

Request for Proposals: Education Research for COVID-19 Response & Recovery

Spring 2021 Round

Last updated May 12, 2021.

J-PAL is hosting a one-time Education Research for COVID-19 Response & Recovery (the Covid round) request for proposals (RFP) to fund randomized evaluations of strategies to improve access, quality, equity, and relevance of pre-primary, primary, and post-primary education in response to the COVID-19 pandemic across low- and middle-income countries. This request for proposals will consider **full research projects** and **pilot research projects** that address key questions on how best to mitigate learning loss as a result of school closures and how to continue and motivate student learning during and after the COVID crisis.

J-PAL affiliates, postdoctoral fellows, and PPE invited researchers are eligible to apply for full and pilot funding. PhD students who have a J-PAL affiliate on their thesis committee at their host university are eligible to apply for up to \$50,000 in pilot funding.

The Covid round welcomes a full range of proposals that are particularly relevant for a COVID-affected world. This includes but is not limited to topics such as girls' enrollment, remote and distance learning, and remedial education/academic recovery, as well as cross-cutting themes in gender, equity, and public/private schools. Based on evidence gaps and policy needs, we particularly welcome strong proposals in the following areas:

- Innovations in education technology designed to make remote learning more equitable and accessible during school closures;
- Policies to reduce the gender gaps in school participation and learning both during and after the COVID crisis;
- The use of remedial education to accelerate learning for disadvantaged students, such as girls and disabled children, upon re-entry into schools; and
- Pedagogical innovations in private schools which can have relevant lessons for lower-income public school communities.

Proposals also have the opportunity to apply for additional funding if they partner with a cognitive sciences researcher or a psychologist to incorporate an interdisciplinary component such as piloting a new instrument/intervention, or add a new module to their existing survey(s).

Application materials should be submitted to Priyanka Varma, PPE Initiative Manager, at PPE@povertyactionlab.org by **Sunday, June 13, 2021 at 11:59 pm ET**.

Background: The COVID-19 pandemic has left an unprecedented 1.6 billion children and youth out of school,¹ affecting approximately 85 percent of the world's student population.² Yet even before the pandemic, 258 million children and youth of primary- and secondary-school age were out of

¹ https://www.un.org/development/desa/dspd/wp-content/uploads/sites/22/2020/08/sg_policy_brief_covid-19_and_education_august_2020.pdf

² <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/33696/148198.pdf?sequence=4&isAllowed=y>

school,³ and low levels of school quality meant that even students attending school regularly were struggling to achieve basic literacy and numeracy. In Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda, for example, three-quarters of grade 3 students could not read a basic sentence in 2014. In rural India, half of students in grade 3 could not solve a two-digit subtraction problem in 2018.⁴ Based on current projections, the share of children below minimum proficiency levels is expected to increase by 25 percent.⁵

Learning losses, resulting from school closures, are compounded by [inequities](#),⁶ particularly for students who were already left behind by education systems. In response, many countries have pursued online learning during school closures as a stop gap measure. However, less than half of households in low- and middle-income countries have internet access.⁷ With differential access to remote learning and home conditions further widening learning gaps among students, children and youth from disadvantaged backgrounds are at high risk of being left further behind.

Meanwhile, as schools slowly begin to reopen, girls and other vulnerable groups are at high risk of not returning to school. School systems must therefore both encourage school re-entry for as many students as possible, while ensuring equitable learning for all. Previous research shows that a central barrier to learning is that children enter classrooms at very different levels, many unable to keep up with curriculum. As the COVID crisis is expected to widen the gap between children with access to learning resources out of school and those without, teachers are likely to return to classes with an even wider range of students' abilities in their classrooms, making their jobs even more difficult, and risking even more children being left behind.

Finding ways to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic and support school systems as they reopen is a pressing challenge that must be met in the context of severe budget constraints, insufficient crisis preparation, and persistent gender and socioeconomic gaps in many low- and middle-income countries around the world.

Framework: Over the past seven years, J-PAL has supported research to inform critical policy decisions in post-primary education. J-PAL's [Post Primary Education Initiative \(PPE\)](#), supported by a number of donors, including the Douglas B. Marshall, Jr. Family Foundation, Echidna Giving, Google.org, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, and the U.K. Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (formerly the U.K. Department for International Development), has aimed to fill key gaps in what is effective in secondary, vocational/entrepreneurial, and tertiary education. Notably, funding from PPE has doubled the number of randomized evaluations in post-primary education since 2013. However, many open questions remain in both post-primary education and other segments of the education landscape, from early childhood programs to technical and vocational education and training (TVET), and tertiary education. The COVID-19 pandemic has likely exacerbated existing questions and challenges.

Focus: J-PAL's one-time Education Research for COVID-19 Response & Recovery RFP (the Covid round) funds randomized evaluations of strategies to improve access, quality, equity, and relevance

³ <https://www.brookings.edu/research/beyond-reopening-schools-how-education-can-emerge-stronger-than-before-covid-19/>

⁴ <https://www.povertyactionlab.org/updates/focusing-foundations-education-time-covid-19>

⁵ <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/future-development/2020/07/30/learning-losses-due-to-covid-19-could-add-up-to-10-trillion/>

⁶ <https://www.cgdev.org/blog/more-our-database-school-closures-new-education-policies-may-be-increasing-educational>

⁷ <https://en.unesco.org/news/new-report-global-broadband-access-undermines-urgent-need-reach-half-world-still-unconnected>

of pre-primary, primary, and post-primary education in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. In doing so, the RFP aims to build a stronger base of evidence to inform the design of more effective (and cost-effective) education policies and programs in response to the COVID crisis.

J-PAL's Covid round is particularly interested in projects evaluating the impact of the following three priority areas and three cross-cutting themes as they relate to access, quality, equity, and relevance of education:

1. **Remote and Distance Learning:** Large-scale efforts to utilize technology in support of online learning, distance education, and remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic are quickly emerging and developing. Yet despite growing interest in the potential for technology-enabled instruction to ensure remote student learning, the evidence on the impact of greater use of technology for learning is both limited and mixed. We welcome proposals that seek to close this evidence gap and answer important immediate questions, such as: How can remote and distance learning programs be used effectively to improve student learning at home? What are the key implementation issues to take into consideration with online learning (i.e., electricity or internet access, durability of devices, etc.)? What kinds of software/learning products are most effective (i.e., television, radio, laptops/computers)? What role should parents and/or caregivers take to support younger learners with technology use and online learning? What type of support do teachers need to use technology and how do programs address this need? What are effective blended/online models for teacher professional development? Are different types of programs required for different types of skills? Will remote and distance learning exacerbate issues of inequity where vulnerable groups or low-income populations will be excluded from or kept at the edge of educational practices and innovation? How effective are remotely-designed, tailored instruction programs in supporting student learning? What is the effectiveness and reliability of technology-enabled assessments, such as phone-based assessments? Proposals should also articulate whether the technology is aligned to classroom content or not, (i.e. how is it complementary and/or additive).
2. **Girls' Education:** Around the world, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated school participation rates, with girls particularly at high risk of not returning to school. The opportunity cost of schooling for boys and girls may also look quite different. For example, if low-income mothers have to increase their labor force participation to increase their income, domestic work may fall onto the girls in the household, potentially taking them out of school and exacerbating learning loss (an [example](#) of increased labor demand and decreased human capital investment by Shah and Steinberg 2019). As schools gradually begin to reopen, we particularly welcome proposals that explore some of the main barriers to girls' enrollment/re-enrollment in school that have been shown to work pre-COVID, but we don't know whether they are effective in the context of post-COVID reopening: (1) distance to school, (2) financial and other opportunity costs of attending school, (3) remedial education, and (4) lack of adequate food or nutrition. Additionally, given how the pandemic may shift aspirations and future-oriented behaviors for girls and boys, we welcome proposals looking at whether empowerment and livelihood for adolescents (ELA) programs can address these outcomes. We also encourage proposals that seek to answer key open questions in girls' education, as highlighted by the Population Council's [Girls' Education Roadmap](#), including: What is the impact of better water, sanitation, and hygiene efforts in schools on girls' enrollment, particularly in light of the COVID crisis? How can

schools mitigate issues of gender-based violence and does that improve female participation and learning in schools? Would a well-developed life skills curriculum, practically designed to respond to real-life concerns, reduce girls' dropout rates? Which aspects of multi-component life skills programs are essential for improving participation and/or learning? Does delaying marriage and/or childbearing lead to improved education outcomes? Does community engagement improve girls' enrollment, attainment, and/or learning on its own? Does it amplify the effect of other intervention components directed at girls? What combination of interventions can get students, especially girls, back on track, especially in settings where gender disparities in learning outcomes continue to disadvantage girls?

3. **Remedial Education/Academic Recovery:** Extended school closures will likely exacerbate low learning outcomes and related learning gaps among students. As schools reopen, teaching effectively is and will be particularly challenging for teachers due to the overall learning loss among students, as well as the greater variation in the preparation of children and youth when they re-enter school. We welcome proposals that help us understand how remote learning may connect students with teachers across geographies (e.g. rural and urban connections) and the effectiveness of such connections, the effectiveness of diagnostic assessments to help target instruction, which interventions rapidly accelerate learning outcomes (e.g. foundational literacy and numeracy) as well as how to reduce the variance of achievement in classroom settings and ensure that all students are progressing.
4. **Public and Private Schools:** The response to the Covid-19 pandemic across public and private schools varies in many ways. On one hand, private schools are more vulnerable to school closures because of parents' inability to pay fees. On the other hand, it is possible that private schools may have to be more innovative regarding pedagogy during the pandemic given they must demonstrate value to paying parents while public and non-governmental schools may not face the same pressure. Understanding what innovations private schools (or public and non-governmental schools) are deploying and understanding the effectiveness of these interventions and potentially designing and studying ways of extending those innovations to lower-income public school communities is the first order interest.

If you're looking for organizations running programs that might help answer these questions, you can find and filter through hundreds of organizations and programs working on gender and education globally [here](#).

Given the Covid round is motivated by the need to rapidly understand the most effective ways to address COVID-induced challenges, J-PAL will give preference to proposals that are relevant both during and after the crisis (i.e., how to leverage household educational engagement, what forms of remedial education or learning acceleration are effective, how to bridge achievement gaps, etc.). As such, we welcome proposals aiming to evaluate the impact of strategies that improve other aspects of education systems to build resilience against future crises.

Three critical themes that cut across the three priority areas listed above are **gender, equity, and public/private schools**. Particularly in response to the ongoing pandemic, it is important to examine the gender implications of different educational programs, as well as the differences related to socioeconomic status, disability status, language of instruction, and other ways in which

groups are marginalized. We encourage projects to expand in their proposals whether and how the research proposal addresses issues of gender and equity such as differential impacts based on students' initial learning levels. Furthermore, given school closures and re-openings affect both public and private schools, J-PAL encourages proposals that aim to understand the implication of these strategies on both public and private school going populations.

For gender specifically, researchers should include a discussion in their proposals of how the intervention they are looking at may affect boys and girls differently, whether the intervention is likely to have a particular gender focus, and whether the intervention is cognizant of the potential special vulnerabilities of girls or boys. For example, evaluations of at-home support should consider how parental engagement varies by their child's gender. A study may also be directed narrowly at boys or girls as long as the researcher(s) justify why the intervention is specifically aimed at a particular gender. Evaluations are expected to include analysis disaggregated by gender, and we request applicants to state if the studies are powered to detect differential effects by gender.

To elaborate, J-PAL's donors are making an effort for J-PAL's Covid round to study heterogeneity in program impacts by beneficiary/participant gender more systematically. Many studies funded by J-PAL initiatives already collect study participants' gender. In such cases, and when outcome data are individual-specific, we request that grantees conduct heterogeneity analyses by beneficiary gender for the study's main results for internal reporting to J-PAL (to be shared in the final grant report). A single study might be underpowered to detect heterogeneous treatment effects, or null results might not seem interesting in one study, but these findings may be meaningful when included in an analysis across studies.

J-PAL will use the reported results for (a) determining potential pooled statistical analyses to conduct across studies and (b) generating gender-related policy lessons in education. Our reporting template will include a question on this, which researchers are encouraged to fill it in when applicable. We recognize that there will be cases where this reporting is not applicable, for various reasons. In these cases, the PIs can just provide a brief explanation to be shared with the J-PAL team.

Overall, to ensure that studies take these themes into account where appropriate, J-PAL's Covid round will consider gender, equity, and public/private schools as part of the formal evaluation criteria included in the RFP and sent to Review Board members.

Additionally, proposals should clearly articulate what the **demand** for their research is including who the intended user of the findings is, whether the research question is something policy makers are asking for, and/or how the proposal team intends to encourage the **take up** of research findings.

Research proposals that address the themes outlined above will be prioritized, but other proposals dedicated to responding to the COVID-19 pandemic using alternate lenses will also be considered. If a researcher is uncertain about whether a research project is eligible for funding, please contact Priyanka Varma, PPE Initiative Manager, at PPE@povertyactionlab.org.

Funds: J-PAL's Covid round expects to award funding across two types of proposals:

1. ***Full Research Projects:*** These grants will generally be for a maximum amount of \$200,000 for research projects at a mature level of development. Not only must the research question be clear, but the applicants must also demonstrate a commitment from implementing partners, a method of randomization, well-defined instruments, and power calculations. The expectation is that these projects will result in a publicly available paper that is eventually submitted to a top economics or education journal.
2. ***Pilot Research Projects:*** These grants will be for a maximum amount of \$75,000. They are for studies with a clear research question and for which the design and implementation of an evaluation requires further testing and pilot data. These grants may also be for descriptive work that aims to inform future randomized evaluation development. However, in these cases, the budget should be closer to \$25,000 rather than \$75,000. Applications in this category should be for exploratory work and not simply inexpensive randomized evaluations. If a researcher applies for pilot funding from more than one J-PAL initiative, the proposal should justify (i) why the project spans both initiatives and (ii) why more than \$75,000 in funding is needed for the pilot. The expectation is that these projects will ultimately develop into full-scale randomized evaluations. For projects that do not result in a full-scale evaluation, the expectation is that these projects will produce a publicly available paper documenting insights from the pilot.

Additional funding opportunity: Interdisciplinary research between cognitive sciences researchers, psychologists, and economists can further the knowledge base on how to improve pedagogical approaches at scale. Researchers in cognitive sciences and psychology have deep subject matter expertise on how children learn while economists bring rigorous evaluation methods to illuminate what is effective in the real world. To support such efforts, proposals have the opportunity to request additional funding if they partner with a researcher in cognitive sciences or psychology to incorporate an interdisciplinary component into their project, such as piloting a new instrument or a new intervention. New modules could also be designed to be added to field surveys. To be considered, proposal teams should include a brief description of their proposed activities in the narrative and include relevant costs in the budget. The funding cap for this additional component is \$25,000. It could include RA time, salaries for field staff, travels for researchers and requested equipment. If proposal teams are interested in this opportunity and would like support in matching with a researcher in cognitive sciences/psychology, please email Adrien Pawlik, Research Manager, at apawlik@povertyactionlab.org.

Eligibility: For *full research projects*, the pool of eligible applicants is comprised of J-PAL affiliates, J-PAL post-doctoral fellows, and PPE invited researchers outside of the network who work in education and are approved by the Executive Committee of the J-PAL Board.

For *pilot research projects*, the pool of eligible researchers includes those eligible for full research projects and PhD students who have a J-PAL affiliate on their thesis committee at their host university. This adviser must provide a letter of support that indicates his/her willingness to remain involved in a supervisory role throughout the lifetime of the project and provide an objective assessment of the project's merits and likelihood of success. The Review Board also expects the adviser to provide the applicant with guidance on the proposal prior to submission.

All proposals may include other collaborators outside of this group, as long as the principal investigator (PI) is among those invited to participate in the RFP.

Please note that all proposal teams that are working in a country with a regional J-PAL office (see list [here](#)) or IPA country office (see list [here](#)) are encouraged to reach out to that office at least three weeks in advance of the Covid round deadline in order to help prepare their application and provide a letter of office support.

Applications: Applications for full/pilot grants must be submitted to Priyanka Varma at PPE@povertyactionlab.org by **Sunday, June 13, 2021 at 11:59 pm ET**.

In addition, when submitting a proposal to the Covid round, applicants should:

- Attach a letter of support from their partner (intervention-implementing organization). Letters of support from all implementing partners should indicate willingness to work with the research team and willingness to share program cost data with J-PAL (through the PI) for the purpose of conducting the program's cost analysis.
- Attach a letter of support from their J-PAL regional office or IPA country office, when applicable, indicating willingness to work with the research team to provide support on their project.
- Concurrently apply for approval from their respective Institutional Review Boards (Human Subjects Committees). The award of any grant is contingent on approval from the host institution's IRB (unless that IRB defers to the judgment of MIT's IRB), as well as the IRB at MIT, the Committee On the Use of Humans as Experimental Subjects (COUHES).
- Submit the application to their office of sponsored programs or contracts department, as MIT will need official acceptance of the proposal and budget by the applicant's institution to process the sub-award. Applicants can do this after submitting to the Review Board, but doing so before the award decision will lessen delays.

Grants Conditions: Recipients of full or pilot research funds will be asked to:

1. Peer-review proposals in future RFP rounds in which they are not applying for funding.
2. Collect and report to J-PAL cost data that are sufficient to conduct a cost-effectiveness analysis. J-PAL's Covid round team will provide a cost-collection template to projects selected for funding, and applicants are encouraged to budget for these activities at the outset.
3. Publish de-identified data to in accordance with J-PAL's [Data and Code Availability Policy](#). J-PAL's research team will work with you to clean, label, and document datasets collected as part of a randomized trial before publishing them in the [J-PAL dataverse](#) or another data repository of your choice. Requests for data publication services can be made by sending an email to data@povertyactionlab.org. (*Full studies only*)
4. Share data collection instruments and methodologies.
5. Register the trial with the AEA RCT Registry (<https://www.socialscienceregistry.org/>) prior to beginning RCT fieldwork. Registration includes 18 required fields (such as applicant's name and

a small subset of applicant's IRB requirements), with the entire process taking less than 20 minutes if all documentation is in order. There is also the opportunity to include more information, including power calculations and an optional pre-analysis plan. The Initiatives will contact grantees at the start of fieldwork to request the assigned registration number. For questions and support with the registry, please contact Keesler Welch at keesler@mit.edu.

6. Provide brief annual progress reports and a final narrative and financial report within 60 days (for pilot projects) and 120 days (for full projects) of completion of the award period. The Covid round team will follow up one year after the award is made to provide the necessary narrative and financial reporting templates.
7. Produce a publicly available paper describing the intervention, study design, analysis, and results that can be posted on the J-PAL website, ideally within six months of the project end date.
8. Participate in one of J-PAL's activities on a mutually agreed date and place. This activity could be an evidence workshop, a webinar, a matchmaking conference, or a presentation to one of J-PAL's donors.
9. Credit J-PAL's Post-Primary Education Initiative in any presentations and publications, including academic papers, policy briefs, press releases, blogs, and organizational newsletters that emerge from the project.

Review Process: Selection of awardees for all applications will follow a two-stage process:

1. Proposals will be distributed for peer review to referees selected from a roster of researchers and donors focused on education research and policy. Each application will be reviewed by at least three referees. Reviewers will remain anonymous to applicants. Reviewers may use their own judgment when contacting others for assistance with proposal content.

To avoid conflicts of interest, those submitting proposals will not be part of the review roster for the round. However, they may be asked to volunteer in subsequent rounds, whether they are awarded the funds or not. No spouse, partner, or immediate family member of any individual named on a proposal application may serve as a peer or Board referee in the round in which the applicant's proposal is being reviewed.

2. Proposals will be scored using the evaluation criteria and then ranked by members of the Review Board. Funding decisions will be made in a meeting of the Review Board.

If an applicant would like to appeal a decision of the Review Board, he/she may contact Priyanka Varma, PPE Initiative Manager, at PPE@povertyactionlab.org within one week of the funding decision. This appeal will then be communicated to the Review Board.

Timeline

Week of April 12, 2021	Education Research for COVID-19 Response & Recovery RFP Released
Sunday, June 13, 2021	Proposal Submission Deadline
Week of June 28, 2021	Peer Review Deadline
Week of July 5, 2021	Review Board Meeting
Week of July 5, 2021	Funding Decisions Announced
Week of July 12, 2021	Revise and Resubmit Deadline
Week of August 9, 2021	Revise and Resubmit Decisions Announced

Administrative Notes: Budgets, Requirements, and Process

Full and pilot research grants are provided under an award from MIT to the grantee's host institution. For more information on budget, requirements, and process, along with related application materials, please visit [here](#).