

REVERSING GAINS



Save the Children

Brief on the impact of
COVID-19 on education in Syria

Save the Children believes every child deserves a future. Around the world, we work every day to give children a healthy start in life, the opportunity to learn and protection from harm. When crisis strikes, and children are most vulnerable, we are always among the first to respond and the last to leave. We ensure children's unique needs are met and their voices are heard. We deliver lasting results for millions of children, including those hardest to reach.

We do whatever it takes for children — every day and in times of crisis — transforming their lives and the future we share.

Acknowledgement

This report was written by Hani Okasheh. Thanks to Jason Mcgaughey, Ali Aksoy, Razan Faouri, Jiwan Said and Amjad Yamin for providing crucial input and data that informed the report. Special thanks to Maja Munk, Caitlin Smith and Miya Tajima-Simpson for their insightful comments and revisions.

We also appreciate the feedback of colleagues from across Save the Children member, regional and country offices whose contributions have undoubtedly improved the report.

A number of expert reviewers also gave invaluable feedback, for which we are very grateful.

We acknowledge the children and their carers who have shared their experiences with us and given us permission to use their images and their stories.

We also like to thank more than 489 teachers who spoke to us across northern Syria, for whom we are very grateful.

All names have been changed to protect identities.

Published by

Save the Children

savethechildren.net

First published in December 2020

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Cover photo: Ameen* doing his homework in his tent, in northern rural Idlib, North West Syria, taken on 10 October 2020 by Save the Children partner organisation Syria Relief

Typeset and graphics by Amjad Yamin, Dina Jouhar and Ahmad Diranieh

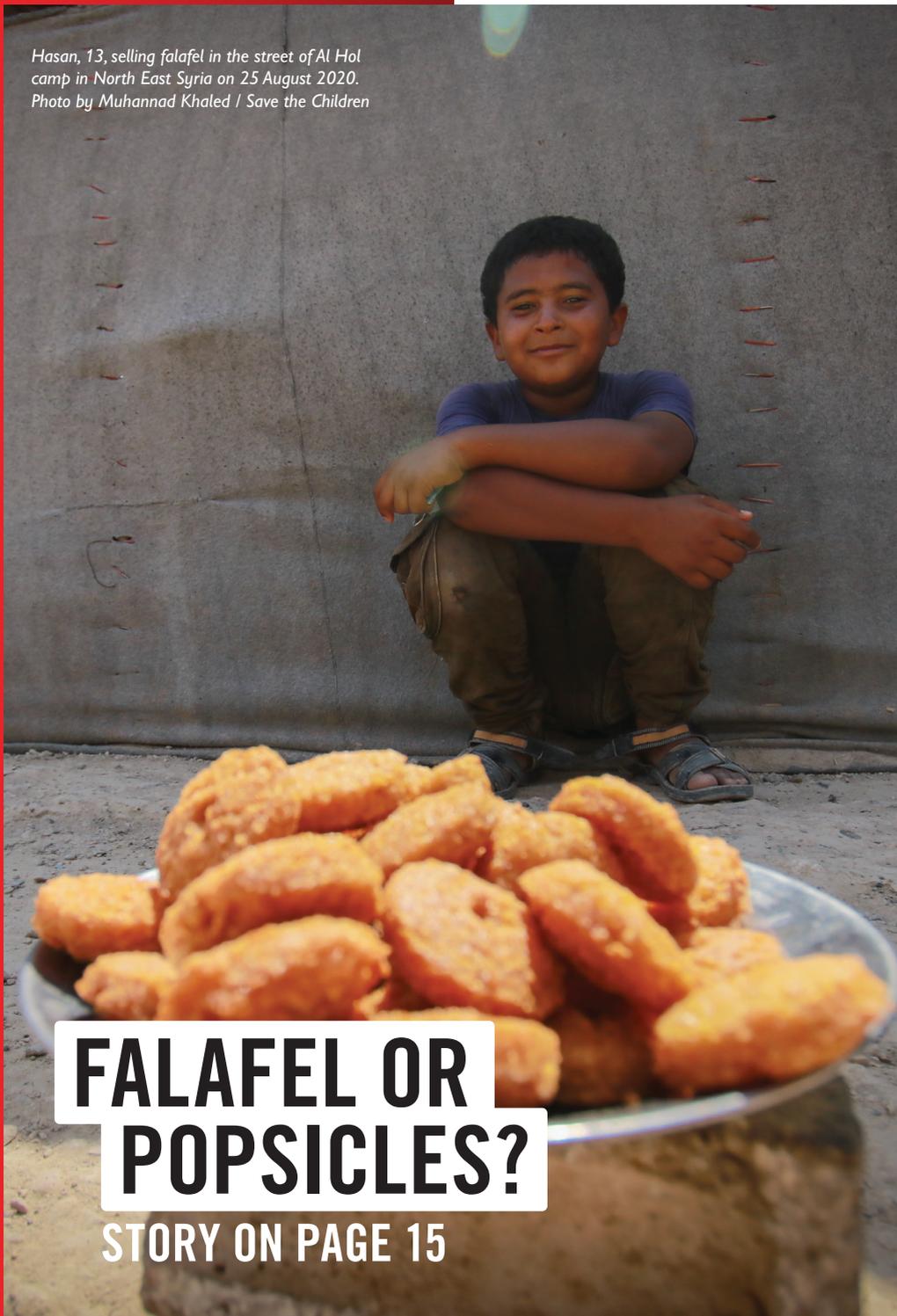
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This empty classroom is in a school near a group of camps, in a village in northern Idlib. As now the school is shut, some of the teachers hold virtual classes, like Basel in this photo. Photo by Ataa Organisation.

Hasan, 13, selling falafel in the street of Al Hol camp in North East Syria on 25 August 2020. Photo by Muhannad Khaled / Save the Children



FALAFEL OR POPSICLES?

STORY ON PAGE 15

ONE

INTRODUCTION

Children are disproportionately affected by the hidden impacts of COVID-19 and may be dealing with the consequences of this for years to come.¹ In Syria, thousands of children have lost access to formal and non-formal education services. Across northern Syria, education actors reported facing considerable challenges in keeping students engaged in learning since the loss of physical access to schools and non-formal education centres in March 2020.² The absence of coherent remote learning systems, coupled with insufficient or no internet/phone coverage and the lack of money needed to purchase credit that children need to access internet and phone based learning activities poses a significant challenge for education actors who report a constant decrease in the number of children attending these activities. At

the time of writing, there are ongoing discussions within the coordination structures across Syria to explore ways to stop students from dropping out, particularly as an estimated 2.45 million school-age children in Syria are out of school while 1.6 million are at risk of dropping out.³ These staggering numbers are a result of nearly 10 years of conflict, displacement and inadequate investment in education. Despite the protracted nature of the conflict, education in Syria has customarily been toppled from the list of funding priorities as the focus has often remained on providing short-term lifesaving assistance to distressed populations during episodes of deadly conflict and mass displacement. We must ensure that along with frontline lifesaving assistance, education is prioritised in the Syria response by all actors.

ANECDOTALLY

In the first quarter of 2020, Save the Children reached more than 11,200 students through its education programmes. However, this number shrunk to around 7,775 during the second quarter of the year, largely due to COVID-19 restrictions. Despite the investment Save the Children made to reconnect children in Syria with learning since 2012, the organisation fears that children who dropped out of education because of COVID-19 may not return to learning in the future. Dropping out of school undermines the immense efforts that children, and their families, have committed to education despite a decade of obstacles. These numbers are only a fraction of the numbers of school-age children in Syria, and Save the Children observes that the conditions for most might be worse than what this paragraph presents. There are still millions of children who have been out of education, some for years.

TWO

LOSS OF PHYSICAL LEARNING SPACES

In North West Syria, Save the Children's partners reported losing access to nearly 50 per cent of students enrolled in their activities in some areas after schools' suspension in March 2020. Similarly, nearly 5,500 children in Al Hol, Roj and Areesha camps in North East Syria could no longer attend Save the Children's learning activities due to COVID-19 related restrictions from late March to mid-June. Moreover, 57 per cent of children surveyed in North West Syria reported being affected by school closure, and a striking 84 per cent of respondents in North East Syria reported being affected by the closure of schools according to a recent survey conducted by Save the Children.

Save the Children recognizes that there is no substitute for the positive and encouraging reinforcement a face-to-face interaction that a teacher can provide, as well as the social-emotional interaction between children within a structured environment. In a classroom, teachers can promptly redirect students' focus, provide one-to-one support and attend to individualized learning needs. Also, teachers can act as the main conduit between students, providing opportunities for peer-to-peer learning, support and engagement in group discussions and lessons. For many students who attended Save the Children's education activities, school was a way to access daily psycho-social and social and emotional learning support (PSS – SEL), which are vital to

assisting children's mental health and emotional development. PSS and SEL have proven to be effective in strengthening self-confidence, resilience and establishing healthy ways to deal with the emotional toll that multiple forced displacements can have on a child.

issue threatening children's access to education. Around 63 per cent of teachers reported that endemic poverty prevents caregivers from sending their children to school, with a staggering 61 per cent of teachers citing child labour as one of the primary reasons that prevent children from attending school. Child labour is particularly a concern in North East Syria as nearly 71 per cent of teachers reported child labour as one of the main reasons leading children to drop out of school. COVID-19 further compounds existing issues that curtail children's access to education. About a third of teachers cited conflict and attacks on education facilities as one of the issues keeping children out of school. This is more prominent in North West Syria, where nearly 35 per cent of teachers cited attacks on education facilities as one of the primary reasons forcing children to drop out of school.

SURVEYING TEACHERS

Save the Children surveyed 489 teachers in northern Syria to try and understand what they see and believe when it comes to the reasons that lead children to drop out of education and what would it take to bring them back and overall they expressed concerns about their ability to return to school. About 60 per cent of teachers that Save the Children surveyed in Syria cited the threat of COVID-19 as one of the biggest reasons that force children to drop out of school. However, concern about COVID-19 is not the only

In your opinion, what is the biggest reason that makes children drop out the school?

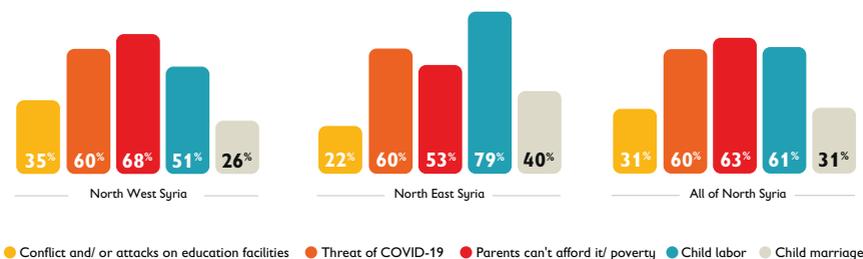


Figure 1: Why do children drop out of school

As a teacher, what does it take to bring children back to school in your opinion?

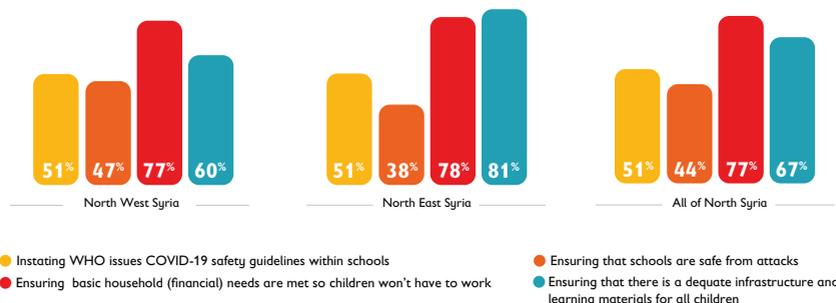


Figure 2: What could bring children back to school

Ameen* picking cucumber in northern rural Idlib, North West Syria, taken on 10 October 2020 by Save the Children partner organisation Syria



WORK BY DAY LEARN IN THE EVENING

FROM SCHOOL TO WORK

Ameen*, 12 years old, and his family were displaced from their hometown in northern rural Hama numerous times, due to the escalation in violence, until they settled in a camp in a village in northern rural Idlib, North West Syria.

Ameen has four brothers and one sister. Their father used to be the breadwinner of the household, but he passed away before they were displaced, so their mother Shaima*, 45 years old, currently takes care of the family on her own.

Ameen had to drop out of school when schools were suspended, as a result of the COVID-19 outbreak, in the camp where he currently lives. He resorted to working in construction and harvesting so he can support his family and secure food for them.

A month after dropping out, Ameen and Shaima were able to get a mobile phone and Ameen was enrolled into the distance learning programme (via Whatsapp); that Save the Children and its partner organisation, Syria Relief, provide in the area.

Ameen now works during the day and studies in the evenings, where he watches the classes sent to him by his teachers on Whatsapp groups and sends them back his homework as soon as he completes it.

Ameen is happy and grateful for Syria Relief's work and wants to continue his education so he can become a teacher like his father used to be.

THREE

BARRIERS TO REMOTE LEARNING

In March, local governments in Syria imposed heavy restrictions on movement and gatherings to mitigate the spread of COVID-19. NGOs also imposed strict measures that affected regular activities including face to face interactions, hand-to-hand distributions, and gatherings of groups, the last of which is essential to regular educational activities. To ensure the continuity of these activities, Save the Children and its partners employed alternative remote learning modalities, utilising messaging applications that rely on an internet connection, which at the time was the quickest and most efficient medium of communication with students. These applications were used to send instructional videos and setup chat groups convening students with their teachers. However, Save the Children's initial assessment of children's ability to take part in remote learning activities through mobile phone handsets was soon challenged by realities on the ground.

Save the Children and its partners across Syria reported not being able to maintain the same levels of attendance in remote learning activities compared to a classroom. Many caregivers do not have a mobile phone they can give to their children or one with sustainable access to the internet, primarily

because of the additional costs a household would incur. Typically, an average mobile phone with internet capabilities costs somewhere between USD 175 – 225. It also costs on average an additional USD 8 – 10 per month to purchase a data bundle to connect to the internet. This additional cost is problematic for many families across Syria, particularly in light of the acute economic crisis that the country is witnessing and extreme rates of endemic poverty. As such, many caregivers cannot buy the needed devices and if they could they would hesitate about handing over such expensive devices to their children. Even if children had access to a mobile phone with sustainable internet access, it is likely that there are multiple children in the household, who would equally need to connect to remote learning activities through the same device. This situation poses another critical challenge for education service providers where it is extremely difficult to follow-up with children who drop-out from a remote learning system. In the majority of cases, organisations can only make follow-up calls, which are considerably less effective in supporting children and their caregivers to return to learning, compared to physical face-to-face meetings.

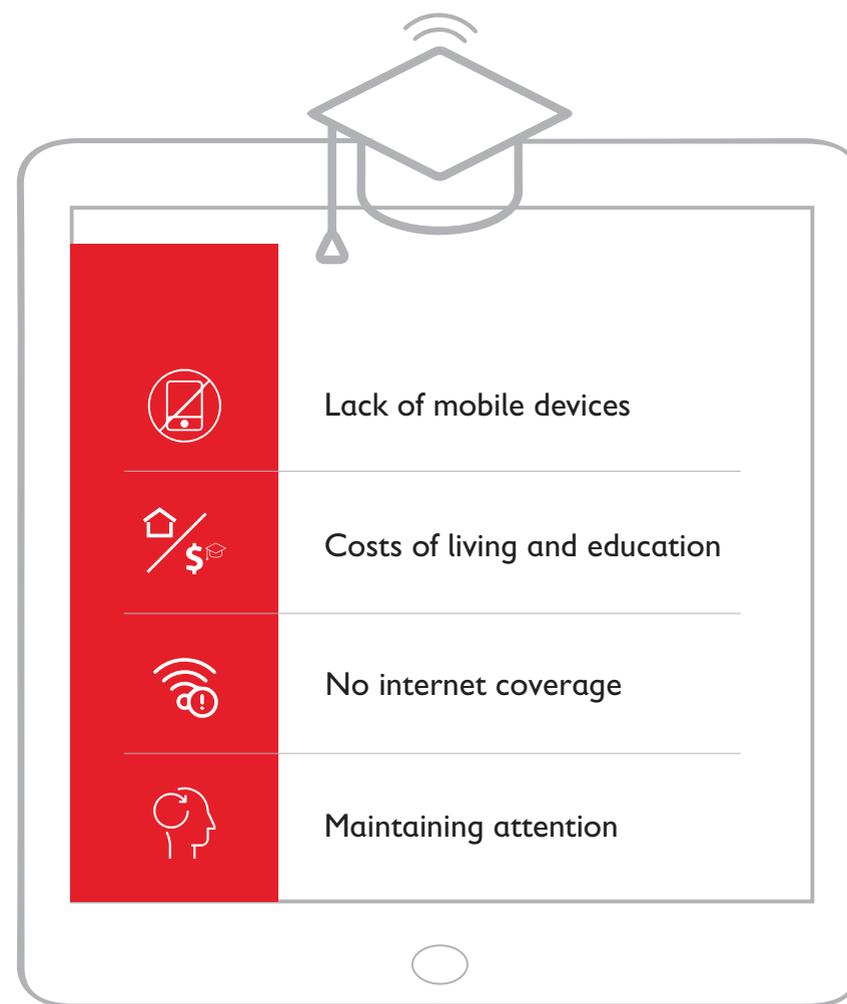


Figure 3: Barriers to remote learning

1 "Protect a Generation: the impact of COVID-19 on children's lives", Save the Children, September 2020

2 The majority of local government bodies across Syria imposed measures to curb the spread of COVID-19, which included the closure of schools.

3 "Humanitarian Needs Overview 2020", UN OCHA, in press

FOUR

A BLEAK OUTLOOK

Globally, the COVID-19 pandemic revealed the entrenched inequities in terms of investment in sustainable educational interventions.⁴ Historically, the education sector in Syria has been underfunded⁵ and the COVID-19 pandemic made challenges related to the lack of classrooms, supplies and teachers more pronounced. In the context of the current COVID-19 outbreak in Syria, a blended learning approach⁶ could be a viable alternative, particularly due to the lack of resources needed to enact the COVID-19 guidelines for safely carrying out activities in physical spaces fulltime for all children. However, the lack of developed and translated trainings on remote learning delivery for teachers, school-staff and caregivers required for blended learning to work, in addition to the absence of tools and resources at the household level, makes it significantly challenging for education actors to keep children engaged in learning remotely.

Additionally, there is a pressing need to address the challenges that impede children from learning safely in school that have been affecting education in Syria before, during and likely after COVID-19 unless addressed. This includes the lack of adequate number of basic classrooms (with windows, doors and a ceiling), learning spaces with desks, chairs and textbooks for children to learn, WASH facilities and supplies, teachers and teachers trainings, among others. In parallel, and per the teachers

survey, it is key to also address the secondary, poverty related issues that stop children from learning at home and at school, whether not owning a mobile device, not having enough credit to connect to the internet or needing to drop out of education to ensure they can feed themselves and their families.

Ultimately, the host of issues presented in this briefing note are forcing an increased number of children in Syria away from learning. The exponential growth in the number of out-of-school children deepens the long-term effects and impact of the education emergency in Syria. The longer that children remain with no sustainable access to some type of available learning environment, the less likely they are to re-enrol in learning in the future. The consequences of the above are not only limited to the immediate term. With vast numbers of its school-age children currently out-of-school, Syria faces a troubling prospect that these children would remain lacking in skills, development and emotional growth. Further compounding the situation, remote learning is coming at a time when Syrian families grapple with endemic poverty and the cumulative effect of war. This compels many families to resort to negative coping mechanisms that put children at exacerbated risks including child labour, forced marriage and recruitment into armed groups. All of this will most certainly have a detrimental impact on the future stability of Syria.



Figure 4: Risks for out of school children

4 "Protect a Generation: the impact of COVID-19 on children's lives", Save the Children, September 2020

5 In 2020, funding for education interventions constituted only 6.1 per cent of the total funding of the humanitarian response. (<https://fts.unocha.org/countries/218/summary/2020>)

6 While not prescriptive, blended learning in Syria refers to the use of in-person teaching, remote follow up through phone calls and social communication mediums and the training of caregivers on methods to maintain their children's learning progress. The use of one or a combination of these methods relies on the contextual realities in different areas across Syria and the degree to which COVID-19 related restrictions affect education

FIVE

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Many of the issues adversely affecting education today in Syria have plagued the sector since before COVID-19, but was exacerbated by the global pandemic and its control measures. Measures should be taken not only to address the impact of COVID-19 on education, but also those structural issues in education created by 10 years of conflict and underinvestment in education across Syria.

- The humanitarian community should initiate timely and serious discussions about reopening schools if safe to do so, with an inclusive hybrid remote and in-person approach, enacting the World Health Organisation's (WHO) minimum health and safety standards to prevent the spread of COVID-19.
- To facilitate the above, donors should provide humanitarian actors with the support necessary to enact the WHO's global safety guidelines in physical learning spaces to restore learning in classrooms and learning centres across Syria.
- The humanitarian leadership should facilitate serious discussions with the various de facto authorities on the ground concerning the practical steps to re-open schools if it is safe to do so, in a manner that accommodate their concerns and in line with the WHO's global safety guidelines.
- Donors should immediately and predictably support humanitarian interventions that alleviate the economic pressure on households, so caregivers could keep their children engaged in learning. This includes direct in-kind support as well as cash support to vulnerable households.
- Education authorities and donors should invest in the education system so that it can provide access to safe and conducive education environments (in classrooms and at home) and so that teachers, school personnel, caregivers and students are given the skills and support needed to learn in a difficult learning environment.
- NGOs should actively spread COVID-19 safety messages and consistently provide the supplies and services needed to enact them among caregivers, and pursue them to keep their children engaged in learning.
- Humanitarian actors should make substantive investments in multi-sectoral approaches as it requires concerted efforts to ensure children can access basic services, including learning and protection, both physically and remotely.



Hasan, 13, and his siblings in their tent in a camp in North East Syria on 25 August 2020. Photo by Muhandad Khaled / Save the Children

Hasan, 13, has been living in a displacement camp in North East Syria along with his mother Madina and his five siblings for almost three years now. The family left their home due to conflict and was displaced several short times before reaching the camp. When leaving their home, Hasan's late father told his family that they will return within a week's time which has not happened yet.

Hasan's story in his own words:

My father, peace be upon him, was working at a sawmill and we were doing very well. Our home was made of three rooms, a sitting room, and a kitchen. We had a yard as well where we were caring for our animal; a cow and a few sheep. I loved my home a lot as well as the whole village. I was very frustrated when we left our village and our home.

When the conflict started, schools stopped. But we had a relative who used to our house and bring a board to teach me, my siblings, and cousins. But in spite of that, I missed school, my friends and our times at school.

When we left our home, my father said it is going to be for only a week and we have never seen it ever since."

I enrolled in Save the Children's school after two months of being at the camp. I was happy as I started making friends again.

My father was very dear to me. When he died, I felt very sad. I still feel powerless because of that.

The prices got high recently. We can't afford a lot of the things we could afford previously like meat. We used to buy meat once a week but haven't bought it for months now. Also fruits are expensive and we cannot buy them.

After the first lockdown was announced because of Corona, I started working when school got closed. I started selling things. I started with falafel our neighbour was making at his tent. Then yoghurt and sometimes I buy food rations from people and sell it to others. I basically roam the camp until I sell whatever I have.

I'm making about one thousand Syrian pounds a day and sometimes two thousand on good days from selling falafel and yoghurt and 500 hundred pounds from selling food rations. I give whatever I make to my mother and she buys us food and stuff.

When I work, I keep thinking of what is missing in our home be it staples or vegetables and whether I will be able to earn enough to buy it.

Corona closed our schools and stopped our education. I wish it resumes as soon as possible.

But when school opens, I cannot sell falafel and yoghurt anymore as those are normally sold in mornings. I may start selling popsicles".

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