

# Online Learning Resources, Challenges, and Coping Strategies of Low-Fee Private Schools in Ghana During COVID-19 Pandemic

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## ABSTRACT

In Ghana, the education sector has been one of the most affected sectors since the emergence of COVID-19. The plights of low-fee private schools (LFPSs) in the country could be exacerbated by the closure of schools due to COVID-19. This study investigated the online learning resources, challenges, and coping strategies of LFPSs during the closure of schools in Ghana due to COVID-19 pandemic. Google Form was used to gather data from 67 heads of LFPSs in Ghana between April and June 2020. We found that about one-fifth of LFPSs used online learning before the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic. Most LFPSs acquired an online learning resource due to COVID-19. However, heads of LFPSs had mixed perceptions of online learning. Also, the closure of schools affected school finances; teaching, learning and assessment of students; and the ability to pay teachers' salaries. To cope with their challenges, heads of LFPSs used strategies such as staff lay off; online learning and giving assignments; and the distribution of food items and personal protective equipment. The study recommends the following: there is a need for in-service training for teachers on online learning, improvement in the information and communication technology (ICT) infrastructure across the country, and subsidization of ICT resources. Also, the Government of Ghana should provide tax relief to telecommunication companies that improve their infrastructure and expand their coverage across the country to enhance internet accessibility and connectivity.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, low-fee private schools, online learning, Ghana

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## INTRODUCTION

Since the emergence of COVID-19 in December 2019, it has negatively affected the human development indicators of countries, especially educational indicators. Globally, about 107 countries, as of March 18, 2020, had implemented national closure of schools (Viner et al., 2020). Furthermore, it is estimated that about 1.4 billion children were affected by the closure of schools as of June 2020 (United Nations Development Program, 2020).

In Ghana, the first confirmed cases of COVID-19 were recorded on March 12, 2020, and as of May 4, 2022, 161,222 confirmed cases of COVID-19 have been recorded (Ghana Health Service, 2022). To curb the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Government of Ghana announced the closure of all educational institutions (private and public schools) on March 15, 2020. It is estimated that about 9.7 million Ghanaian students were affected by the national closure of schools (UNESCO & UNICEF, 2020). On May 21, 2020, the Government of Ghana announced the partial reopening of schools for junior high school, senior high school, and university final year students across the country (Frimpong, 2020). Furthermore, on January 3, 2021, the

Government of Ghana announced the reopening of schools from kindergarten to junior high school in the country (Communications Bureau, 2021). According to the Ghana Statistical Service (GSS, 2020), the education sector was the most affected sector during the partial lockdown (65%) and after the lifting of the partial lockdown (63%).

There are two types of schools in Ghana based on management and funding, namely public (government) and private schools. Public schools are financed and managed by the government, while private schools are funded and managed by individuals, community groups, religious bodies, or charitable trusts (Tooley et al., 2007).

After the national closure of schools, the Ghana Education Service and the Ministry of Education rolled out distance learning programs and online learning platforms to ensure continuous learning among learners, such as the launch of Ghana Learning TV (GL-TV) (Ministry of Education, 2020). Also, private schools in the country initiated and strengthened their online learning platforms to meet the educational needs of their learners.

Private institutions are essential stakeholders in the educational sector in Ghana. For instance, over one-fifth of basic school learners are enrolled in private institutions, while over one-third of technical and vocational learners are enrolled in private institutions. In addition,

about half of tertiary learners are enrolled in private institutions (Ministry of Education, 2019).

In Ghana, private institutions comprise both high- and low-fee schools. It is estimated that about two out of five private schools in Ghana are low-fee schools as of 2010 (International Finance Corporation, 2010). Limited financial resources characterize low-fee private schools (LFPSs) due to limited financial and business advisory services (International Finance Corporation, 2010). LFPSs rely on their internally-generated funds, especially tuition fees, for their survival since they are non-beneficiary of the Government of Ghana funding to the education sector. The closure of all educational institutions in Ghana due to COVID-19 could exacerbate the plights of LFPSs and poses a threat to their survival.

Also, empirical studies in Ghana on the impacts of COVID-19 on education have focused on students (Owusu-Fordjour et al., 2020; Sarpong et al., 2021; Tuffour et al., 2021; UNESCO & UNICEF, 2020), barriers and facilitators of online learning (Adarkwah, 2021), education (Nantwi & Boateng, 2020), and teachers (IPA, 2021). There is a lack of studies on the impact of COVID-19 on LFPSs. Hence, this study sought to investigate the online learning resources, challenges, and coping strategies of LFPSs during the closure of schools in Ghana due to COVID-19 pandemic. Hence, we ask the following research questions:

1. What online resources were used by LFPSs during COVID-19 pandemic?
2. What challenges did LFPSs experienced due to closure of schools to curb COVID-19 pandemic?
3. What strategies were used by LFPSs to cope with the challenges they experienced due to closure of schools to curb COVID-19 pandemic?

The findings from this study would aid policy makers and other education sector stakeholders in understanding the contextual situation of LFPSs to develop appropriate interventions to alleviate their plights.

## MATERIALS AND METHOD

### Study Design and Setting

This study used a descriptive research design to investigate the online learning resources and challenges and coping strategies of LFPSs in Ghana during COVID-19 pandemic. The descriptive research design was used because it enables researchers to describe a social phenomenon of interest.

Ghana has an estimated 30.8 population as of 2021, and a little over half of the population (56.7%) resides in urban areas (GSS, 2021). Ghana is a lower-middle-income country, and Accra is its capital (World Bank, 2017). Burkina Faso bounds Ghana to the North, the Gulf of Guinea to the South, Togo to the East, and Côte d'Ivoire to the West. Ghana has sixteen administrative regions.

### Data Collection

The data for the study was collected from heads of LFPSs from April 30, 2020, to June 2, 2020. Google Form was used to design an anonymous questionnaire. The online questionnaire consisted of 27 questions. The 27 questions consisted of 19 open-ended questions and

eight closed-ended questions. The questionnaire had four sections: socio-demographic characteristics, the role of parent-teacher association (PTA), online learning resources, and general school management.

The socio-demographic section covered questions such as the name of the school, region of school, number of students enrolled in the school, and number of teaching and non-teaching staff. The next section on the role of parent-teacher association covered questions concerning the roles of PTA, including whether a school had a functional PTA, how PTA are engaged in running the school, was PTA engaged during the emergence of COVID-19, and what role was PTA played during the emergence of COVID-19. The third section on online learning resources covered questions such as whether a school had an online learning resource to complement traditional teaching before the emergence of COVID-19, whether a school acquired an online learning resource during the emergence of COVID-19, name of the online learning resource used, and opinions about online learning, among others. The final section, general school management, covered whether a school had paid teachers since the closure of schools, how COVID-19 impacted the running of schools, measures to cope with the impacts of COVID-19, and how long schools can cope with school closures, among others.

The Google Form link was shared on Edify Ghana's<sup>1</sup> WhatsApp platform. Also, the researchers and heads of Edify Ghana partner schools were encouraged to share the Google Form link with heads of other LFPSs in Ghana. Participation in the study was voluntary, and heads of LFPSs were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. The online questionnaire began with the aims of the research and the use of the data. All participants consented to participate in the study before completing the online questionnaire.

### Data Analysis

All closed-ended responses were analyzed using the statistical package for social sciences (SPSS) software version 25. Descriptive statistics such as frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation were used to summarize the responses. Also, all open-ended responses were analyzed thematically using NVivo software version 10. To ensure reliability of open-ended responses, the authors used constant comparison method, where each open-ended response was analyzed and interpreted by comparing it to already analyzed and interpreted open-ended responses. In addition, peers with expertise in mixed method design were made to examine how the authors collected the data, analyzed the open- and closed-ended data, and reported the findings.

### Characteristics of Participants

In total, 67 heads of LFPSs participated in this survey (Table 1). The mean age of heads of LFPSs was 42.2 years. More than half of the heads of LFPSs were males (52%) and had attained a bachelor's degree (54%). Over one-third of LFPSs that participated in this survey were in the Greater Accra region (37%). Also, seven out of 10 LFPSs that participated in this survey were junior high schools. The mean number of students enrolled in LFPSs was 342.8. Furthermore, the mean number of teaching and non-teaching staff was 21.3 and 7.7, respectively.

<sup>1</sup> Edify Ghana is an international Christian non-governmental organization that assist Christian LFPSs through the provision of training, access to loans, and education technology.

**Table 1.** Characteristics of participants (n=67)

| Characteristics   | Frequency | %    |
|---|-----------|------|
| <b>Age</b>  |           |      |
| Range   | 25-82     |      |
| Mean  | 42.2      |      |
| Standard deviation  | 12.1      |      |
| <b>Sex</b>  |           |      |
| Male  | 35        | 52.2 |
| Female  | 32        | 47.8 |
| <b>Educational level</b>                                    |           |      |
| Junior high school  | 1         | 1.5  |
| Senior high school  | 4         | 6    |
| Higher national diploma                                     | 1         | 1.5  |
| Teacher training certificate                                | 1         | 1.5  |
| Post graduate certificate/diploma                           | 13        | 19.4 |
| Bachelor's degree   | 36        | 53.7 |
| Master's degree   | 9         | 13.4 |
| Doctorate degree  | 2         | 3    |
| <b>Region of school</b>                                     |           |      |
| Ashanti   | 7         | 10.4 |
| Bono  | 4         | 6    |
| Central   | 18        | 26.9 |
| Eastern   | 7         | 10.4 |
| Greater Accra   | 25        | 37.3 |
| Western   | 6         | 9    |
| <b>The highest educational level provided by the school</b> |           |      |
| Pre-school  | 1         | 1.5  |
| Primary   | 13        | 19.4 |
| Junior high school  | 52        | 77.6 |
| Senior high school  | 1         | 1.5  |
| <b>Total number of students enrolled</b>                    |           |      |
| Range   | 15-2,041  |      |
| Mean  | 342.8     |      |
| Standard deviation  | 300.7     |      |
| <b>Total number of teaching staff</b>                       |           |      |
| Range   | 3-79      |      |
| Mean  | 21.3      |      |
| Standard deviation  | 12.9      |      |
| <b>Total number of non-teaching staff</b>                   |           |      |
| Range   | 1-34      |      |
| Mean  | 7.7       |      |
| Standard deviation  | 6.3       |      |

**Table 2.** Information on online learning resources (n=67)

|   | Frequency | %    |
|---|-----------|------|
| <b>Does the school use an online learning platform before the emergence of COVID-19?</b>  |           |      |
| Yes   | 13        | 19.4 |
| No  | 54        | 80.6 |
| <b>Are you still using your online learning platform? *</b>                               |           |      |
| Yes   | 12        | 92.3 |
| No  | 1         | 7.7  |
| <b>During the emergence of COVID-19, have your school acquired an online platform? **</b> |           |      |
| Yes   | 29        | 53.7 |
| No  | 25        | 46.3 |
| <b>Name of online learning platforms used during COVID-19 ***</b>                         |           |      |
| ClassDojo   | 1         | 1.8  |
| E-mail  | 1         | 1.8  |
| Google Classroom  | 9         | 16.5 |
| Google Drive  | 1         | 1.8  |
| Google Meet   | 1         | 1.8  |
| Khan Academy  | 1         | 1.8  |
| Microsoft Team  | 1         | 1.8  |
| Schoology   | 1         | 1.8  |
| Seesaw  | 1         | 1.8  |
| SOS Distance Learning   | 1         | 1.8  |
| WhatsApp  | 29        | 52.7 |
| Zoom  | 8         | 14.6 |

Note. \*Total number of participants=13; \*\*Total number of participants=54; & \*\*\*Total number of responses=55

"In my opinion, online learning is good because of its flexible nature. The cost is also relatively cheaper, and above all, it gives students self-discipline and self-motivation" (Male, Central Region).

"It is the best method of teaching and learning during this pandemic. It is also developing the learners and staff in the usage of technology" (Female, Western Region).

However, some heads of LFPSs expressed unfavorable views about online learning. They narrated factors such as accessibility of ICT devices (e.g., smartphones and tablets), internet accessibility and connectivity, non-suitability of online learning for everyone (e.g., learners residing in rural areas and learners from poor households), and high cost of online learning made online learning unfavorable. Other factors include increased teachers' workload, ineffective supervision of online learning by teachers and parents, and the non-interactive nature of online learning. Some heads of LFPSs explained that:

"It's not like the main classroom where teachers can supervise learners and give the necessary help. You don't know whether the learner is doing the work independently or someone is doing it for them. Not everyone has access to the internet, and even some [learners] don't have access to the devices" (Female, Eastern Region).

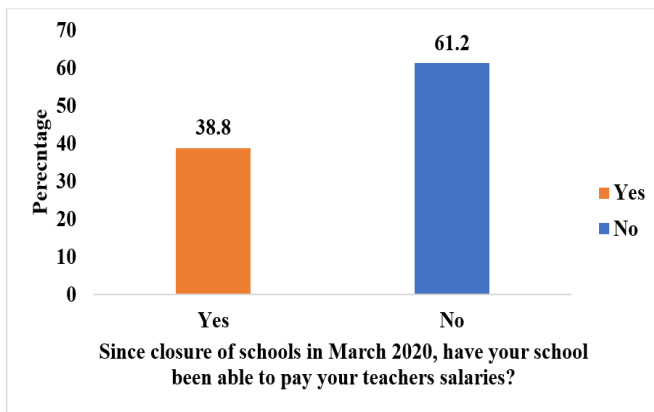
"Online learning is a good initiative, but it is a challenge for children in rural areas and those from poor homes to access it" (Male, Central Region).

## RESULTS

### Online Learning Resources

Table 2 shows that only 13 LFPSs, representing 19%, used online learning before the COVID-19 pandemic. A little over half of LFPSs (54%) who did not use online learning before the COVID-19 pandemic acquired one during the pandemic. The dominant online learning platform used by LFPSs were WhatsApp, Google Classroom, and Zoom.

Heads of LFPSs were asked their opinion on online learning. They expressed both favorable and unfavorable views about online learning. Some heads of LFPSs reported that online learning is flexible, enhances knowledge of technology, complements traditional face-to-face learning, and is the best teaching method during the COVID-19 pandemic. The following quotes buttress the favorable views about online learning:



**Figure 1.** Percentage distribution of heads of LFPSSs whose schools were able to pay their teachers' salaries since March 2020

### Challenges

The challenges experienced by LFPSSs due to the closure of schools were, as follows:

1. inability to pay teachers' salaries,
2. affected finances of schools, and
3. affected teaching, learning and assessment of students.

#### *Inability to pay teachers' salaries*

Several heads of LFPSSs narrated they could not pay their teachers' salaries due to the untimely closure of schools. The inability of heads of LFPSSs to pay their teachers may affect the livelihood of teachers and their households since their salaries are their primary source of income. Also, some heads of LFPSSs mentioned that they could lose their teachers and students if the COVID-19 pandemic protracts:

"We received no income, so living conditions were challenging for my teachers and myself. We were taken unaware. We couldn't collect tuition and exam fees. However, the parents are not ready to pay the tuition fees they owe us since we couldn't end the term. There is a probability of losing some teachers and learners if this pandemic should keep long" (Female, Central Region).

In addition, heads of LFPSSs were asked if they had paid teachers since March 2020, and about two out of five heads (39%) affirmed that they paid their teachers for some of the months (**Figure 1**).

#### *Affected finances of schools*

Heads of LFPSSs reported an increased financial burden due to the closure of schools. Tuition fees are the primary cash inflows for LFPSSs, and the closure of schools affected their cash inflow since most parents refused to pay the tuition fees they owed for the term. It is also worth noting that most tuition fees are often in arrears, so the closure of schools exacerbated the financial health of LFPSSs. Hence, most LFPSSs could not honor their financial commitments such as loan repayment schedules and statutory payments (e.g., payment of social security contribution of staff and tax payment):

"It has affected the school negatively, especially how we pay our salaries, taxes, utilities, loans and social security contribution of staff" (Male, Ashanti Region).

"We were not able to complete the term successfully. Consequently, parents are unwilling to pay the arrears of fees, so it has brought financial burden on the school" (Female, Eastern Region).

In addition, limited cash inflow from tuition fees stalled the infrastructural projects of LFPSSs, such as the expansion of school infrastructures:

"It has affected me a lot because there were some ongoing projects before the pandemic [but] all those projects have stalled" (Male, Central Region).

#### *Affected teaching, learning, and assessment of learners*

Most heads of LFPSSs highlighted that the closure of schools prematurely by the government brought the academic calendar to a halt and consequently affected teaching and learning during the academic year. Also, some LFPSSs could not conduct their end-of-term examinations for learners to assess their academic performance for the term:

"It abruptly ended the term such that learners could not write their end-of-term examination" (Female, Greater Accra).

"Learners have been affected academically, and all programs for the year have been distorted" (Male, Bono Region).

#### *Coping Strategies*

Furthermore, the study found that heads of LFPSSs employed various strategies to cope with the negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. The coping strategy used by LFPSSs includes

1. online learning and giving assignments,
2. staff lay off, and
3. sharing food items and personal protective equipment (PPE).

#### *Use of online learning and giving of assignments*

Heads of LFPSSs relied on online learning to provide education to their learners while at home. In addition, some heads of LFPSSs planned to expand their existing online learning platforms to enhance the provision of education to their learners. The following quotes buttress the theme:

"We are improving our online teaching and learning using google classroom and other online resources through the help of Edify to make our online learning more effective" (Female, Eastern Region).

Apart from online learning, heads of LFPSSs employed other strategies such as sending weekly assignments to learners at home and organizing classes at home for learners whose parents can afford them:

"We keep visiting pupils and holding classes for few of them whose parents are willing" (Male, Greater Accra Region).

"We have decided to give take-home assignments for parents to pick up from the school for their children. Parents return the assignments for marking and pick another. We also explain the assignments on phones and WhatsApp to parents where necessary" (Female, Greater Accra Region).

### Staff lay off

Heads of LFPSS had to continue paying their staff while schools were closed. To help cut costs due to limited cash inflows, some heads of LFPSS had to lay off staff to salvage their financial situation:

“Some staff have been laid off temporarily. I have sent a letter to notify the Social Security and National Insurance Trust about staff lay off” (Female, Western Region).

In addition, some heads of LFPSS engaged a few staff to teach online and paid those staff from tokens provided by parents:

“We maintained a ‘skeleton’ staff to run our online learning program. Parents contributed a token to support the school during the period, and we paid those staff from the proceeds” (Female, Greater Accra Region).

### Sharing food items and PPE

Heads of LFPSS also shared food items and PPE with their staff to alleviate their plights during the closure of schools. Some heads of LFPSS also extended this kind gesture to their learner’s parents. Some heads of LFPSS narrated the following:

“At the end of the month, we shared some of the school’s food items we had in stock. These included rice, spaghetti, oil, and tin tomatoes. These food items were bought on loan before the COVID-19 pandemic” (Female, Central Region).

“The school recently received food items from individuals and groups, which were shared with the parents of our learners. About 18 parents benefited from this initiative” (Male, Greater Accra Region).

## DISCUSSION

This study investigated the online learning resources, challenges, and coping strategies of LFPSS during the closure of schools in Ghana due to COVID-19 pandemic. The results showed that most LFPSS used traditional teaching methods in educating their students before the emergence of COVID-19. However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, most LFPSS acquired online learning platforms to ensure continuous education to their learners at home. The acquisition of online learning platforms by LFPSS during the COVID-19 will promote blended learning in Ghana and ensure the country will be on track to achieve the sustainable development goal (SDG) 4, which aims to achieve inclusive and equitable quality education.

Heads of LFPSS had mixed perceptions about online learning. While some heads of LFPSS believed that online learning enhanced learning during the emergence of COVID-19 and it was the best teaching method during the COVID-19 pandemic, others had concerns about the appropriateness of online learning as a mode of learning for every learner and online learning increased the workload of teachers. Previous studies have established that online learning is the best method during the COVID-19 era (Adarkwah, 2021), and the use of online learning has increased teachers’ workload (Carver-Thomas et al., 2021). Concerns about the appropriateness of online learning as a mode of learning for every learner will slow the uptake of online learning in Ghana, which will negatively impact the country’s progress towards the

achievement of SDG target 4.5, which aims to ensure equal access to all levels of education.

Also, heads of LFPSS reported barriers to the use of online learning. These barriers include accessibility of ICT devices, internet accessibility and connectivity, high cost of online learning, ineffective supervision of online learning by teachers and parents, and non-interactive nature of online learning. These barriers would not allow learners to harness the full benefits of online learning. This finding is consistent with previous studies which identified accessibility of ICT devices, internet accessibility and connectivity, and high cost of online learning, as barriers to online learning (Adarkwah, 2021; Owusu-Fordjour et al., 2020; Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021; Razkane et al., 2022; Tarkar, 2020; Tuffour et al., 2021; Wolf et al., 2021). In Ghana, access to the internet is a challenge for most households. For instance, less than one-tenth (8%) of Ghanaians aged 12 years and older in 2010 had access to internet facilities (GSS, 2013), while Ghana’s internet and social media penetration in 2020 was 48% and 20%, respectively (Kemp, 2020). In addition, studies have found that parents who are not technology-savvy are unable to supervise and assist their children with online learning (Nantwi & Boateng, 2020; Owusu-Fordjour et al., 2020).

We found that the main challenges experienced by LFPSS were the inability to pay teachers’ salaries, impact on school finance, and impact on teaching, learning and assessment of learners. Most heads of LFPSS have been unable to pay their teaching staff their salaries since March 2020. An explanation is that most LFPSS primarily depend on the payment of tuition fees and feeding fees, so the abrupt closure of schools affected their cash inflow, which hindered their ability to pay their teachers. The primary sources of revenue for LFPSS are tuition fees and canteen fees (Brion, 2020; IDP Foundation Inc. & Results for Development Institute, n. d.). This finding supports previous studies which found that teacher lost their total or portions of their salaries due to the closure of schools (Taylor et al., 2021). The inability of heads of LFPSS to pay their teachers would affect their wellbeing, especially their financial wellbeing. Studies have found that the closure of schools due to COVID-19 has exacerbated the economic plights of private school staff (National Development Planning Commission, 2020).

Heads of LFPSS mentioned that the emergence of COVID-19 affected the school finances and, consequently, affected their ability to honor statutory payments (loan repayments and social security contributions of staff) and stalled infrastructure development. Generally, most LFPSS have infrastructural deficits (Nsiah-Peprah, 2004), and the emergence of COVID-19 would worsen their infrastructural deficit.

In addition, heads of LFPSS narrated that schools’ closure due to the COVID-19 pandemic affected teaching and learning. In addition, teachers were unable to assess their learners for that term. This finding is consistent with previous studies that found that the closure of schools affected the teaching, learning and assessment of learners (Owusu-Fordjour et al., 2020; Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021; Tarkar, 2020). For instance, studies have found that school closure due to the COVID-19 pandemic would lead to learning loss among students (IPA, 2021; Rahman & Sharma, 2021; Sabates et al., 2021).

We furthermore found that heads of LFPSS used strategies such as online learning and giving assignments, and sharing food items and PPE to cope with the challenges imposed by COVID-19. Previous studies have identified online learning as an alternative teaching method during the COVID-19 pandemic (Adarkwah, 2021). Also, some

heads of LFPSs had to lay off staff to reduce their wage bill. This finding supports earlier studies which found that some teachers lost their jobs (Bassok et al., 2020), while other studies found that teachers may have to be laid off to cut costs if learners do not enroll for their courses for the academic year (Carver-Thomas et al., 2021; Code et al., 2020).

### Limitations of Study

The main limitations of this study are that the sample size for the study was small, and heads of LFPSs were not randomly selected. Therefore, the study's findings may be biased and may not represent the experiences of all LFPSs in Ghana. Despite these limitations, this study would help policy makers and other stakeholders in the educational section understand the plights of LFPSs in the COVID-19 era.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study found that a higher proportion of LFPSs acquired an online learning resource when schools were closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. WhatsApp, Google Classroom, and Zoom were the primary online learning resources used by LFPSs. Also, while some heads of LFPSs had favorable views about online learning, others had unfavorable opinions about it. Heads of LFPSs highlighted that accessibility of ICT devices, internet accessibility and connectivity, online learning increased teachers' workload, and ineffective supervision of online learning by teachers and parents made online learning unfavorable.

In addition, heads of LFPSs acknowledged that the closure of schools due to the COVID-19 pandemic affected their ability to pay teachers' salaries. The schools' closure also affected their schools' finances and the teaching, learning, and assessment of learners. To cope with these challenges, heads of LFPSs had to lay off staff, share food items and PPE with staff, and use online learning resources to educate their learners at home. To reduce the impacts of future pandemics on teaching and learning, we recommend that all schools in the country make conscious efforts to integrate online learning into their traditional face-to-face teaching method. Also, to reap the full benefits of online learning, we recommend the following measures should be implemented: there is a need for training for teachers, learners, and parents on online learning; improvement in the ICT infrastructure across the country; and subsidization of ICT resources (e.g., the purchase of laptops, tablets, and smartphones for educational purposes). In addition, the Government of Ghana should provide tax relief to telecommunication companies that improve their infrastructure and expand their coverage across the country to enhance internet accessibility and connectivity.

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