

## We take the school to your home

Jordi Boscho,<sup>1</sup> Elena Duque,<sup>2</sup> Mimar Ramis,<sup>3</sup> Esther Roca<sup>4</sup>

Teachers and the Roma community unite to overcome inequalities in response to the closure of schools by COVID -19. Roma boys and girls at Santiago Apóstol school (Valencia) continue studying in times of uncertainty for everyone.

"Many families are unemployed; our households have few ICT devices ... There are many dilemmas we have to face, as our everyday life is already challenging in terms of having the basics ... to get through this confinement ... How are we going to cope with not having essential services, no Internet or WIFI? Well, the Santiago Apóstol school offers us this service, so that our sons and daughters have the same opportunities. Boys and girls continue learning ” (José, a father at the school)

These are José’s words to the headteacher of the Santiago Apóstol school, a few days after the March 13 announcement of school closure in Valencia due to the COVID19 crisis. The school is a Learning Community<sup>5</sup> that serves 200 boys and girls. It is located in the El Cabanyal-El Canyameler neighbourhood and reaches up to 99% of Roma families in the area. In most cases, these Roma families suffer serious economic challenges and poor social integration.

Before the COVID19 confinement, students were able to attend school from 7.30 am until 19.00. The day started with shower service and breakfasts available to all the students. At 9:00 the classes began. Students had lunch at the school, From 4:30 pm to 7:00 pm and afternoon programme with more than 30 Roma volunteers and educators was available. This programme had created an important space for all students to do their homework and reading activities, as well as for family learning. Secondary school graduates continuing their post-compulsory studies were also eligible to participate. For many, the school is a second home.

For the teaching team and for the entire educational community, the school closure has meant a very rapid and stressful reorganisation to meet basic needs. The school staff has provided families with access to food and other hygiene resources, and have also tried to fulfil all the ICT needs of families and in the broader community. Despite great challenges, the school team has not given up on the community's dream of offering the best possible learning to those who need it most. This was the main message transmitted from the school teachers’ and the community in the first week of confinement. As the head teacher says: “Amidst the health crisis, at the Santiago Apóstol School we consider that equal opportunities for children and young people are the most powerful tool for socio-economic transformation that a society has, therefore we think that we will overcome this situation by joining forces, working all as one. Our families and students have the right to a high-quality education and we will fight for it together, as we have always done.”

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<sup>1</sup> Head teacher of the Santiago Apóstol Learning Community (Valencia-Spain)

<sup>2</sup> University of Barcelona

<sup>3</sup> University of Barcelona

<sup>4</sup> University of Valencia, Coordinator of Learning Communities in the Valencian Community

<sup>5</sup> <https://comunidadesdeaprendizaje.net/presentacion/definicion/>

There is no established roadmap for what steps to take and when, but there is a growing consensus on approaches that guarantee greater success. Community voice in decision-making on the actions to be taken has been important for an effective and sustained response during confinement. The focus has been on protecting children and taking care of their learning, their relationships in the community, and in short, their development. The response reflects values of the Roma community, which is historically characterised by strength in the face of difficulties, solidarity and dedication to community. These values are shared with the school, and together they are facing this new challenge.

The school has never sent the message “we send you what tasks you have to do” but, instead, the school asked families “how are you and what do you need now so that we can ensure that your daughters and sons can continue learning?” The responses were enthusiastic due to the previous trust built with the school:

*We appreciate being able to have enough food ... the community remains very united ... and within the difficulty of the situation ... we are well because we are united ... taking care of people and ensuring that all people are responsible ... We are deeply grateful for all the health people, police, etc ... who in their majority are taking good care of all of us... (Lucía, mother of the Learning Community of Santiago Apóstol School)*

In the first week of confinement, the school focused on ensuring food, provision of ICT and access to the internet, educational resources, etc. The school has launched donation campaigns in order to provide the neighbourhood with ICT and WIFI. They also prepared and mailed materials and learning resources for the students. The fact that there is a very high percentage of families with low literacy has not stopped them from pursuing the idea of “taking the school home”, and transforming the prejudices that have traditionally existed with these communities. This work has been made possible by the network that the school that for years has brought together communities, neighbourhood associations and other professionals and organisations in Valencia. This previous community development has allowed everyone to react quickly and with solidarity. The inclusion of the different educational stakeholders is important for the success of this project. As a teacher says, “the borders between the centre and the environment disappear to put us all at the service of the children.”

Key success factors include:

**1. Daily personal contact with each of the students.** The team of educators have had daily direct telephone contact with the boys and girls since day one of the mandated confinement. Various messages have been sent to cheer and support the children. A record of all individual remote tutorials has been maintained and used to evaluate how well it is working. When direct contact with a child has not been possible, the school management team has made efforts to open other channels of communication.

**2. High learning expectations for all.** The lack of accessibility to ICT learning resources has also been addressed. Diverse initiatives have been developed to respond to a range of needs. A community WIFI has been set up in the neighbourhood area where most of the students are concentrated. The school’s existing ICT devices as well as donated devices have been distributed to the students who need them most in order to successfully complete the school year or carry out the practical projects. Learning materials covering the third term were created for all the students and sent to their homes

along with school supplies. Finally, a website was created to support the learning of all students. The website is designed for mobile phones (<https://www.santiagoapostolcabanyal.es/el-cole-en-casa/>), as these devices are present in nearly all homes. These initiatives are cultivating greater student resilience and help them make progress toward their long-term goals.

*Thanks to people we do not know, but people who feel like family, because they want to help us, now I have a computer, I can study well, I am more motivated ... I am happy that there are people who want to help us ... and that encourages us to continue. (Students FP Santiago Apóstol School)*

**3. Ongoing communication between school management and teachers.** Most teachers need new ideas and practices to continue to ensure that all students have access to learning. The school's management team regularly communicates with the teaching team to provide support and training resources, and to exchange ideas. In addition, they participate in a network and exchange forums with pedagogical leaders from other schools. Teachers' confidence in their ability to stimulate childrens' learning and development while they are home, as well as to increase communication with families, supports ongoing progress.

Following this first month of intense work, the challenge of supporting maximum well-being and learning for the schools' students will continue. Upcoming challenges include providing of interactive learning spaces for the youngest children in the school, and helping children to keep up with learning. In addition, it will be important to continue growing in a community of solidarity and mutual support to better overcome the economic and social impacts of the crisis that will emerge over time.

*Boys and girls are crying out to go back to school ... because they want to continue learning and see their friends, their cousins ... We do not lose hope.*

(Mom and grandmother from the Santiago Apóstol school)