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## Brazil: Failure to Respond to Education Emergency

Budget Cuts, Disastrous Covid-19 Response Leave Millions out of School



Student receives hand sanitizer at a public school in São Paulo on the first day of in-person classes, on February 8th. © Andre Penner/ AP Photo/ Picture alliance

(São Paulo, June 11, 2021) – The Brazilian government has failed to address the huge impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on education, leaving millions of children with little or no access to school, Human Rights Watch and Everyone for Education (Todos pela Educação), said today.

More than a year after the government ordered the initial closure of schools due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the Education Ministry urgently needs to increase support to states and municipalities to guarantee remote education, including online learning, and a safe return to schools, the groups said.

“School closures have affected the most economically vulnerable children most severely,” said Anna Livia Arida, Brazil associate director at Human Rights Watch. “The government

needs to put education at the center of its Covid-19 recovery plan, restore the education budget, and spend those resources to ensure that millions of children, especially those at a greater risk of dropping out, are able to study.”

According to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), 5 million children between ages 6 and 17 in Brazil didn't have access to education in November 2020, the worst situation in two decades. More than 4 million of them were enrolled in schools but had no remote learning or in-person classes in 2020. School closures affected children unequally, with the greatest impact on Black or Indigenous children and adolescents, and those from lower income households.

A Parliamentary Monitoring Committee that examined investment and expenses by the Education Ministry in 2020 found that there was “an abrupt and inexplicable decrease of federal resources in different areas of education, in a year in which the federal education budget should be revised to address new challenges, such as student connectivity and implementation of health protocols.”

Globally, school closures, coupled with families’ loss of income and jobs, will almost certainly lead to a higher school dropout rate, more child labor, greater food insecurity, and increased exposure to violence and exploitation for children, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) reported. It warned that higher dropout rates will have long-term effects on children and on the economy, resulting in lower wages and a reduced quality of life.

According to the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística, IBGE), an official entity, 16.6 percent of children and adolescents living in households with per capita incomes of up to half of the minimum wage had no access to education, while among households with per capita household incomes of 4 or more times the minimum wage, the percentage was only 3.9 percent. Also, 46.7 percent of children who had no access to education last year were living in the economically marginalized North and Northeastern parts of Brazil.

In Brazil, fewer than a quarter of all students dedicated three hours or more a day to school activities in September, a study by several nongovernmental organizations showed. Almost 5 percent of students in primary school and more than 10 percent of high school students reported in January that they had dropped out of school.

Before the pandemic, 4.1 million students in Brazil had no internet access. There is little chance that this situation will improve without federal support, said Human Rights Watch and Todos pela Educação, a Brazilian group that seeks to improve the quality of public education in the country.

The federal Education Ministry has failed to spend money already available in the budget for projects that could have helped minimize the consequences of the pandemic. The Education Ministry has the legal authority to coordinate national education policy and to provide additional funding for education to states and municipalities. However, it has done little to fulfill its responsibility to coordinate with states and municipalities to reduce inequalities during the pandemic.

States and municipalities have mostly faced the problems of adapting activities for remote learning alone, as well as implementing health protocols and other measures needed to safely reopen schools. They have struggled in particular with adapting activities for students with limited or no access to the internet.

The Education Ministry had for Primary Education a R\$ 48.2 billion budget for 2020 but spent only R\$ 32.5 billion, the lowest amount in a decade, Todos pela Educação found. The Education Ministry also reduced spending on its Connected Education program, which aims for universal access to high-speed internet in basic education. It committed only R\$ 100.3 million to the program, the Parliamentary Monitoring Committee reported, less than half of what it had allocated the previous year.

For 2021, President Jair Bolsonaro “blocked” or froze R\$ 2.7 billion, or almost 20 percent, of the education budget. Milton Ribeiro, the education minister, supported a presidential veto – later overturned by Congress – of a bill that would have provided emergency funds to increase access to the internet for both students and teachers.

The Covid-19 pandemic affected the education of millions of children worldwide, but the Brazilian government's disastrous response to the pandemic dramatically worsened its impact on children in Brazil. Instead of adopting the World Health Organization recommendations, Brazil's government tried to block efforts by states to require social distancing, vetoed a law that required the use of masks in schools – later overturned by Congress, – and invested heavily in drugs that it claimed, without scientific evidence, prevented or cured Covid-19.

Only about 10 percent of Brazil's population is fully vaccinated. That includes 234,000 education professionals nationwide, about 8 percent. Vaccine scarcity has contributed to high rates of new cases and deaths, which have kept schools closed longer in Brazil than in other countries: for a total of 40 weeks last year, twice the world average, according to UNESCO.

International human rights law guarantees all children the right to education, even in times of emergency. Brazil urgently needs to place children and adolescents at the center of its recovery strategy and to prioritize efforts to ensure education for all, during and after the pandemic.

To comply with Brazil's international human rights obligations, Human Rights Watch and Todos Pela Educação specifically recommend that the federal government, through the Education Ministry and in conjunction with governors and mayors:

- Allocate resources strategically to ensure access to education for children historically at risk of exclusion from education, including Black and Indigenous children, as well as those on rural areas and others whose education has been particularly affected during the pandemic.
- Make vigorous efforts to ensure that vaccines are available to all and continue efforts to make vaccines available and accessible to education professional across the country, including with targeted outreach to teachers in marginalized communities.
- Ensure there are clear indicators for when in-person school closures might be justified by risk of coronavirus transmission and define objective, evidence-driven parameters to guide decisions to reopen schools.

- Support states and municipalities, especially the most economically vulnerable ones, in providing schools with sufficient and relevant personal protective equipment for all students and staff, Covid-19 information, and resources to provide enhanced ventilation and carry out cleaning and hygiene protocols.
- Support states and municipalities to evaluate learning gaps and the loss caused by prolonged school closures and to meet the needs to close the gaps.
- Adopt measures to furnish affordable, reliable, and accessible internet, including targeted measures to provide free, equitable access – and devices capable of supporting core educational content – for children who cannot yet attend in-person classes.
- Carry out national “back to school” communications and mass outreach campaigns, for a phased, safe, and effective return to schools, in communities to persuade children who have been out of school – either due to the pandemic or other reasons – to return to school, and their families to support these decisions. Identify children who do not return to in-person classes or drop out or do not regularly attend and engage in intensive outreach to them and their caregivers to provide any support they require to continue or resume their studies.

“The prolonged interruption of in-person classes because of the pandemic is causing a profound and cruel setback in Brazilian education, with serious repercussions for educational inequality, school learning, and the food, physical and socioemotional protection system for millions of children and young people,” said Priscila Cruz, executive president of Todos Pela Educação.