

**BRIEF OVERVIEW
OF THE ANALYTICAL REPORT**

**RESEARCH INTO THE LOCAL
SELF-GOVERNMENT BODIES
OVERCOMING THE CHALLENGES POSED
BY COVID-19 IN PROVIDING EDUCATIONAL
SERVICES IN THE MUNICIPALITIES**



This document presents a brief report overview of the research results on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on providing educational services at the level of municipalities and elucidates challenges before the municipalities and all participants of the education process in providing high-quality education to school-age children. The document also gives successful examples of overcoming the challenges and provides recommendations for improving the provision of education in blended and distance learning modes during the lockdown.

AUTHORS OF THE RESEARCH

Gulbarshyn Chepurko, Doctor of Sociology, Chairperson of the Department of Social Expertise at the Sociology Institute of the Academy of Science of Ukraine, Chief Expert at the Yuriy Saienko Social Expertise Center

Lidiya Hladchenko, Candidate of Economic Science, Associate Professor at the Department of Finance at Vadym Hetman Kyiv National Economics University, Chief Expert at NGO “Club of the Economists”

THE REPORT WAS PREPARED BY

Iryna Nahorna, Education Reform Advisor, U-LEAD with Europe

Oksana Pysana, editor

Tetyana Dytyna, translator

Bohdana Fomina, designer

This publication was produced with the assistance of the European Union and its Member States Germany, Sweden, Poland, Denmark, Estonia and Slovenia. The contents of this publication are the sole responsibility of the authors and can in no way be taken to reflect the opinions of the U-LEAD with Europe Program, the Government of Ukraine, the European Union and its Member States Germany, Sweden, Poland, Denmark, Estonia and Slovenia. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, translated, adapted, stored in a search engine or transferred in any form or by any means without the prior consent of the U-LEAD with Europe Program.

CONTENTS

SUMMARY	4
THE MAIN CONCLUSIONS	7
GOOD EXAMPLES OF ENSURING ACCESS TO EDUCATION IN THE MUNICIPALITY DURING COVID-19 RESTRICTIONS	19
RECOMMENDATIONS	22

SUMMARY

This document presents a brief report overview in English of the research results and its main purpose is to elucidate the process of organizing the education of school-age children in the conditions of lockdown measures and to provide recommendations for improving the provision of education in blended and distance learning modes. The full report in the Ukrainian language is available on the 'U-LEAD with Europe' programme's learning portal <https://u-learn.org.ua>.

The research regarding local self-government bodies' overcoming the challenges posed by COVID-19 in providing educational services in municipalities was conducted between December 2020 and April 2021. The main purpose of the research was to study the process of organizing education in the municipalities of villages and urban-type settlements in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, and to identify difficulties and best practices in responding to the challenges facing education authorities in municipalities.

Major objectives:

- analysis of the experience of municipalities and the best examples of the organization and provision of educational services, given the lockdown measures;
- analysis of the policy of the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine on the provision of distance and blended learning modes of study, as well as the implementation of the educational reform in the context of COVID-19;
- development of recommendations for ensuring the provision of quality educational services in municipalities, especially for the low-income population from remote settlements.

The fieldwork stage of the research was carried out from January to February 2021 in five regions of Ukraine, namely the oblasts of Vinnytsia, Dnipropetrovsk, Kherson, Chernihiv and Chernivtsi, and covered 22 raions and 54 settlements, which are part of 31 municipalities. A total of 150 respondents were surveyed.

The purpose of the research was achieved by means of the triangulation technique, which included: 1) desk research, 2) quantitative research (survey of four target groups), 3) qualitative research (in-depth interviews with key informants). Thus, the survey was conducted by means of a semi-structured interview of 150 respondents (30 municipality officials in charge of the educational sphere, 30 village headmen, 30 teachers and 60 parents) and five in-depth interviews with key informants –

representatives of the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine. Additionally, an analysis was carried out of the current legislation relating to distance and blended learning modes of study, as well as the implementation of the educational reform in the context of COVID-19, and presented were five examples of local self-government bodies' best practices in overcoming challenges posed by COVID-19 in providing educational services in municipalities which can later be made public. The application of the triangulation technique verified the obtained results.

The analysis of the opinions of municipalities' officials has allowed us to determine their assessments of educational institutions' level of provision in the context of the organization of education during the quarantine.

Difficulties arose with providing the students and teachers of the municipalities with computer equipment and Internet access, which are necessary for distance learning, and the use of both e-learning materials and educational platforms. Municipalities face problems with ensuring equal access to education for the children from families in adverse living conditions due to their lack of equipment and Internet access, as stated by 82 percent or 49 interviewed officials, as well as the children with special needs who are unable to receive educational services remotely, as indicated by 52 percent or 31 officials.

These results were confirmed in surveys of both teachers and parents. The most pressing problems facing teachers and parents during the organization of children's education during the lockdown period were as follows: **(1) poor quality of Internet and mobile communication, especially in remote villages; (2) absence or obsolescence of computer hardware and software in both schools and students' homes; (3) children's lack of skills to study independently.** Moreover, teachers particularly stressed the lack of responsibility and disregard for the educational issues on the part of parents, as well as the irregular working hours of teachers, their overload and the need to improve digital literacy. In addressing these issues, teachers sought help primarily from the management of their schools during the lockdown. At the same time, parents noted the lack of control over the completion of homework on the part of teachers.

The change in the mode of learning during the lockdown has affected the students' learning results: 50 percent of teachers and 70 percent of parents believe that, over the course of distance/ blended learning modes under the lockdown, the level of student's knowledge has decreased; 40 percent of teachers and fewer parents (28.3 percent) think it remains unchanged; and only 10 percent (or 3 teachers) and one parent reported an improvement in the pupils' level of knowledge.

The best practices of the municipalities are based on a combination of the authorities' leadership, teachers' initiative, parents' responsibility and their consolidated efforts. In particular, **the local authorities/ departments of education** dealt with the problems relating to the availability and quality of Internet access and mobile communication, tried

to improve the educational process participants' access to gadgets, helped families in adverse living conditions and provided information and advisory service; teachers sought new approaches to work while taking into consideration the characteristics of rural areas, acquired new skills and learned to work remotely, improved their qualifications and widely used individual approaches for supporting those students who were unable to study remotely; parents purchased gadgets for distance learning, assisted their children in studies when possible, supported children from other families and learned to communicate remotely. Local businesses, sponsors and volunteers joined in, too.

The results of the research have proved that the successful organization of the educational process during the lockdown depends on high interaction among all the participants of the educational process, technical equipment provision and, most importantly, the educators' skills relating to the modern information and digital technologies.

Thus, the observance of rights in connection with education under such circumstances requires systemic changes in approaches to revamp the education. The results of the research show that local self-government bodies, along with the authorities, must facilitate the search for effective ways of ensuring the provision of quality educational services in municipalities, especially for the remote settlements and low-income populations, as well as the increase of the effectiveness of the education system, and must also take into account the results of successful and unsuccessful practices in reforming the educational sphere, initiate change and prepare for joint decision making.

THE MAIN CONCLUSIONS

Based on the results of the survey of municipality officials, teachers, parents, representatives of the Ministry of Education and Science concerning local self-government bodies' overcoming challenges posed by Covid-19 in providing educational services in municipalities.

Based on the results of the survey of municipality officials regarding local self-government bodies' overcoming educational problems that arose due to COVID-19

1. The examination of the opinions of municipalities' officials has allowed us to determine their assessments of educational institutions' level of provision in the context of the organization of education during the lockdown. Difficulties arose with providing the students and teachers of the municipalities with computer equipment and Internet access, which are necessary for distance learning, and the use of both e-learning materials and educational platforms. 53 and 55 percent of the respondents respectively stated that "all or most of" the teachers had computer equipment and Internet access. As for the students, the option "all or most of" was chosen by 13 (computer equipment) and 22 percent (Internet access) of the surveyed officials. The higher rate assessments of the availability of Internet access, as compared to the availability of computer equipment, are due to the fact that students were using the technical equipment of their relatives, neighbors, as well as other students.

2. Challenges arose with ensuring equal access to education for the children from families in adverse living conditions due to their lack of equipment and Internet access, as stated by 82 percent or 49 interviewed officials, as well as the children with special needs who are unable to receive educational services remotely, as indicated by 52 percent or 31 officials. In order to overcome them, the municipalities are provided with assistance in the form of financial support, patronage and individual approach to students in adverse living conditions on the part of teachers.

3. At the municipality level, the major difficulties in the organization of education during the lockdown were related to equipment issues, such as students' provision with computer equipment and Internet access. At the same time, among common problems are the insufficient skills of students to study independently and therefore the need for assistance in the primary school students' studies, as well as the insufficient time that parents spend on their children's education and the low level of parents' responsibility for their children's learning.

Measures undertaken in the municipalities in order to overcome educational issues:

- in the educational process: the provision of tasks in paper form; the use of telephone communication not solely for ordinary communication, but also to provide students with learning tasks; the use of one gadget by several students.
- in the educational management, on the part of the representatives of local self-government bodies: change of the Internet service provider; provision of schools with gadgets according to the opportunities available; financial assistance to individual families, including the provision/ purchase of gadgets.

4. According to officials' assessments, the key barriers to effective problem-solving regarding the organization of education are: (1) municipalities' lack of Internet providers which could guarantee a sustainable and high-quality mobile network coverage and Internet access, especially in remote villages where providers of these services find the work unprofitable; (2) the insufficiency of financial support at all levels: municipality, school and family. An important problem of distance learning is the students' overload and the violation of sanitary and epidemiological standards of working on a computer. Moreover, there has been an obvious overload of teachers due to additional workload: adopting new approaches to work, mastering technology, designing classes in a new mode, finding new instructional materials, visiting students regularly, etc., which all require additional school staff. At present, the municipalities cannot deal with all of these issues on their own.

5. Local self-government bodies provided support to educational institutions both in organizing education and improving their material and technical support, as stated by 52 percent or 31 respondents. Out of them, 68 percent or 21 officials indicated that the support was provided in the form of advisory service, 48 percent or 15 people reported the organization of teacher training/ retraining aimed at improving their professional skills in accordance with the new requirements, and 26 percent or 8 people out of the respondents similarly reported the provision of financial, as well as material support to educational institutions. The municipalities mainly offered information and advisory service, established control on the part of the village mayors, paid for postal services, improved the quality of the Internet, or arranged for its provision, and provided computer equipment to individual teachers and students. Importantly, the support was offered

not solely by local budgets and departments of education, but also by local businesses, sponsors and parents of children from privileged families. The improvement of teachers' qualifications was often done by them independently.

6. Face-to-face, distance and blended learning modes of study were used in the organization of education during the lockdown. However, the blended learning mode, as noted by 63 percent or 38 representatives of the local authorities, had an absolute advantage. To facilitate the provision of learning in face-to-face classes, first and foremost, personal protective equipment was purchased, some classes were held outdoors, and other subjects were taught remotely. The training in distance learning mode was carried out in online classes via video conferencing, by means of students' use of educational platforms, as well as through the active use of messenger apps and social networks. As shown by the survey, the students were largely provided with tasks over the phone and through messenger apps.

7. The survey showed that communication between the school/ municipality's management and parents was principally facilitated by the following methods: through classroom teachers, by publishing information on the school/ municipality website and through interaction in social media and group chats in messenger apps. As stated by 73 percent or 44 officials, classroom teachers play a key role in the communication. Besides, 53 percent or 32 officials reported that the local administration website had been updated to ensure communication with the consideration of lockdown requirements.

8. Local authorities' representatives who participated in the sociological survey highlighted some successful, in their opinion, examples of solving problems concerning the organization of children's education during the lockdown in their municipalities. The systematization of these examples suggests that **the best practices of the municipalities are based on a combination of the authorities' leadership, teachers' initiative, parents' responsibility and their consolidated efforts.**

In particular, the **local authorities/ departments of education** dealt with the problems relating to the availability and quality of Internet access and mobile communication, tried to improve the educational process participants' provision of gadgets, helped families in adverse living conditions and provided information and advisory service; **teachers** sought new approaches to work while taking into consideration the characteristics of rural areas, acquired new skills and learned to work remotely, improved their qualifications and widely used individual approaches for supporting students who were unable to study remotely; **parents** purchased gadgets for distance learning, assisted their children in studies when possible, supported children from other families and learned to communicate remotely. Local businesses, sponsors and volunteers joined in, too.

Based on the results of **teacher survey** on the education of school-age children during the pandemic

1. During the lockdown, all modes of study were used in the municipalities, but the blended learning mode prevailed, being reported by 67 percent or 20 teachers. At the same time, holding distance learning classes at their schools was reported by 97 percent of the respondents or 29 people.

2. To ensure the safety of face-to-face study in the municipalities, personal protective equipment was purchased, some classes were held by teachers outdoors, and besides that, other subjects were taught remotely.

Over the course of distance learning, the Internet played a key role in the educational communication: 90 percent of teachers or 26 people used email and messenger apps to provide students with tasks; synchronous online classes via video conferencing or messenger apps were held by 66 and 69 percent of teachers respectively. Importantly, though, 55 percent of teachers were also forced to assign learning tasks over the phone, pass them directly to the students' parents (48 percent of teachers), to the students themselves (31 percent of the answers), or otherwise.

3. The possibility of using distance learning mode and its effectiveness depend on the availability of the computer equipment of satisfactory quality and access to a stable Internet connection. The results of the survey showed that 83 percent or 25 teachers had both a computer and a smartphone. Also, 90 percent of teachers paid for Internet access themselves and purchased electronic devices for use in the educational process. Therefore, the technical equipment provision of the work of 90 percent of teachers was at their own expense.

According to 53 percent of teachers (or 16 people), their students have both a computer and a smartphone; and 13 percent of teachers believe that their students do not have such devices at all. Also, 77 percent of the respondents noted that students' gadgets and Internet access were paid by their parents. Thus, in the course of distance learning during the lockdown, not all of the students in municipalities have equal opportunities to be educated due to their lack of computer equipment, other gadgets and Internet access.

To provide students with learning assignments and receive their completed homework, teachers primarily used email and messenger apps, and also did it through online communication. However, it should be pointed out that 63 percent of the respondents stated that the assignments' review took place in the course of communication with students over the phone.

4. The change in the mode of learning during the lockdown has affected the students' learning results: 50 percent or 15 teachers believe that, over the course of the use of distance/ blended learning modes during the lockdown, the level of knowledge in

students has decreased, while slightly less than a half (40 percent or 12 teachers) think it remains unchanged, and only 10 percent (or 3 teachers) reported an improvement in the students' level of knowledge.

5. The most pressing problems facing teachers during the organization of children's education during the lockdown period were as follows: (1) poor quality Internet and mobile communication, especially in remote villages; (2) the absence or obsolescence of computer hardware and software in both schools and students; (3) children's lack of skills to study independently.

Thus, the key difficulties in the educational process were related to the technical equipment provision and students' skills to work independently and self-organization. Furthermore, the respondents particularly stressed the lack of responsibility and disregard for the educational issues on the part of parents, as well as the irregular working hours of teachers, their overload and the need to improve their digital literacy. In addressing these issues, teachers sought help primarily from the management of their schools during the lockdown.

6. To overcome the problems relating to the organization of education, the teachers have highlighted the following basic recommendations:

- regarding technical aspects: the need for the authorities to solve the issue of teachers and students' access to quality Internet and provide them with quality electronic devices for education, as well as the need to help families in adverse living conditions with regard to technological devices, the Internet and child care and nutrition;
- concerning educational process: increase school funding, provide access to quality educational platforms, develop/ adapt methodologies related to distance learning, improve teachers' digital literacy, foster students' skills of self-study and the use of computer and educational platforms;
- regarding students' parents: specific work must be carried out to ensure that parents supervise their children, pay sufficient attention to their education and arrange for the proper technical equipment, as well as to increase parents' computer literacy.

7. The teachers taking part in the survey listed some successful, in their opinion, examples of solving problems concerning the organization of children's education during the lockdown in their municipalities. Among the main ones are:

- the improvement of technical equipment provision (allocation of funds for connecting to the Internet, purchase of laptops, Internet access for the families in adverse living conditions);
- enhancing the educational process (motivating students to work independently and complete their tasks properly and in time; teachers' individual approach to families

who are unable to arrange for their children's distance learning; independent qualification improvement and selection of effective online learning methods; creating one's own domain and using online learning platforms);

- establishing effective communication with parents to support their children's education.

Based on the results of parent survey on the education of children during the pandemic

The lockdown and the system of distance learning have exacerbated all the problems of which mostly only teachers and the administration were aware. Today parents are aware of them as well.

1. According to the survey results based on the answers of the majority that is 56.7 percent or 34 parents, children continued to study during the lockdown, and the blended format of studying (partially attending school, partially learning remotely) was usually applied in towns and villages in question. 36.7 percent or 22 respondents mentioned about using the technology of distance learning, while merely 6.7 percent or 4 parents claimed about traditional classroom studying during the whole week or several days a week.

2. Forced transition to blended/ distance learning modes caused organizational, educational, psycho-emotional and technical problems of providing quality education. The most urgent challenges parents have faced when organizing the educational process during the lockdown are: full absence or obsolescence of computer equipment and software – 48.3 percent (or 29 persons), children's incapability to study independently – 48.3 percent (or 29 persons), poor Internet and/ or mobile connection – 46.7 percent (or 28 persons), insufficient control on homework 23.3 percent (14 persons). A smaller percentage of the surveyed that is 21.7 percent (13 persons) mentioned about the insufficient level of ICT (Information and Communications Technologies) usage, and only 6.7 percent of parents (or 4 persons) emphasized that there is absolutely no homework control.

3. One of the crucial problems was the fact that parents, particularly those who are not educated enough or do not have enough resources, were not prepared for such a change in the education system. It was usually the parents, especially mothers, who organized the educational process for students by explaining current study materials. At the same time, the parents who continued working had to leave their kids alone. And this affected homeschooling and let children go unsupervised whereas before the lockdown they were supervised by teachers.

4. Most teachers receive feedback from students and communicate with them to check completed tasks: they keep contact with children via messengers and phone. Students may also send their homework via email or Viber, or hand it in during a personal meeting. According to the survey results sending homework via email or Viber has been the most popular way of checking the tasks, as a majority of the respondents (86.7 percent or 52 persons) claimed. Besides, most parents mentioned about other ways teachers used, for instance, online-communication with a teacher (65 percent or 39 persons) and phone conversations (60 percent or 36 persons). Almost half the number of the participants (35 percent or 21) pointed to the way of communication with a teacher personally. Simultaneously, a few parents stated that students forwarded their homework through social services, mail, or with the help of workers of other public organizations/ institutions – 5 percent (or 3) and 3.3 percent (or 2 persons) mentioned that children brought the completed tasks to schools. No one stated that it was not marked or that the children did not report on their homework.

5. Most surveyed parents (80 percent or 48) think that during the lockdown a key method of students' knowledge assessment was written tests. Written modules (65 percent or 39) is in second place, and oral tests (58.3 percent or 35) in third place. Teachers gave slightly different answers (83 percent; 63.3 percent; 66.7 percent accordingly), although written tests were a priority. There were also such cases when teachers did not assess the students who receive inclusive education.

6. The lockdown and distance learning took a heavy toll on poor families in which children were provided with free meals at school, and if they stayed at home during the distance learning it caused additional financial burden for their parents.

7. From the parents' point of view deterioration in the level of knowledge occurred among the students who study in schools in the surveyed settlements and rural municipalities. According to the majority (70 percent or 42) of the parents surveyed, the level of knowledge of students has deteriorated. 28.3 percent (or 17 persons) believe that it has remained unchanged. Only one parent said it has improved. Teachers and parents' main efforts were focused not on ensuring the quality of education, but on overcoming organizational, technical, educational, psycho-emotional difficulties so that students had access to distance learning during the lockdown.

8. 21.7 percent (or 13) of the parents interviewed asked for help in organizing the education in the lockdown period. The main issues which parents of school-age children addressed to various representatives of the educational system (school administration, teachers, classroom teachers) are primarily the issue of technical support for learning: lack of access to the Internet; lack of equipment (computers, smartphones). Secondly, it is an inability to leave a child at home during the period of distance learning. And thirdly, the children's lack of skills to use a computer, smartphone and parents' lack of skills to use a computer, smartphone.

9. Best practices in the organization of children's education during the lockdown can

be categorized in five groups: those implemented by parents themselves (computer, smartphone, teaming up with other parents to gain knowledge about curricula, etc.); by teachers (learning to use gadgets, forwarding printed homework, assistance in learning, etc.); by neighbors (assistance in the installation and use of educational applications, assistance in monitoring children's education, etc.); by children (older children helped in the education of the younger ones, monitored them) and by local self-government bodies (replacing old wires, wireless Internet connection).

Parents' main recommendations for the educational process stakeholders on how to improve the quality of education and organize the educational process during the lockdown are the following:

- for the municipality authorities: to discover problems municipality's residents deal with; to hold records concerning families in adverse living conditions to support them; to renew the logistics of educational institutions; to improve communication with the school administration, teachers, schoolchildren's parents; to make education accessible to all children.
- for the school administration: to maximize teacher support, to provide them with powerful computers and high-speed Internet; to provide children with appropriate computer equipment; to encourage children to study; to organize a clear schedule of classes;
- for teachers: to explain the material in a more understandable way; to teach children to be independent and responsible, to take into account needs of all students; to reduce the burden on students during the lockdown.
- for other parents: not to hush up problems and to contact the school administration; to teach children to self-organize during distance learning; to help teachers teach children and be more patient; to team up with other parents and find solutions to problems; to help a child organize the educational process, make a schedule and control the learning process.

As we can observe, most schools, teachers, parents in settlements and rural municipalities adapted to the lockdown and found different options for children to continue their education. Therefore, the effectiveness of such education depends on the joint efforts of teachers, parents and students, and also the material conditions of families. After all, when organizing distance learning, the teacher should take into account availability of students' equipment for learning and good Internet connection. Accordingly, teachers should be provided with equipment and the Internet as well. The organization

and effectiveness of home schooling depends on parents. After all, it is important to have a separate room for taking classes and computer equipment for learning, teachers and parents' support in case of difficulties etc.

Thus, the results of the survey proved that the effectiveness of the educational process organization in the conditions of the lockdown depends on the active interaction of all educational process representatives, technical capabilities and, above all, teachers' awareness of modern information and digital technologies.

During the lockdown local authorities responded to requests from parents and teachers in addressing the problems in the organization of children's education:

- with the help of the municipality funds Internet connection was provided and covered, as well as the necessary equipment for its operation was established, laptops and smartphones were purchased;
- local governments activated the work of mobile and Internet providers to ensure quality services for their municipalities;
- constant communication, clarification and coordination among class teachers, parents and students on learning issues were organized;
- special mailboxes were set up to support families who did not have access to the Internet where they could leave homework, assignments could be sent by mail, and some advice on homework could be given via phone;
- additional meals were provided to children from families in adverse living conditions during the lockdown;
- sponsorship was provided in order to solve the education issues teachers and parents addressed with.

According to the in-depth interviews with representatives of the Ministry of Education and Science on distance and blended learning modes, as well as the implementation of the education reform, taking into account the situation with COVID-19

1. The process of establishing municipality education management is ongoing, so the cooperation of the Ministry of Education and Science with local community education authorities today, according to the experts themselves, is fragmentary.

2. The areas of responsibility of the parties in education (the Ministry of Education, local self-government bodies, principals/ owners of schools, etc.) may partially overlap.

3. There are difficulties with clear understanding who is responsible for which direction and to what extent in the Ministry of Education and Science and other state organizations (Ukrainian Institute for Educational Development, Institute for Modernization of Educational Content, State Education Quality Service of Ukraine). Methodological assistance from the Ministry of Education and Science and other state structures is provided, although belatedly, and the decision not only on material support, but also on the organization of education is fully entrusted to school principals and local authorities. At the same time, the experts' choice of urgent schooling problems in the territorial municipalities and the most pressing areas of education improvement during the quarantine are indicative – at the beginning of the survey experts almost unanimously recognized the most important organizational and communication problems, and, as a result, most of them preferred the issue of updating the logistics base as the most important direction for improving education during the lockdown.

4. Unfortunately, no case of successful cooperation between the Ministry of Education and local municipalities (step-by-step instructions, a presentation with clear examples would be very useful for many municipalities that are in the process of forming) has been demonstrated.

5. Based on the experts' response to the proposed questions, it can be concluded that there are difficulties in forming a general and balanced concept in the light of the trends in the spread of coronavirus COVID-19. At the moment there are isolated/ individual reactions to certain effects of the coronavirus, in particular regulations: "Regarding the Organized End of the 2019/2020 School Year and Enrollment in General Education Institutions," "Policy on the Remote Mode of Receiving a Complete General Secondary Education," The guidelines "Organization of Distance Learning in Schools" and others.

The pandemic was a catalyst that accelerated the digitization of Ukrainian society, for example, "online" communication, remote work, the need for massive changes in educational practices, etc., and led to the inevitability of the introduction of information technology in almost all spheres of life.

Most recommendations introduced by the Ministry of Education referred to sanitary standards and compliance with the conditions established by quarantine zones, which are based on the General Sanitary Doctor's Regulation "On the Approval of Anti-Epidemic Measures in Educational Institutions for the Period of Lockdown in Connection with the Spread of the COVID-19"¹ before the start of the new school year. The Ministry of Education did not introduce methodological recommendations, and placed responsibility for the organization and form of distance learning on the pedagogical council of each school. At the same time, the authorities of many countries implemented such initiatives and online resources for distance education between March and June 2020².

It is difficult to list all the problems that teachers have faced in the organization of distance learning. The results of the surveys of municipality officials, teachers and parents have demonstrated a list of the main problems associated with transition to distance or blended learning, these are: difficulties with the logistical support of schools – low speed of Internet connection or lack of the internet; lack of a standardized online platform for distance learning; lack of modern mobile devices, computers and other gadgets to organize and conduct classes, etc.; difficulties in organizational and technical issues of establishing the educational process – online broadcasting and communication through various platforms; overtime working hours of teachers, etc.; difficulties with psychological, pedagogical and methodological support – lack of experience in such training, both for teachers and students; lack of knowledge in the field of information and communication technologies (ICT) for both teachers and parents, etc.

Among the positive effects of online education in 2020 is the training (in many families – forced) of information and communication competence. This will help bridge the digital divide between generations – many older people (and even the proportion of middle-aged people) are not aware of how to use computers, laptops and tablets. A significant number of people, who have not known enough electronic gadgets until recently, are extremely skeptical about the idea of buying goods and services over the Internet, paying for utilities, using online services of the Pension Fund, etc. However, the quality of the Internet in all territories of the country is not the same, there are still many settlements where the Internet connection is absent or unstable, even if the household is provided with a computer or smartphone.

1 On approval of anti-epidemic measures in educational institutions for the period of the quarantine due to the spread of coronavirus disease (COVID-19) [Electronic resource] // The Ministry of Health of Ukraine : [official web portal]. Access Mode: www.moz.gov.ua/uploads/ckeditor.pdf

2How countries are using edtech (including online learning, radio, television, texting) to support access to remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic [Electronic resource] // THE WORLD BANK: [official web portal]. – Access Mode: How countries are using edtech (including online learning, radio, television, texting) to support access to remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic [Electronic resource] // THE WORLD BANK: [official web portal]. – Access Mode: <https://www.worldbank.org/en>.

GOOD EXAMPLES OF ENSURING ACCESS TO EDUCATION IN THE MUNICIPALITY DURING COVID-19 RESTRICTIONS

One of the research objectives was the identification of the best samples of the educational services organization and provision during the lockdown measures in the municipalities. The public authorities/ officials of the municipality who participated in the sociological survey singled out what they thought were successful examples of solving the problems regarding the organization of children's education during lockdown in their municipalities. The systematization of these examples suggests that successful municipality practices are based on the combination of the authorities' leadership, teacher initiative, parental responsibility, and the consolidation of their joint efforts. Specifically, local authorities/ departments of education addressed the issue of the availability and quality of the Internet and mobile communications, tried to improve the provision of gadgets to participants of the educational process, helped families in adverse living conditions, provided information and counseling services; teachers sought their approaches to work taking into account the characteristics of the rural areas, acquired new skills and learned to work remotely, improved their skills, widely used an individual approach to support students who did not have the opportunity to study remotely; parents bought gadgets for distance learning, supported children from other families, learned to communicate remotely. The examples of successful practices of ensuring children's education in the municipality during COVID-19 are given below.

1. Vinnytsia Oblast, Mohyliv-Podilskyi Raion, the village of Murovani Kurylivtsi, Murovani Kurylivtsi Municipality. Municipality Department of Education at the formative stage.

TEACHERS' INITIATIVE

During the lockdown and introduction of distance learning, Murovani Kurylivtsi Municipality faced problems inherent in virtually all municipalities in rural areas of Ukraine, that is, lack of quality Internet and devices for all students needed for distance

learning. To ensure the educational process during lockdown in educational institutions, municipalities began to actively use the possibilities of remote work and finding ways to solve existing problems. Thus, through efforts of the Department of Education of the Municipality which is at its formative stage, and support of the district administration and school management the educational institutions' websites operate, where all the necessary information is posted, there is a Facebook page, video conferencing is used for teaching, messengers etc. Early in the introduction of distance learning, due to the absence of a single platform for its conduction, a computer science teacher from one of the schools of the municipality developed a separate platform using Microsoft Office 365. All schools in the municipality gained access to the platform. Before it launched, an online course was conducted for all teachers to get acquainted with the possibilities of the platform and its step-by-step use. It empowered all teachers and students to have free access to distance learning and improved its quality.

As a result of the single platform supplement, telephone communication to give assignments to students was minimized. Children who did not have their own gadgets teamed up with neighbors to gain access to education. Thus, there was almost no problem of access to educational services for children with special needs in the municipality during lockdown.

2.Dnipropetrovsk Oblast, Novomoskovsk Raion, the village of Hubynykha, Hubynykha Municipality. Municipality educational institutions are subordinated to the raion state administration (at the moment of survey).

INITIATIVE OF THE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION OF THE RAION STATE ADMINISTRATION

Distance learning was introduced during lockdown. The municipality faced a lack of technical support for students, especially as about a half of the families with school-aged children are in adverse living conditions. As no additional funding was provided for the purchase of gadgets for teachers and students, they had to rely heavily on the telephone communication between teachers and parents. The school management, represented by the principal and teachers of the respective classes, printed out the teaching materials and passed them on to the students' parents. By prior arrangement, parents collected materials from teachers during personal meetings in line with all lockdown requirements. At the same time, teachers were constantly in touch with parents and had the opportunity to provide counseling or explanations about materials for students via the parents' phones.

3. Kherson Oblast, Skadovsk Raion, the village of Kalanchak, Kalanchak Municipality.

Municipality Department of Education

MUNICIPALITY AND TEACHERS' INITIATIVE

With the beginning of the lockdown and introduction of distance learning, there were problems in the municipality due to the absence of access to quality Internet and the insufficient number of the necessary gadgets for teachers and students.

Since the beginning of distance learning, due to the deficiency of gadgets and the Internet in some families, the municipality administration has gathered information about such needs and started looking for ways to solve this problem. To continue the education process of children in such families, teachers printed materials with tasks for children and passed them on to students, mainly through parents during personal meetings. After the children completed their tasks, the parents handed over the completed work to teachers. Individual lesson plans for children in adverse living conditions were also developed, classes took place in the form of personal meetings of children with teachers in line with all lockdown requirements. It was during such meetings that children in adverse living conditions could ask teachers questions about the materials and get additional explanations of the learning material.

In addition, teachers held individual consultations for those parents who did not have the skills to use Zoom online service, which was used for both classes and teacher-parent meetings. After additional parental consultancy, this problem was solved. Later, according to teachers, the issue of deficiency of gadgets was partially solved when children were able to alternately use the devices available in schools.

4. Chernihiv Oblast, Pryluky Raion, Varva Municipality, the village of Varva.

Municipality Department of Education

TEACHERS' INITIATIVE

Many families in the municipality, especially those in adverse living conditions didn't have gadgets and access to the Internet during distance learning. To ensure access to education, teachers developed individual lesson plans for such children, and visited families on a scheduled basis to explain the materials, give homework, and check completed homework. At the same time, teachers were always in touch with parents by phone and provided consultation if necessary. During off-line mode of study, all teachers and students were provided with individual protective equipment and kept social distance.

To solve the problem of the deficiency of the Internet and gadgets, the municipality management turned to the local deputies to allocate funding for education needs and quality Internet ensuring. Furthermore, a voluntary action Gift An Extra Smartphone To A Student In Need was initiated in the municipality. For their achievements in education, benefactors (the management of the enterprises located on the premises of the municipality) donated smartphones to students.

5. Chernivtsi Oblast, Dniester Raion, the village of Kelmentsi, Kelmentsi Municipality.

Municipality Department of Education

MUNICIPALITY INITIATIVE

To enable distance learning, the municipality budget allocation was made to speed up Internet connection for 10 municipality schools. Additionally, 41 laptops were purchased under the New Ukrainian School program. Computer science teachers at the school level gave training to elderly teachers on the use of computers and distance learning programs. Younger teachers assisted elderly teachers with the use of technology during distance learning

As not all families had gadgets for effective distance learning and there were no funds for their full provision, special boxes were made on the school premises for each class separately for teachers to leave printed materials for learning, and for students - their homework. Thus, the students who did not have the opportunity to use the technology for distance learning could receive materials and complete their homework on time, and teachers had the opportunity to timely assess students' knowledge.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. For the central government authorities

- Development of targeted aid programs to families in adverse living conditions in order to provide them with technical equipment and software necessary for children's education. This issue should be addressed at the central level, as the survey showed that municipalities do not have sufficient financial capacities to address it.
- Granting a subsidy from the State Budget of Ukraine to municipalities to solve the problem of an adequate technical equipment of schools and overcome the problem of digital inequality. Funding should be allocated precisely from the State Budget to ensure equal conditions and equal access to quality educational services in general secondary education for all children, regardless of their place of residence under Article 53 of the Constitution of Ukraine. This issue is particularly relevant for rural municipalities with remote villages.
- Study of international experience (of experts, organizations, etc.) regarding the nuances and consequences of lockdown restrictions in educational institutions. These are the recommendations of the UN, WHO, UNICEF, cases of other countries, etc.
- Creation of quality digital content to compensate for the learning outcomes caused by the shift to distance learning.

2. For the central/ regional government authorities

- Work with leading national mobile and Internet providers regarding the launch and implementation of the public-private partnership projects to ensure quality mobile coverage in rural areas and primarily in remote villages.
- To recommend mobile and Internet providers to provide targeted aid, namely, to ensure quality mobile coverage in rural areas and primarily in remote villages at the request of the municipalities. Create a work group, helpline, information support, prepare a step-by-step plan for such assistance.

3. For the Ministry of Education and Science

- Improving the number and staff of the general secondary schools, as well as the norms of the academic load of teachers in order to bring them into compliance with the new requirements caused by the specificity of distance/ blended learning

modes (in particular, higher labor costs) and personalization of teachers' approach to distance learning of students.

- Development and implementation of effective tools of communication with participants of the educational process so that bodies of state authority obtain reliable information on the difficulties and problems that arise or may arise among participants in the educational process during distance learning, and provide them with support. Long-term planning is needed given the ambiguity of the quarantine restrictions period and, respectively, all innovations and restrictions should be justified by measures, explanations of the consequences, etc.
- Intensify efforts on the development of comprehensive recommendations for educational institutions regarding the organization of the educational process during quarantine, taking into account the specificity of rural areas, in particular regarding the teachers' acquisition of distance learning skills. Development of minimum sanitary and hygienic and educational requirements taking into account the characteristics of the region to achieve the educational standards.
- Inclusion of the courses of human rights protection in education, distance learning technologies, modern ICT mastering, conflict prevention and management and mediation in the professional development programs for teachers.
- On the basis of the State Standard of Basic Secondary Education update and integrate the educational curricula in order to eliminate information overload and content imbalance
- Development of the distance education standard (use of distance education technologies) and relevant guidelines.
- Development and implementation of quality digital content for institutions of complete general secondary education.
- Establishment of the Education Technical Assistance Center.
- Create an informational and psychological support line for both students and teachers (lack or low availability of online communication skills, social relations and communication can cause the respective problems).
- Encourage the extracurricular online communication and free time.
- Monitoring and quality control of distance learning in educational institutions (including the use of the control method by the principal over the implementation of educational programs approved by the staff meeting).

4. For local self-government bodies

- Organization of recording and monitoring of families on a regular basis where children do not have access to computer equipment and the Internet to further respond quickly and meet the educational needs caused by the pandemic.
- Providing educational institutions with new computers and accessible high-speed Internet, villages and small towns first.
- Updating the material and technical resources of educational institutions in municipalities to ensure continuity and proper quality of the educational process.
- Providing organizational and methodological support for teachers to implement distance learning.
- Inclusion in the budget of the local municipalities of expenses for equipping teachers with the necessary equipment and, if necessary, for their training in the use of ICT.
- Making arrangements to ensure full participation of persons with special educational needs (SEN) in the educational process with mandatory consideration of an individual development program during distance learning (use of distance learning technologies) in quarantine or emergency situations.
- Develop educational institutions to be able to work with inclusions both online and offline.