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## FEATURED Q&A

# Are Latin America's Students Learning Under Lockdown?



Mexico's "Aprende en Casa" program utilizes TV, radio and Internet modalities aligned to the national curriculum, but a lack of access to reliable Internet could lead to a learning crisis for marginalized communities, Michael Lisman writes below. // File Photo: Mexican Government.

**Q Mexico's government has decided that it is too dangerous to send children back to school due to the Covid-19 pandemic, so the country is relying for now on classroom instruction broadcast on television, radio and over the Internet. Like countries around the world, Latin American and Caribbean nations have debated whether children should be attending class in person this year. What are examples of best practices that schools have employed in order to provide education safely to students during the current pandemic and previous crises? What are the main obstacles the pandemic is presenting for students, parents and teachers, and how can they be overcome? What will be the long-term effects of children missing in-person classes during this crisis?**

**A Tim Scully, member of the Inter-American Dialogue and professor of political science at the University of Notre Dame:** "Covid-19 is not an equal opportunity threat: it disproportionately targets the most vulnerable, who are more exposed and fragile. Globally, nearly 400 million children are missing the essential nourishment from meals their schools provided. Online learning is the most common form of distance learning. However, more than 60 percent of households in low and lower-middle income countries, many of whom reside in Latin America, don't have access to the Internet. Teachers and school communities throughout the region have been doing their best to respond to these challenges. Since many school principals report that teachers are wholly unprepared to transition to digital learning, many school communities have developed coordinated efforts to deliver

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## TODAY'S NEWS

### POLITICAL

## Coronavirus Vaccine Could Be Delayed in Region

A top Mexican health official said that a pause in trials with a leading coronavirus vaccine being tested could delay the rollout of a vaccine in the Americas.

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### BUSINESS

## Panama Canal Calls for Bids on \$2 Billion Water Supply Project

The ambitious project aims to guarantee an adequate water supply for both canal operations and local consumption for the next 50 years, the government-run operator of the waterway said.

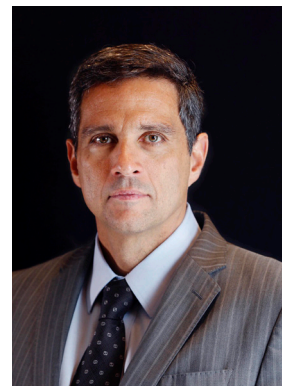
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### ECONOMIC

## Brazil Central Bank Chief Rolls Out Green Agenda

Brazil's central bank chief Roberto Campos Neto on Tuesday unveiled a new "sustainability agenda" that will embed climate issues into its policies and decision-making "from a financial point of view."

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Campos Neto // File Photo: Brazilian Government.

## POLITICAL NEWS

## Coronavirus Vaccine Could Be Delayed in Latin America

A top Mexican health official said Tuesday that a pause in trials for a leading coronavirus drug being tested by AstraZeneca and Oxford University could delay the rollout of a Covid-19 vaccine in the Americas, Agence France-Presse reported. Pausing vaccine trials “is not an unusual occurrence ... and as a consequence the vaccine’s arrival may be delayed” across the



López Gatell // File Photo: Mexican Government.

region, said Hugo López Gatell, Mexico’s under-secretary for health, at a press conference. The governments of Mexico and Argentina have signed an agreement to work together with the Swedish-British pharmaceutical company, which has guaranteed distribution across Latin America, according to the report. Under the plan, some 250 million doses of the vaccine would be sold at cost across Latin America, with the exception of Brazil, which has its own agreements, AFP reported. The trials have been suspended for several weeks after a volunteer from the United Kingdom had an unexpected negative reaction after receiving the vaccine. Mexico has suffered 68,484 fatalities from the virus as of Tuesday, according to the report. Meanwhile, Argentina on Tuesday registered a new record number of daily cases of the deadly virus. In total, there have now been more than half a million confirmed cases in Argentina since the pandemic began earlier this year. The South American country had hoped to be a major manufacturer of the new vaccine. “It is bad news because it delays everything. Now it is necessary to determine if the volunteer

suffered the problem that he suffered from the vaccine applied or from something else, but that will inevitably take time,” infectologist Eduardo López, who serves on Argentina’s presidential advisory committee, told local newspaper Clarín.

## ECONOMIC NEWS

## Brazil Central Bank Chief Rolls Out New Green Agenda

Brazil’s central bank on Tuesday unveiled a new “sustainability agenda” that will embed climate issues into its policies and decision-making, Reuters reported. In a presentation, Central Bank President Roberto Campos Neto said “we are going to deal with the environmental issue from a financial point of view,” Agência Brasil reported. The plan includes a broad range of steps, from internal environmental awareness campaigns and incorporation of climate risk scenarios in central bank stress tests, to the adoption of more comprehensive measures, such as the creation of a sustainable liquidity financial line for banking institutions, including those in the private sector. Campos Neto add-

“We are going to deal with the environmental issue from a financial point of view.”

— Roberto Campos Neto

ed that the bank will be setting guidelines for companies and financial institutions regarding the disclosure of information on how climate change will affect their businesses financially, as well as drafting risk management and socio-environmental risk reports. The new plan also creates a new green rural credit bureau in an open banking format, which shares customer data among financial institutions. International investors have been increasing pressure on the administration of far-right President Jair Bolsonaro to do more about deforestation of

## NEWS BRIEFS

## Brazil Misses Vaccine Targets for Children

For the first time in nearly two decades, Brazil last year failed to reach its targets for any of the primary vaccines recommended to children under one year of age, Folha de S.Paulo reported Tuesday, citing analysis it conducted of 2019 data from the National Immunization Program. According to the report, some vaccinations have been reduced by 27 percent in the past five years. The data covers a period before the coronavirus pandemic took hold in Brazil, which has consumed health resources and hindered traditional vaccination efforts further.

## Mexican Activists Occupy Human Rights Building

Activists for victims of femicide who took over the offices of the Mexican government’s Human Rights Commission last week remained at a stand-off with authorities Tuesday, El Universal reported. Rights commission officials in recent days voiced concern about the safety of case files kept in the building. The activists responded by placing the files on a table outside the building, asking employees to pick them up, and pledging to turn the building into a shelter for women.

## Reinsurance Prices Set to Rise Worldwide: Report

Global reinsurance prices appear set to rise at least 5 percent across the board this year, as fallout from the coronavirus, natural catastrophe losses, low interest rates and capacity constraints drive prices up, Moody’s said Tuesday, citing its survey of property and casualty buyers. Price increases this year are expected to be strongest for catastrophe-exposed property reinsurance. Around \$8 billion of every \$10 billion that is lost in Latin America and the Caribbean due to natural catastrophes is uninsured, according to a report earlier this year by Business Insurance.

the Amazon and other environmental and social problems. [Editor's note: See related [Q&A](#) in the July 14 issue of the Advisor.]

## BUSINESS NEWS

# Panama Canal Calls for Bids on \$2 Billion Water Supply Project

The Panama Canal Authority on Monday put out a public call for bids on a \$2 billion package of water supply projects. The ambitious project aims to guarantee an adequate water supply for both canal operations and local consumption for the next 50 years, the government-run operator of the canal said in a statement. "Securing sustained, operational water levels is paramount for the long-term viability of the Panama Canal. The historically low levels of water in recent years only exacerbated the need to adopt a comprehensive plan," Panama Canal Administrator Ricaurte Vásquez said. Droughts have severely diminished the fresh water lakes that supply the canal's locks, and its watershed saw its fifth driest year in 70 years in 2019. In February, the Canal Authority began collecting a freshwater surcharge from ships transiting the inter-oceanic waterway to address a scarcity of rainfall. The projects will seek alternatives for the water currently supplied by two artificial lakes, Gatún and Alajuela, by potentially building dams, transferring water from other lakes to Gatún or building desalinization plants. The authority plans to shortlist the most-qualified firms by the end of year. Panama completed a multi billion-dollar expansion of the canal in 2016 that enabled it to handle larger ships. To date, that bet seems to have been paying off financially. However, the country's economy is susceptible to a continued global trade downturn, which will result in lower traffic passing through the Panama Canal, Carlos Morales, director for Latin American sovereigns at Fitch Ratings, told the Advisor last week. [Editor's note: See related [Q&A](#) in Sept. 2 issue of the Advisor.]

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physical learning packets. Given low levels of literacy in the most vulnerable households, teachers have responded creatively by developing learning packets that focus on learning opportunities encountered by their students in every day rural and urban life. The Peruvian government created a relatively effective distance-learning platform called 'Aprendo en Casa' that relies on multiple media such as the Internet, TV and radio to reach the most marginalized. WhatsApp and Facebook have become a primary means of facilitating learning throughout the region, but these innovations have limitations, since access to a cell phone with a reliable data plan is often limited. The challenges posed by the pandemic are formidable, and will almost certainly, at least in the short run, result in a rise of children experiencing learning poverty."

**A** **Debra Gittler, founder and executive director, and Carolina Bodewig, coordinator of monitoring and evaluation, at ConTextos in El Salvador:** "With Covid, we have embraced WhatsApp, Zoom and other digital platforms to build community—not just disseminate content—based on three best practices. First is providing social, emotional and socio-affective support. Reading, writing and dialogue are essential skills for a healthy citizenry. We have embraced the visual and digital arts as additional types of texts for comprehension and expression, and prioritized reaching as many as we could to help share stories and images, as well as navigate and explore their meaning, while encouraging students to share stories of their own feelings and experiences. This is a time to prioritize and support our shared humanity. Second, it is important to build trusting relationships. We embraced our professional development network of teachers and case workers, providing direct social and emotional support as well as modeling tools for them to replicate with their students, families and neighbors.

Simultaneously, we host leadership training to think beyond the traditional classroom/school, recognize community assets and envision holistic learning. A third best practice is leveraging partnerships. With Covid, we strengthened existing relationships with both the private and public sectors to lift up our teachers and youth leaders so that they, in turn, could build strong relationships via digital platforms to lift up the voices of others. For instance, formerly incarcerated youths lead photography programs with returning deportees via partnerships with oth-

“During quarantine, we’ve learned the real potential of digital engagement...”

— Debra Gittler and Caroline Bodewig

er nongovernmental organizations. Missing in-person classes is an enormous loss, but it has also been a unique opportunity to reimagine education in El Salvador, which has much space for improvement of academic results. During quarantine, we've learned the real potential of digital engagement: to build and grow meaningful relationships, to recognize and lift up community assets, to develop new leadership and to form a vision for a post-pandemic schooling that emphasizes healing and human development."

**A** **German A. Ramirez, principal at GRG Education:** "As schools reopen following the mid-year recess, and in a climate of uncertainty and ideological bias, authorities are trying to find the best path forward in pursuit of the common good. The aim at reconciling two desirable objectives—guaranteeing the right to education while ensuring the well-being of all constituents—poses challenges, and most solutions imply risks. We favor an approach in which authorities, families and educators can jointly agree on

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core aspects of the educational formula such as calendars, schedules, class sizes, safety measures, space allocation, instructional modalities, technology, and teacher and student support. We also believe that a good way to navigate these uncharted waters is through flexibility and openness to learning from others. For example, in some U.S. districts, schools will start with remote instruction, followed in two-three weeks by a hybrid (face-to-face and distance learning) model and the plan of returning to full face-to-face instruction in a few months. In Spain, Madrid's reopening plan calls for face-to-face instruction with a phased start, mandatory masks, social distancing and a maximum class size of 20 students. Another flexible approach being tested in various places has students alternating between staying at home and attending school two or three days a week in reduced class settings, while supported by a hybrid learning model. It may be time for replacing the industrial era schooling model currently in place for one that is less rigid, promotes freedom of choice and strives for not letting anyone behind. The question is how."

**A** **Michael C. Lisman, education lead in the Bureau for Latin America and the Caribbean at the U.S. Agency for International Development:** "As the pandemic continues to roil Latin America and the Caribbean, alternatives to classroom-based instruction have been rolled out across the region. Nearly all of the region's ministries of education now have remote programs set up, which appear to vary in their reach and relevance. Mexico's comprehensive 'Aprende en Casa' program, for example, utilizes TV, radio and Internet modalities and provides content aligned to the Mexican curriculum as well as practical resources for parents, teachers and

students. The hope is that programs such as these can help bridge the gap until a 'normal' return to school is deemed viable on a case-by-case or phased basis. It will also be important to assess the impacts of such programs on student outcomes such as learning, though doing so systematically may be challenging and costly. Recent survey data suggests that the breadth and depth of many of the region's remote programs are insuf-

**“The breadth and depth of many of the region's remote programs are insufficient for those without reliable Internet...”**

— Michael Lisman

ficient for those without reliable Internet or in households without dedicated adult supervision. Because of this, there is a risk of a deep and highly concentrated learning crisis across marginalized communities of the region. While comparatively wealthy and middle-class families may find ways to keep their children cognitively and emotionally on track, marginalized communities bear the brunt of the interruption. These are the communities most vulnerable to spikes in illiteracy, failure and dropout rates, even in cases where automatic grade policies are applied to jump-start the new school year. Recovery efforts and international assistance will need to carefully assess the educational fallout of 2020 (and perhaps beyond) if they are to be effective."

*The Advisor welcomes comments on its Q&A section. Readers can write editor Gene Kuleta at [gkuleta@thedialogue.org](mailto:gkuleta@thedialogue.org).*

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