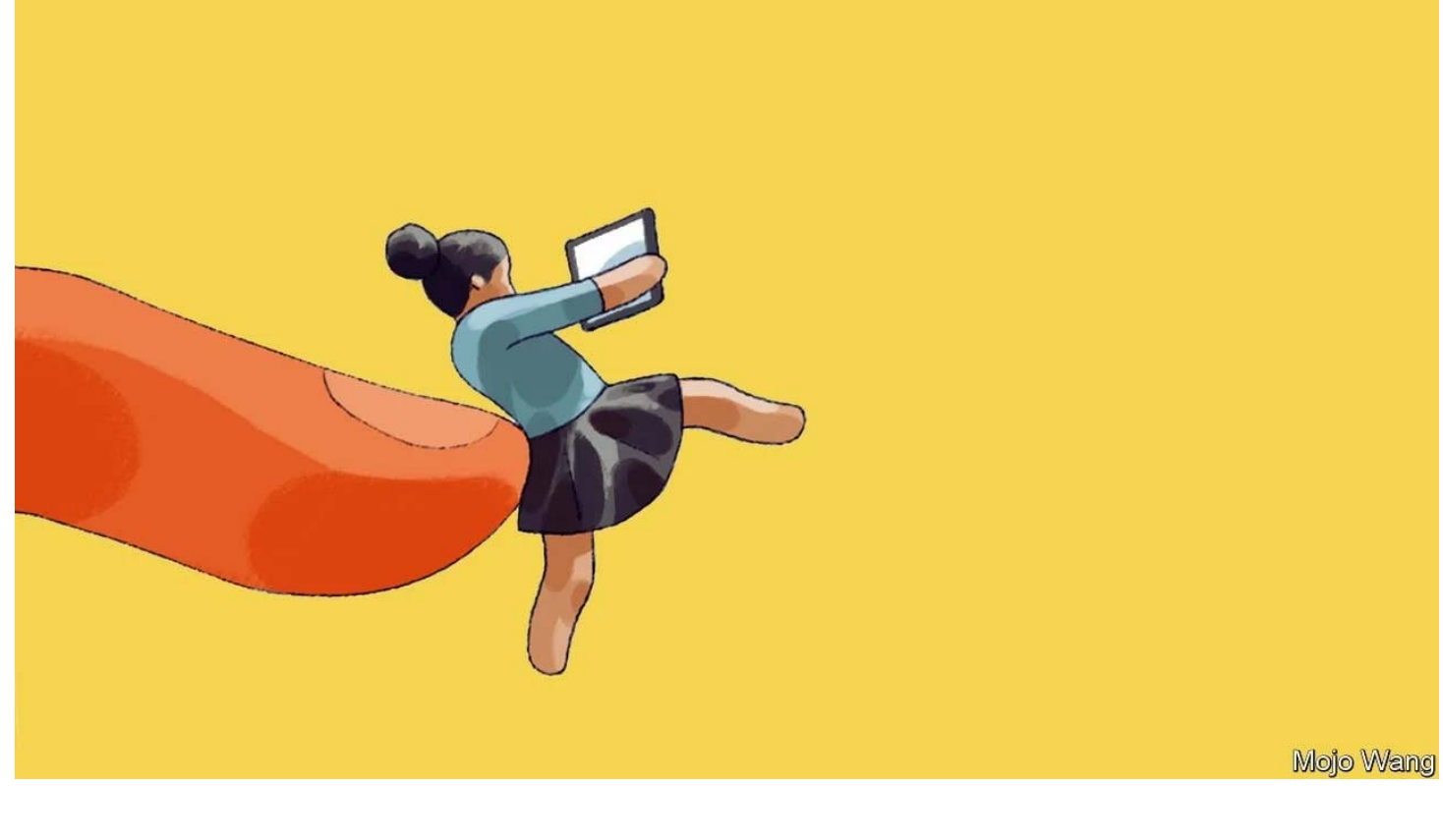


Must try harder

Closing the world's schools caused children great harm

They will need help to catch up on lost learning



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Covid-19 rarely makes children very ill. In the year to April the chance of an American aged 5-14 catching and dying from the virus was about one in 500,000 —roughly a tenth of a child's chance of dying in a traffic accident in normal times. Yet schools around the world have been wholly or partly closed for about two-thirds of an academic year because of the pandemic.

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The immense harm this has done to children's prospects might be justified if closing classrooms were one of the best ways of preventing lethal infections among adults. But few governments have weighed the costs and risks carefully. Many have kept schools shut even as bars and restaurants open, either to appease teachers' unions, whose members get paid whether they teach in person or not, or to placate nervous parents.

As a result, young brains are being starved of stimulation. Primary-school pupils in England are around three months behind where they normally would be; children in Ethiopia learned 60-70% less than usual during 2020. Even before the pandemic things were bad. More than half of ten-year-olds in low- and middle-income countries could not read a simple paragraph. The World Bank warns this could rise to almost two-thirds. In all countries school closures will widen the gap between better-off pupils (who have iPads and quiet bedrooms for remote learning) and worse-off ones (who often don't).

However, the disruption caused by covid-19 also creates a chance to [make schools better than they were before](#). So many pupils have so much ground to make up that educators are pondering the most effective ways to help them do so. Some rich countries are offering more tutoring for struggling students, individually or in small groups. Some poor countries are simplifying overstuffed curriculums, allowing teachers to deviate from government textbooks and spend more time teaching basic reading and maths. Such reforms seem to work.

The experience of remote schooling has given teachers a crash course in educational technology. In-person lessons could improve if teachers were properly trained and allowed to experiment. Software can help make classrooms more personalised, so children receive instruction that closely matches their abilities. And if teachers were free from humdrum tasks, including much of their marking, they would have extra time for the pupils who need the most help.

The pandemic has underlined how family background affects academic success. A full stomach, encouraging parents and a house with lots of books have always been an advantage. Conditions at home matter even more when that is where lessons take place. The past year has shown the need for social workers to help deprived pupils: making sure they get glasses so they can read what's on the screen, for example, or helping their parents with paperwork so that they are not evicted. Schools can offer mental-health counselling, too, and put pupils in touch with charities or agencies that help solve distracting domestic problems.

Alas, too few governments are doing even a bare minimum to make up for time lost. Only 2% of the money ploughed into covid-19 relief packages last year went to education. The un has found that by last autumn only a quarter of children had access to some kind of remedial programme. Children who failed to grasp important lessons during lockdowns may continue to fall behind. By one estimate, a child in a poor country who misses a year of school and does not receive the right help to catch up can eventually trail by almost three years.

Next year England plans to spend only a bit more to help pupils catch up than it did in a single month last summer subsidising families to eat out in restaurants. Lawmakers in America, where children have missed more in-person schooling than almost anywhere else in the rich world, have been more generous. But only 20% of the extra money they are giving to schools must be spent on catch-up learning. Much will be devoted to pointless "sanitation theatre"—including plastic dividers between desks, which may make it harder to see the blackboard or hear the teacher.

Two-thirds of poor countries have cut education spending. Money is not everything, but even in good times the poorest spend only \$48 a year for each schoolchild, which is not enough. (Rich countries spend \$8,500.) The un predicts that foreign aid for education will fall by 12% between 2018 and 2022.

Governments are often tempted to neglect education. Improving schools costs money, and may require confronting powerful interest groups, such as teachers' unions. The benefits may not come until after today's politicians have left office.

However, almost nothing matters more for a good life tomorrow than a good education today. At a minimum, governments should step up their efforts to repair the damage caused by school closures during the pandemic. It would be better still if they seized the opportunity to rewrite the rules for schools.

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