with students during the first few weeks. This was critical for encouraging large-scale innovation and for quickly finding the best ways to drive learning in these circumstances. Best practices were identified and mainstreamed to the other schools and teachers.

Fifth, the institutional evaluation system to assess student work was adjusted to take each student's specific situation into account. To this end, the evaluation criteria were made more flexible. Students who were unable to do their academic work or who did it unsatisfactorily have the possibility to make up for it when they return to in-person learning.

Implementation challenges

AE had to work on adaptive capabilities related to operation and management as well:

- **Centralised decision making.** A unified command post was created with all the management team and the principals of the 11 schools, who met initially daily, then twice a week, to follow up on indicators, review progress, identify problems and take decisions. This involved a new way of working in a co-ordinated manner. Albeit very time consuming, this was key to ensuring a rapid and consistent response across all schools.
- **Informed decision making.** Information was collected on a weekly basis from students, families and teachers. Surveys were designed to understand the behaviour of the different interest groups week by week, validate hypotheses underlying the strategy and identify problems almost in real time. For example, the results of these surveys led to the adjustment of time schedules, to the change of student reporting thanks to parents' feedback, and to decisions about virtual activities based on the percentage of students and teachers with limited connectivity.
- **Effective communication.** In a community with 11 000 students, 700 employees and many partners, good communication is essential to ensure that decisions are well understood and correctly implemented. To this end, new communication channels were created to share the daily and weekly decisions of the unified command post.

Monitoring success

In each phase, key performance indicators were monitored according to changing priorities. For example, during the first weeks, the emphasis was on indicators such as the number of students not contacted and the percentage of students without a computer or Internet access. The first stage of this strategy reduced the number of non-contacted students at high risk of dropping out of school from 400 to 8. This was achieved by activating networks of families, neighbours and community boards when teachers were unable to locate students.

In the second phase, each student's academic work was monitored, with weekly collection of data such as attendance of virtual sessions and delivery of academic work. Psychosocial follow-up was also strengthened to reinforce the accompaniment of students with emotional problems.

During the third phase, the focus on students with low academic performance and learning problems was strengthened, based on the assessments made by their teachers.

Adaptability to new contexts

Alianza Educativa's Learn at Home strategy responds to the challenges of ensuring education continuity for students in vulnerable contexts and with limited Internet access. The challenges are similar to those faced by many educational institutions in other parts of the world.

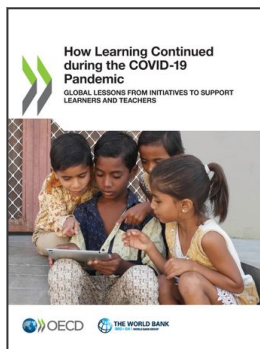
Technical solutions to these challenges include the development and printing of physical guides for students without Internet, access to synchronous and asynchronous sessions, and flexible and tailored assessment giving students the opportunity to progress at their own pace and according to their specific situation. This has been supported by teacher training and the activation of technological tools for online learning.

Nonetheless, the most complex part of the work related to the development of capacities to respond to the adaptive challenges, such as the fine-tuning of the pedagogical model in the new reality of remote and home learning, the way of working and communicating with the members of the community, and the redefinition of learning objectives given the new priorities and limitations.

This experience is scalable and replicable. Each institution needs to examine its own technical and adaptive challenges and design mechanisms to build capacities to overcome them.

Box 10.1. Key points to keep in mind for a successful adaptation

1. Designate a central control station or steering committee that meets periodically (at least once a week) to define priorities and next steps and take action.
2. Prioritise the learning objectives that students will be expected to achieve given the disruptions caused by the health crisis and the available resources and capabilities.
3. Provide guidelines for teachers to design the new learning materials and study worksheets that will help students achieve those objectives.
4. Organise schedules for both students and teachers, taking into consideration the necessary time to check in with every student, whether on line or by phone.
5. Select the virtual platforms to be used for online learning. It is important to take account of the opinions of students and teachers, as they will be the end users.
6. Create a mechanism of daily monitoring to keep track of students' attendance, academic progress, health and psychosocial risks, and emotional well-being.
7. Analyse data compiled by each school every week to identify challenges that need to be addressed by specific support teams (psychology, technology, etc.).
8. Develop a communications plan to provide families with tips and information on how to best support their children. Use different channels like the institutional web page, social media, email and text messages to ensure greater coverage.



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