

Oslo

General Background

Lockdown in primary schools

Norwegian schools were on average closed for 9 weeks due to the pandemic. (Average in OECD was 14 weeks). There were large local differences in the country. In Oslo, 60 % of schools were closed for a period (other regions – only 10 %). The younger students were on average more at school than older students were. In upper secondary schools, 10th grade was given priority over 8th and 9th grade.

All schools in Oslo were closed on the 12th March 2020. Grade 1.-4. opened again 27th April. The other grades opened beginning of May.

During the weeks the schools were closed, schools were open to students with parents in socially critical jobs, (personnel in health and care service and in the transport sector).

Almost 5 % of the pupils received physical education at school. Just over half of them were pupils with special education needs or pupils who were vulnerable or exposed for other reasons. The rest were children of parents with socially critical occupations.

All students were offered digital homeschool, so even if school building were closed, remote teaching has been provided in the whole period.

Reopening

The Norwegian central government's easing of restrictions with effect from 16 April 2021 did not apply to Oslo. The Oslo City Government retained the stringent measures longer.

In addition, Oslo continued with all-digital teaching in selected districts (Grorud, Stovner, Alna, Bjerke, Gamle Oslo, Grünerløkka and Søndre Nordstrand) due to high infection rates. Activity and organization of education from the reopening was organized after the "traffic light model" (green, yellow and red light).

Level	Measures
Green level	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Sick individuals may not attend school 2. Good hygiene and regular cleaning 3. Social distancing measures: <p>Avoidance of physical contact between individuals (shaking hands and hugging) Social distancing between staff Regular organisation of classes and school day</p>
Yellow level	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Sick individuals may not attend school 2. Good hygiene and increased cleaning 3. Social distancing measures: <p>Avoidance of physical contact between individuals (shaking hands and hugging) Entire classes and groups can receive instruction together Students should have assigned seats in each classroom or designated partners/groups Social distancing between staff (of at least one metre) in all situations</p>

	<p>Staff can switch classes, but should maintain a distance to students if possible</p> <p>Social distancing between students/staff outside the classroom/teaching situation</p> <p>Prevention of crowds and large gatherings</p>
Red level	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Sick individuals may not attend school 2. Good hygiene and increased cleaning 3. Social distancing measures: <p>Avoidance of physical contact between individuals (shaking hands and hugging)</p> <p>Division of students into smaller groups – goal: reduce the number of contacts by half</p> <p>Students should have assigned seats in each classroom or designated partners/groups</p> <p>Social distancing between staff (of at least one metre) in all situations</p> <p>Staff can switch classes</p> <p>Social distancing between students/staff (at least one metre) in all situations</p> <p>Prevention of crowds and large gatherings</p> <p>Consideration of alternating attendance times/alternative rooms</p> <p>Partial online instruction</p>

On April 27, schools were opened for grades 1-4., while grades 5. – 10. Returned to school May 11. Until 2 June, the schools were to implement infection control measures that corresponded to the red level of measures.

Most schools opened as planned, but the requirements in the infection control guide meant that 36 per cent of the primary schools had to postpone the reopening for a few days for some pupils or stages.

Almost half of the schools state “lack of space” as the main reason for postponing the reopening. The smallest schools had to postpone the reopening to a lesser extent. Approximately 20 per cent of all schools with less than 100 pupils had to postpone, while the corresponding proportion for the larger schools was 40 per cent.

Almost all primary and lower secondary schools divided the pupils into separate cohorts according to the recommendations in the infection control guide. In a third of the schools, the cohorts alternated from day to day between being physically present at school and receiving home schooling. In 10 per cent of the schools, the cohorts alternated between being present at school and receiving home tuition during the same school day.

After summer holydays 2021, all schools started at green level. Normal school days without restrictions opened from 25 September. Local restrictions could be implemented if necessary.

Governance of the crisis

Most municipalities had to make new plans for teaching after the lock down 12 March. Some already had contingency plans for closed schools. The new situation led to a heavy workload for both school owners, school managers and teachers - and the contact teacher role in particular has been demanding. The traffic light model was perceived as a useful tool, both in drawing up plans locally and in practical organization of the reopening of schools. For the municipalities there was a considerable room for freedom in interpreting and adapting the national guidelines and infection control guides to local conditions.

Oslo has had a higher infection rate throughout the pandemic and longer periods of closure than anywhere else in the country.

Online teaching were provided to “all” pupils from the first week, so even if school buildings were closed, remote teaching has been provided in the whole period.

Research show that the majority of children/youth in Oslo tackled the challenges, but the pandemic has affected young people very differently. Those who already had a difficult life situation before the pandemic has been hardest hit.

The studies that examined the importance of socio-economic background, found that low-income families struggled to access to digital or other resources, while families with more resources managed to keep what they had or increase access. It seems that the pandemic reinforced existing inequalities.

Norwegian teachers emphasized that they had a spotlight on vulnerable children - more than before - while the results were mixed about how vulnerable children managed to learn at home.

Vulnerable children, children in child care, children with disabilities, newcomers to Norway, children in families with persistent low income or children of parents mental illness, are examples of children who already has follow-up measures or that society knows needs it.

The new group of vulnerable may be children and young people with parents who have ended up in a difficult life situation due to the pandemic, children and young people who are particularly lonely, anxious about their own or others' health or their own future prospects, and children who are exposed to violence, conflict or neglect in the home.

According to user organizations, more people are turning to the helpline on such topics now than before. More young people have experienced increased mental health problems during the pandemic. Ung.no has had a large increase in inquiries regarding mental health during the pandemic

Implications for Education

The NIFU report: *Questions to School-Norway Analyzes and results (survey of school leaders, school owners and teachers during the corona outbreak in 2020)*, show that teachers have had relatively few problems implementing digital teaching, but greater challenges in following up vulnerable students. Main findings from the analysis are:

- 9 out of 10 teachers state that they have acquired better digital competence
- The majority of teachers state that the digital infrastructure has to a small or no degree prevented them from being able to provide desirable digital teaching
- 85 per cent of municipalities believe that they are able to follow up the Education Act's requirements for a safe and good school environment in a digital everyday school life to some or a large extent.
- A clear majority of the schools have reallocated resources to assist teachers in the work of following up vulnerable students

The NTNU report *Experiences of teaching and assessment in upper secondary school under Covid-19 home school*, presents findings from surveys conducted among students, teachers and school leaders in Oslo (spring of 2020). Some findings:

- The school leaders believe that the schools have solved the challenges under Covid-19 in a good way.

- The students have experienced great trust from the teachers and flexibility in the teaching, but at the same time have an experience of being unfairly assessed. Many experienced little involvement in the assessment work.
- The teachers have used new teaching and assessment methods, but the teachers have also had an experience of being alone in the work with teaching and assessment.

Researchers at the University of Bergen and NIPH investigated in April how 3,000 young people between the ages of 13 and 18 handled the closure of schools.

- After seven weeks of homeschooling, about 60 percent felt they learned less in school than before. The ones who noticed the measures the most were the elders, girls, those with low socio-economic status, and young people born outside Norway
- The analyzes of the students' writing tests show that they were one and a half semesters behind the expected development. We had a short shutdown that had major negative consequences for the students' writing skills, says Professor Gustaf Skar at the Writing Center at NTNU.

Mental health

The NOVA report *Oslo youth in the corona period - a study of young people during the covid-19 pandemic*, sheds light on how young people in Oslo felt during the pandemic in the spring of 2020. 12,686 youth in Oslo aged 13 to 19 responded.

The pandemic has had positive consequences for many. More youth became aware of important things that mean something in life, their trust in others increased, they learned to cope with more than they thought they would be able to do, and they appreciated everyday life more. The new everyday life opened up a free space to do more nice things with the family, spend time differently and use time more freely.

Overall, however, many believe the pandemic affected them negatively:

- 6 of 10 students at upper secondary schools in Oslo stated that they learned less than normally. Students with a difficult home situation stated to a far greater extent that they learned less than usual.
- Satisfaction with life decreased, more people experienced loneliness, school stress was at least as high as before, and many experienced that the social contact with the others in the class did not work very well.
- Girls experienced personal maturation and growth to a greater extent than boys during the pandemic, but to an even greater extent this applied to young people with an immigrant background.

Feedback from the county governors shows that the requirements to organize the students in small groups and ensure a distance of one meter led to both a shortage of teachers and a lack of space in the time after the reopening (Utdanningsdirektoratet 2020b).

OsloMet and the University of Oslo have conducted a survey among 726 teachers from all over the country about home schooling. Some main findings:

- The weeks with distance learning meant more work and became an additional burden for the teachers. For many, it became difficult to set limits for their own availability and inquiries from both students and parents came at all hours of the day.
- Access to digital resources and their own home office situation were decisive factors for whether the teachers felt that they were able to follow up the students well enough.

- Several of the teachers were concerned about the follow-up of students with special needs. The students they were worried about before the schools closed, they were often extra worried during the time of distance learning.

The results of a large survey commissioned by KS (the municipal sector's organization) on the municipalities' corona handling show that a lot went well.

Weaknesses also appear in some important areas. Three areas stand out:

- The offer to vulnerable children and young people was greatly reduced in some places, especially in the first two months. In a minority of the municipalities, the offer was also reduced during the autumn.
- The municipalities have occasionally received a lot of information to handle from central authorities, often presented directly at televised press conferences. This has made it difficult to provide residents with good and up-to-date information locally. Half of the municipal leaders believe that it has not been as easy to keep track.
- In the first phase of the pandemic, half of the municipalities experienced that they did not have enough infection control equipment, or they feared that they would run out.

This is how the municipalities respond to whether they managed to provide a good enough offer to the vulnerable children there from 12 March to 20 April:

- Four out of ten leaders believe that they were able to follow up the vulnerable children to a medium or small degree.
- One in four believe that students with special education requirements received this to a small extent in March and April.
- An overwhelming majority of the municipalities report a poorer than normal offer for children with a claim for PPT help (educational-psychological service) at the start of the pandemic.
- Four out of five leaders also believe that day care for children and young people with developmental disabilities was less well taken care of than normal then. 27 percent believe that it is still worse.