

OPINION

Canada can play vital role in getting refugee children back into classrooms

By KEVIN FREY AND SCOTT WALTER JULY 28, 2020

Canada should spearhead a truly global and coordinated response to the education challenges posed by COVID-19 by convening a high-level event virtually during the United Nations General Assembly in September.



COVID-19 has created an unprecedented crisis in education. The pandemic has put [1.5 billion children](#) out of school. That's in addition to the [75 million children and youth who were already out of school](#) due to conflict and crisis. COVID-19 threatens hard-won global advances in access to quality education, and its effects will be especially severe for refugee and internally displaced children—especially girls—whose educational futures were already on hold. We cannot abandon them.

Canada is a global leader in education. Our government has made strong commitments to protect girls, refugees, and other marginalized children's right to an education. We cannot allow the pandemic to disrupt or delay those plans. Stronger school systems, better trained teachers, more learning materials, and greater inclusion of refugee and displaced students must be an integral part of both Canada's global COVID-19 response and our approach to improving education around the world.

As co-chairs of Canada's coalition of international educational organizations, we believe Canada has a unique role to play supporting education for the world's poorest and most marginalized children. We are calling on the Canadian government to support all children in their return to school. This includes fulfilling the commitments made by Prime Minister Justin Trudeau in 2019 to spend an additional \$150-million annually for three years to ensure that more refugee and displaced children get the quality education they need and deserve and to lead an international campaign in this regard. This commitment builds upon Canada's

leadership at the G7 meeting in Charlevoix, Que., [where donors pledged more than \\$4-billion for educating children living in crisis.](#)

In a speech at a [UN political forum on July 13](#), International Development Minister Karina Gould said, "every child deserves a quality education in an environment that is safe and inclusive—even in the midst of a pandemic." We cannot agree more strongly. We are calling on the Canadian government to play a leading role in the global "back to school better" movement by working with educational authorities, non-governmental organizations, and local schools, including in refugee-hosting countries. However, Canada's leadership role lies not only in providing funding, but also in sharing our educational expertise and methodology with the world.

Together, we can create a comprehensive, effective strategy that weds Canadian technical expertise and financial support with local knowledge and needs. We can continue children's education even while children are out of the classroom and prepare students to return as schools reopen in their country. These plans must support refugee, displaced, and otherwise excluded children who were not in school prior to the pandemic to return as well.

Evidence from other crises demonstrates that the longer children and youth are out of school, the more likely it is they will never return. This is especially true for girls. According to the UNHCR, families caught in conflicts spend an average of [26 years](#) displaced from home. This means children are spending their entire childhoods displaced, without access to an education or a pathway to a positive future.

The longer schools are closed, the greater the risk of exposure to child labour, early and forced marriage, adolescent pregnancy, sexual and gender-based violence, and other forms of exploitation. Pandemics exacerbate these already precarious situations.

Canada must support the education sector, including teachers, as they return to school, and work to improve the quality of education. Active, learner-centered methods including, for example, learning through play, cultivate students' creativity, critical thinking, social skills, and academic success, and are [increasingly recognized as a global best practice](#). These approaches reduce drop-out rates, engage students to learn and retain more of their lessons, and help students who have dropped out to return to school. Children empowered by these approaches are more resilient and are more able to resist abuses than their peers. Quality education promotes peace, economic prosperity, gender equality, and civic engagement.

The global demand for quality education that supports literacy, numeracy and 21st-century soft skills far outstrip our current capacity to train new teachers to deliver it. The increased strain on school systems in refugee-hosting countries makes the need for teacher training, relevant curricula, and resources such as books and low-tech distance learning materials even more urgent in these contexts. We need continued and increased support from the Canadian government to invest in teachers as the shortest and best route to improving and delivering the best quality of education.

As part of its strategic response to COVID-19, Canada should support the continuity of learning and expand access to quality education during the pandemic and beyond. Canada should spearhead a truly global and coordinated response to the education challenges posed by COVID-19 by convening a high-level event virtually during the United Nations General

Assembly in September. This could rally increased political and financial support to minimize disruption and ensure the continuity of education. A focus on refugee and displaced learners must be central to that effort.

COVID-19 poses one of the greatest educational crises of our lifetimes. But we are confident that with swift and decisive action by the Canadian government, it can become an opportunity to rebuild the world's educational systems to be stronger, more resilient, and more inclusive in ways that will benefit the world's most marginalized children.

<https://www.hilltimes.com/2020/07/28/canada-can-play-vital-role-in-getting-refugee-children-back-into-classrooms/258175>

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