

HMDC Presents... UNESCO: Video 1 Transcripts

These are the words spoken in the two Video 1 films for UNESCO (The Topic). We read along while we watch, pause at each time mark, and circle any word we do not know so we can look it up together.

VIDEO 1 (EXPLAINER)

[0:00] Welcome, delegates, to this explainer on the COVID-19 education and technology gaps. If you're preparing for Harvard Model United Nations Online this December 5th and 6th, 2026, you are in exactly the right place. We're diving straight into part one of the UNESCO topic today, equipping you with the impartial, hard facts you absolutely need to build your resolutions. No fluff, just the data directly from the international community. Here is a quick look at our agenda. We'll cover one, the global school closure, two, measuring the harms, three, six major solutions, four, the key lesson, and five, questions for delegates. Let's get to it. Section one, the global school closure. Let's look at what actually happened during the peak of the crisis. Back in 2020 and 2021, schools closed for the vast majority of the world's children.

[0:47] It was an unprecedented shock to the system. Suddenly, lessons had to migrate to the internet, television, radio, and mobile phones. But you know, this rapid shift violently exposed a massive digital divide. If a student had a device and a connection, they kept learning. If they didn't, they were completely cut off. Section two, measuring the harms. Let's dig into the specific data to see exactly how much damage this divide caused. The sheer scale of this is mind boggling. According to UNICEF, on August 26, 2020, at least 463 million school children couldn't access any remote learning whatsoever. That is about 31% of students globally. And as you might expect, this caused the most severe harm to poorer and rural students, turning a public health emergency into an extreme crisis of inequality.

[1:40] And the core of that inequality, it was all about what kids had at home. UNICEF reported on November 30, 2020, that an unbelievable 1.3 billion school-age children had zero internet connection at home. Online-only education literally couldn't reach them. They were locked out. Now, this lack of access caused immense educational harm. The World Bank noted on June 23, 2022, that learning poverty, meaning 10-year-olds who are unable to read and understand a simple text, rose incredibly sharply. In low- and middle-income countries, it jumped from 57% all the way to an estimated 70%. And if anyone claims this was just a minor bump in the road, that claim is entirely incorrect. The OECD showed on December 5, 2023, that average PISA math scores for 15-year-olds plummeted by almost 15 points globally.

[2:33] To put that into perspective, that's a historic drop, three times larger than any change they'd ever recorded before. But it's not just about test scores. There is the very real harm of students disappearing from the system entirely. Data from the GCED Clearinghouse of UNESCO, last accessed in October 2026, warns that more than 11 million girls are at risk of never returning to school, which exposes them to severe lifelong social harms. And for the children who did manage to log on, well, we have to look at privacy harms. Human Rights Watch stated on May 25, 2022, that a staggering 89% of government-recommended learning apps appeared to monitor children, or at least had the ability to do so. Often routing their data straight to advertising companies.

[3:18] And just to prove this isn't a problem of the past, the International Telecommunication Union reported on November 17, 2025, that 2.2 billion people are still completely offline today. If another global emergency happens tomorrow, those exact same families will be harmed all over again. Section three, six major solutions. Now that we understand the harms, let's evaluate the six main options currently being debated by the international community. Solution one is connecting every school to the internet. This is highly desirable because it directly addresses the root cause of the divide. For example, a UN program called Giga is already mapping and connecting schools globally, as reported by IEEE Spectrum in December 2024. However, it presents a very undesirable financial reality.

[4:06] Connectivity is enormously expensive. And frankly, solid evidence on technology's added educational value is quite thin, according to the UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report on July 26, 2023. Solution two leans into low tech learning using radios, TVs, and basic phones. A really desirable aspect here is how it helps reach millions of offline children, like Peru did with its mass broadcasts noted by the World Bank on October 30, 2024. The undesirable side? Broadcasts are totally one way. A study in Nature Human Behaviour on June 13, 2022 showed that just sending text messages didn't help learning in Botswana. It was actual human phone contact from teachers that made the real difference. Solution three is catch-up teaching. Programs like Teaching at the Right Level are proven to help and were actually rated a great buy by an expert panel convened by the World Bank on May 9, 2023.

[4:58] So that's incredibly desirable. But here's the undesirable catch. It requires real educators. And according to a 2024 report by UNESCO, we are currently facing a severe global shortage of 44 million teachers. Solution four explores public digital learning platforms built by governments. This is desirable because keeping things public can protect student privacy, directly addressing those surveillance concerns raised by Human Rights Watch on May 25, 2022. But there is an undesirable risk of platform abandonment. UNICEF found on December 21, 2022 that roughly one in three national learning platforms built during the pandemic were later completely shut down or just stopped working. Solution five involves setting strict rules on technology in schools.

[5:44] Implementing bans on phones, data, and AI is actually desirable because it seems to help weaker students focus. In fact, by late 2024, 79 education systems had smartphone bans that reportedly improved results, according to the World Education Blog of the UNESCO GEM Report on January 23, 2025. On the flip side, an undesirable outcome is that a blanket ban could actively harm vulnerable families. As the Pew Research Center noted on October 1, 2021, for many lower-income students during the closures, a cell phone was the only device they had for schoolwork. Solution six is utilizing AI tutors alongside teacher support. The most desirable thing here is scale. Early pilots really help raise scores. For instance, an AI program in Nigeria significantly boosted English results, as detailed by World Bank blogs on January 9, 2025.

[6:34] But trying to roll out AI tutors when 2.2 billion people are still offline carries a highly undesirable risk. It could massively widen the digital divide, as the ITU reported on November 17, 2025. Section four, the key lesson. Let's pull all of these facts together. Looking at all this evidence, one absolutely crucial synthesis emerges for your upcoming debates. The UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report from July 26, 2023 lays it out clearly. Devices alone do not repair learning. Giving out hardware without the human element just doesn't work. Take Peru, for example. They distributed over one million laptops without any teaching support. And as a result, they saw absolutely no learning gains. The tech is just a tool. It cannot replace the educator.

[7:19] Section five, questions for delegates. As you start writing your resolutions, you've got some heavy lifting to do. We'll leave you with these crucial trade-offs to confront in committee. Could UNESCO prioritize connecting schools to the internet first, despite those massive expenses? Or is it more desirable to fund teachers and low-tech options first, which can reach more children right now, but leaves them entirely offline? And the biggest question of all, in a world of limited budgets, who should pay? Weigh the facts, consider the harms, and good luck in your committee sessions.

VIDEO 1 (CINEMATIC)

[0:00] Welcome to the HMDC Forensics briefing for Harvard Model United Nations. Today, we're looking at UNESCO's response to the COVID-19 education gap. In 2020, the pandemic closed schools for 1.5 billion students, pausing formal education for nearly the entire planet. But the impact fell unevenly. At least 463 million of those schoolchildren were completely cut off from any form of remote learning. This map illustrates the core infrastructure failure. Roughly 1.3 billion school-aged children simply did not have internet access at home, with the vast majority living in low-income and rural areas. The pandemic exposed a deep, pre-existing digital divide that instantly isolated the world's poorest students, leaving them stranded while their connected peers kept learning.

[0:49] This isolation triggered a massive spike in what the World Bank calls learning poverty, the share of 10-year-olds who cannot read and understand a simple text. In low- and middle-income countries, that number jumped to an estimated 70%. This chart tracks global PISA math scores to show that wealthy nations were harmed too. Averages plummeted almost 15 points, a decline three times larger than any previous drop in the test's history. The school closures also triggered severe permanent dropout rates. UNESCO estimated that 11 million girls were at risk of never returning to the classroom, pushed instead into early marriage or household labor. Even those who managed to connect faced hidden costs. Human Rights Watch found that nearly 90% of the education apps recommended by governments secretly monitored children and sent their data to advertising companies.

[1:38] From lost foundational reading skills to severe privacy violations, the damage spans generations. UNESCO's task now is to build a global policy response that addresses these complex realities. To close this gap, delegates are debating six major solutions, which reveal a sharp tension between expensive hardware and human teaching. Solution One is a massive infrastructure push. A joint UN project called Giga aims to connect every single offline school in the world to the internet by 2030. However, that global goal carries a \$428 billion price tag. And as UNESCO's own monitors point out, the evidence that internet access alone actually improves learning remains surprisingly thin. By contrast, Solution Two relies on low-tech tools families already own.

[2:26] Countries like Peru and Sierra Leone successfully reached millions of students by broadcasting lessons over local radio and television. Researchers tested this low-tech approach in Botswana. They found that combining basic text messages with a weekly phone call from a human teacher raised math scores significantly, costing a mere \$19 per child. This is the technology paradox. Throwing expensive hardware at the problem often fails to educate anyone, unless there is a human teacher guiding the student on the other end. That brings us to Solution Three, catch-up teaching. Programs that group students by their actual skill level rather than their age have been rated a great buy by the World Bank for effectively recovering lost skills. The immediate roadblock to this human-centered solution is manpower.

[3:11] UNESCO projects a staggering global shortage of 44 million primary and secondary teachers by 2030. Facing this shortage, governments tried to bypass the problem with Solution Four, rushing to build their own public digital learning platforms. It didn't last. A UNICEF audit found one-third of these national platforms shut down entirely, and most lacked an offline mode. Scaling up a human teaching workforce is incredibly difficult, but rushing to build digital replacements without the funding to maintain them proved to be a massive waste of resources. When technology does enter the classroom, it requires strict boundaries. Solution Five focuses on implementing smartphone bans to protect student attention. OECD data shows that students distracted by devices score 15 points lower on math tests.

[3:57] Conversely, education systems that removed phones saw test results improve, particularly for weaker students. But a new wave of technology is already arriving. Solution Six proposes using artificial intelligence as personal tutors. An early pilot program in Nigeria showed impressive English score gains using an AI chatbot guided by a teacher. However, rolling out AI tutors demands the exact same computers and high-speed internet that 2.2 billion offline people still do not have. EdTech is a double-edged sword. It must be strictly regulated to prevent distraction and carefully deployed so it doesn't widen the exact inequality it is supposed to close. This chart plots device distribution against academic performance in Peru.

[4:45] They handed out over a million laptops without pedagogical support and saw zero gains in test scores. Devices alone do not equal learning. To avoid repeating these mistakes, the UN-backed RAPID Framework provides a specific blueprint. It instructs governments to reach every child, assess their current learning, prioritize fundamental reading and math, increase teaching efficiency, and develop student well-being. Member states must lock concrete plans like this in place before the next crisis hits. Right now, the funding isn't there. During the pandemic, education received a devastatingly low 3% of global COVID-19 stimulus money. To prepare for the next crisis, delegates must make a choice. Do we prioritize funding internet cables to every school or human teachers for every child?

[5:32] And crucially, who pays the bill?