Two Lost School Years

Idea In Short

Practice the one-pager on subjects that matter. The global learning loss of 2020 to 2022 was a disaster concentrated in lower-income countries, with India's deficit largest and half of nations cutting education budgets. Compress the story to a single slide with a clear title, a point of view and data.

The Worry Every Parent Carries

Worrying about children's education is part of the parental job description, alongside clothing, feeding, loving and teaching values, all famously underpaid work. The two years from 2020 to 2022 strained that job everywhere, and unevenly. Some parents juggled work, homeschooling and sketchy home internet. Many others worldwide lacked laptops, tutors, spare study rooms, air conditioning and, crucially, effective vaccinations. The intuition of an education gap was widespread. The magnitude only landed with the Economist's reporting, which called COVID learning loss a global disaster, a 2,700-word article thoroughly worth reading, complemented by a 22-page McKinsey report on the same subject.1

The Craft: One Page, Two Hours

The professional exercise that followed is worth copying:

> compress the article into a single PowerPoint page capturing the most important parts of the story

Honesty about effort helps, since the slide took about two hours because the source material rambled, rich in examples and loose in structure, requiring mental rearrangement.

Two or three draft slides were built, destroyed and restarted, which is what real synthesis looks like. A one-pager is essentially an executive summary that stands alone, and the standard taught to junior consultants is severe: always include an executive summary in longer presentations, answer first. On one page you must be comprehensive, fit words and graphics together, stay succinct and, above all, say something.

Title, Voice and Additions

Craft decisions carry the message. It is never a bad idea to write a clear title that says something, and here the title borrowed the article's own language calling the education pause a crisis and a disaster, with wasted minds as the subtext. Voice matters too. The first word of the first bullet was sadly, because the material earned it. Client deliverables may not permit that level of directness, and where appropriate, inserting your voice, point of view and humanity strengthens rather than weakens a page. Write like you speak, and defer to the managing director's style when instructed, because presentations are created for other people. Synthesis also means adding what a source omits. The article never mentioned vaccines, yet vaccine scarcity plainly shaped which countries could reopen schools, with wealthy nations at the front of the metaphorical global line while, as separate reporting noted, even half of China's over-80 population lacked double vaccination. The addition belongs on the slide, flagged as an addition.

What the Data Shows

The article's central divide separates the wealthy North, meaning North America, Europe and Northeast Asia, from the lower-income South across Latin America, Africa and Southeast Asia.2 One chart, admittedly an eye-chart, shows India carrying a huge deficit, enormous in both population and months of delayed educational development per student, with the United States, France, Mexico and the Philippines supplying contrasting cases. Data keeps consultants safe and arguments credible, and two data points carry the alarm on their own. Half of countries cut their education budgets during the crisis and did not restore the money, which spells trouble. Schools in Mexico reopened, and attendance ran at 50 percent, which spells trouble of a different kind, since an open door does not equal a returned student.

Salve Versus Solution

The proposed interventions, revised curriculums, tutoring and better assessments, read more like salve than solution, and the McKinsey framing of resilience, re-enrollment, recovery and reimagining, catchy with its four Rs, remains mostly a discussion of the problem. The harm compounds silently:

> children off the schooling track, at home with television, lose ground that ordinary catch-up programs were never designed to recover

Honest analysis has to say when the announced remedies are undersized for the measured wound, and this is such a case.

The One-Pager Checklist

The exercise generalizes into a repeatable discipline for any dense source. Read the full piece once without notes, then list the five facts a busy executive must not miss. Draft the title before the body, because a title that says something forces the rest of the page to support it. Choose one chart maximum and defend its earning of the space. Write the first bullet with your voice and your verdict, then support it with the two or three data points that keep the verdict safe. Note explicitly what you added beyond the source and what you left out, since synthesis is a series of disclosed judgment calls. Budget two hours and expect to destroy at least one draft, because the destruction is the thinking. A professional who produces one such page weekly builds both a knowledge base and a compression skill no summarizing tool replaces.

A Crossroad Worth Naming

The conclusion belongs on the slide too. Education stands at a crossroad, and the opportunity is to rethink how primary and secondary schooling can be democratized and decentralized. That takes money, willpower and a strategy, and the ingredients exist: best practices for online teaching are documented, and a new generation of teachers could be enlisted, trained and launched to meet students where they are, which is increasingly online. Encouraging experiments deserve attention, including Khan Academy's One World Classroom opening enrollment to anyone in the world.3 Wish such efforts luck, and then

hold the one-pager discipline:

> when the story matters this much, compressing it clearly is not an academic exercise. It is how busy decision-makers get moved to act

- 1The Economist
- 2UNESCO
- 3Khan Academy

Summary

Two lost years created a global education crisis the wealthy North weathered far better than the South. The one-pager discipline, clear title, answer first, humane voice and proof by data, turns a rambling article into an executive summary. The response demands decentralized, online-capable teaching at scale.