

APRES COVID

**Occupational wellbeing in
European education systems:**

**Social Partners in education
addressing the lasting impact
of the COVID-19 crisis**

RESEARCH REPORT | EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The APRES COVID research project, co-funded by the European Commission and implemented by the European Trade Union Committee for Education (ETUCE) and the European Federation of Education Employers (EFEE), provides an in-depth analysis of the long-term impact of the COVID-19 crisis on occupational wellbeing in the education sector. Drawing on literature reviews, a European-wide survey, and case study visits in Slovenia, Portugal, and Malta, the study identifies the work-related psychosocial risks (PSRs) affecting education personnel and highlights how social dialogue and joint action can support a sustainable recovery.

Key findings point to an increase in psychosocial risks during and after the crisis. Educators experienced intensified workloads, blurred boundaries between professional and personal life, heightened stress, and increased risks of burnout. During school closures, the transition to online and hybrid teaching exposed significant disparities in access to technology and digital skills. While many educators successfully adapted, the speed of the shift generated **technostress**, particularly among those with limited prior experience in online teaching. At the same time, this transformation left a lasting positive legacy: improved digital competencies, greater flexibility in teaching methods, and broader integration of digital tools, which continue to enhance instructional practices post-pandemic.

At the same time, the pandemic highlighted existing challenges in education systems: declining attractiveness of the teaching profession, staff shortages, and the erosion of work-life balance. The majority of Europe's teachers, predominantly women, were additionally affected by increased care responsibilities at home, making them particularly vulnerable to stress and exhaustion. The research shows that these pressures have not disappeared with the reopening of schools. On the contrary, the post-pandemic period has seen lasting impacts on workloads, expectations of digital availability, and the mental health of education professionals. This is also reflected in economic implications. According to the OECD, work-related mental health issues cost the EU an estimated **€600 billion annually**, stemming from reduced productivity, absenteeism, presenteeism, and increased healthcare expenditures. Without systemic reforms, shortages are expected to worsen.

The crisis also revealed the central importance of **teacher well-being for the quality of education and student outcomes**. Evidence indicates that when teachers struggle with stress and burnout, student performance and emotional wellbeing also decline. Conversely, teachers who feel supported in their work are better able to foster inclusive, resilient learning environments. In this sense, occupational wellbeing is one of the core conditions for educational success and equity.

Yet, the report also identifies **positive developments**. The crisis accelerated digitalisation, introduced innovative practices in teaching and learning, and stimulated a broader debate about the importance of public investment in education. Many schools and universities adopted new digital tools that remain in use today, improving communication, accessibility, and collaboration. Hybrid solutions for parent-teacher meetings, digital resource sharing, and flexible professional development opportunities have increased efficiency and inclusion in some contexts. Importantly, the crisis reinforced the need for stronger social dialogue between education trade unions and education employers, ensuring that the voices of teachers and staff are heard in shaping policies for resilience and recovery.

The broader implications of these findings raise questions about the long-term sustainability of a high-quality profession in education across Europe. If challenges related to strained working conditions are not systematically addressed, there is a risk of lasting damage to the quality and continuity of education. A shortage of teachers also threatens to undermine student learning outcomes, increase class sizes, and place greater pressure on the educators who remain. In a scenario where the profession cannot attract new talent or retain experienced teachers, education systems could enter a downward spiral – overworked staff become less effective and more prone to illness or attrition, which, in turn, further burdens remaining teachers. It is also a reminder that the issues underlined by COVID-19 are not entirely new problems arising from the COVID-19 crisis, but also structural weaknesses that the crisis has laid bare. Issues related to underinvestment, workload intensification, and varying adequacy of support for educators predated COVID-19. As a result of the crisis, however, we can now see more clearly that working conditions and mental health are inseparable from the quality of education. The wellbeing and commitment of educators are the basis for the success of students and the resilience of whole educational systems, and the strength of societies. Therefore, safeguarding the psychosocial health of education professionals is not just a matter of worker welfare. As seen from the survey evidence, education social partners are acutely aware of the challenges impacting working conditions in education and the wellbeing of education professionals at all levels, and they are actively and successfully working towards addressing them. Social partners are well placed to engage in social dialogue, highlight the most pressing challenges, and influence policy decisions at institutional and governmental levels. They also serve as advocates and, as such, they can draw attention to mental health concerns, work-life balance issues, and psychosocial risks affecting educators, thus promoting greater awareness and continued action. Indeed, addressing the complex and often deeply intertwined challenges will require bold, coordinated action, and above all, a strong commitment to increased investment in the education sector across Europe. It is true that a profession in the education sector has always been intellectually, emotionally, and psychologically demanding, as well as immensely rewarding work. This is because working in education means being an expert in one's field and possessing the right qualities - being nurturing, empathetic, compassionate, curious, and a lifelong learner. With the rising demands and expectations of educators and educational institutions, there should be greater demands.



This report was commissioned by the European Trade Union Committee for Education (ETUCE) and the European Federation of Education Employers (EFEE) in the framework of the project "APRES COVID", funded by the EU. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.



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