



WORLD DAY OF PRAYER AND ACTION FOR CHILDREN 2021

JOINT STATEMENT CALLING FOR CHILDREN'S RETURN TO SCHOOL

PREAMBLE

We, the representatives of the organizations listed below, have come together **calling for schools to reopen and to prioritize children's mental health, emotional, and spiritual well-being.** We present this statement on the **World Day of Prayer and Action for Children***, commemorated annually on **World Children's Day**, the anniversary of the adoption of the **Convention on the Rights of the Child**. We call for urgent action by leaders worldwide, including political and religious leaders, faith communities from all religious traditions, policymakers, teachers, and others concerned about children's well-being.

We recognize that the COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on the lives of children and young people, cutting them off from healthcare and education, and affecting their mental health and wellbeing. **As of the end of October 2021, UNESCO warned that nearly 800 million students around the world were still affected by full or partial school closures.** The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the existing economic disparities and also shown how inequalities violate the rights of many children.

According to UNICEF, "despite the increased availability of online resources, it is estimated that at least one in three of the world's schoolchildren – 463 million – were unable to access remote learning".¹ Even for those boys and girls with access to remote learning during school closures, many children found it difficult to continue their studies remotely due to factors including increased violence in the home. Dr. Najat Maalla M'jid, the Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary General on Violence against Children, has recently stated that "school closures contributed to increased anxiety and isolation among children, along with sadness, frustration, stress, disruptive behavior, hyperactivity, and sleeping and eating disorders".

¹ <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/covid-19-least-third-worlds-schoolchildren-unable-access-remotelearning-during>

School closures not only result in students falling behind in their learning, many children are cut off from essential school-based services such as immunization, nutrition, and mental health and psychosocial support. They are cut off from their teachers who are often the first to recognize signs of distress, potential neglect or abuse among their students and to arrange interventions to help protect them. School closures could add to stress and increase the risk of poor mental health due to the loss of peer interaction and daily routines. We are also concerned about the lack of awareness, understanding, and prevailing stigma and judgment concerning the mental health of children and young people and the need for better support for parents and caregivers. Even before the pandemic, there was a lack of investment in mental health services and now the demand is even greater.

Children and youth consulted are raising their voices on climate change, ending racism and gender discrimination and calling on adults to build a better future as the world recovers from the pandemic. To adequately respond to the global education crisis and the concerns raised by children, we must come together — governments, civil society, multilateral organizations, the private sector, teachers, faith communities and others — to address the immense challenges faced by the younger generation.

We identify the following **key priorities for recovery in schools**:

- Targeted programs to bring all children and youth back to school, where they can access tailored services and support to meet their needs related to learning, physical and mental health, and psychosocial well-being;
- Effective remedial lessons or teaching to help students catch up on lost learning;
- Support for teachers to address learning losses and incorporate digital technology into their teaching and address the inequalities in children’s access to such technology; and,
- Learning about climate change and existing solutions in school curricula as called for by children and youth.

CALL TO ACTION BY FAITH COMMUNITIES

We call on all persons and communities of faith to support and advocate for schools and educators to create learning environments that are sensitive to the social, emotional and spiritual needs and concerns of children and youth.

CALL TO ACTION TO GOVERNMENTS AND INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

We call upon governments and international organizations to support all possible measures so children return to school and a learning environment that meets their needs. We ask them to:

- Establish or invest in supportive and inclusive learning environments which address children’s mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being, while supporting their cognitive readiness, as well as supporting them in civic engagement and collaboration in advocating for climate solutions;
- Scale up evidence-based school programmes to provide preventative and responsive mental health services;

- Involve children and young people in decisions affecting their education and to ensure children's rights and best interests are at the heart of COVID-19 responses;
- Address the disparities in children's access to learning and provide special support for migrant children's education;
- Include violence prevention and response measures, and remove violence-related barriers to return to school post COVID-19, in all school reopening plans.

On this **World Day of Prayer and Action for Children 2021**, we pledge to do our part by inspiring and empowering children, galvanizing religious leaders and faith communities, teachers, parents, civil society organizations, international organizations, technology companies, governments, and many others to take urgent action so that children's right to education remains at the heart of all COVID-19 response. We commit to strengthening grassroots initiatives to promote all children's return to school and to take action to prioritize the mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being of all children.

This Statement is hereby presented on November 19, 2021 by the following organizations:

1. Alliance for the Protection of Children
2. Arigatou International
3. Bahá'í International Community
4. ChildFund Alliance
5. Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, New York Office
6. Global Network of Religions for Children
7. Global Partnership to End Violence Against Children
8. Harvard University's Human Flourishing Program
9. International Network of Engaged Buddhists (INEB)
10. Interfaith Alliance for Safer Communities
11. International Society for the Prevention of Child Abuse & Neglect (ISPCAN)
12. Joint Learning Initiative of Faith and Local Communities
13. New York Board of Rabbis
14. International Conference of Rabbis
15. Religions for Peace
16. Shanti Ashram
17. The African Youth and Children's Network for Human Rights (YCNR)
18. United Religions Initiative
19. UNICEF
20. World Council of Churches
21. World Vision International

We invite others to join us by adding your organization's name below:

<https://bit.ly/3yDnYaj>

Information on the **World Day of Prayer and Action for Children** can be found at:

<https://prayerandactionforchildren.org/world-day-of-prayer-and-action/>