# Heat-proofing our schools

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The start of this year’s dry season felt like déjà vu: Classes in nearly half of the schools in Metro Manila were suspended due to soaring temperatures. The same thing happened last year, but the government should not normalize this as the only solution to problems caused by global warming.

Extreme weather events—from super typhoons to droughts—are a reality today, but they are even more so for the Philippines, whose geographical location makes it among the most vulnerable countries to climate change. The government has a National Climate Action Plan (2011-2028), which lays out the policy framework for climate change adaptation and mitigation efforts, but there is no comprehensive heat action plan that stakeholders can turn to for reference.

One of the local governments that responded to last year’s heat wave crisis was Manila, which said it would formulate a heat action plan matrix to guide city officials in implementing specific local measures at each heat alert level.

Outside of schools, heat waves affect everybody, especially those whose work requires them to be exposed to the outdoors such as construction workers and delivery riders. This makes having a national heat action plan even more urgent because this is not a one-time crisis that affects only specific areas or sectors.

## Historical weather data

The report by the nonprofit group Climate Central, which ranked the Philippines third in Asia with the most “unusual heat” caused by climate change within the last three months, should serve as a warning on what to expect in the months ahead. It stated that the country experienced temperatures reaching Climate Shift Index level 2 or higher for 74 days. This means that temperatures during those days were most likely due to the effects of climate change and, considering historical weather data, it will not be any better as the weather heats up during the summer.

The Philippine Atmospheric, Geophysical and Astronomical Services Administration’s (Pagasa) heat index has five categories: not hazardous (27 degrees Celsius and below); caution (27-32 degrees Celsius); extreme caution (33-41 degrees Celsius); danger (42-51 degrees Celsius); and extreme danger (52 degrees Celsius and above). Pagasa’s advisories have been helpful for local governments and schools, which are encouraged to suspend classes once the heat index reaches danger levels, to anticipate temperatures, and to make decisions ahead of time. This month’s class suspensions were due to the heat index reaching danger levels, but mitigation should go beyond this.

## Major redesign

An article by Manuel B. Garcia (“Physical school closures as a public health response to high heat index in the Philippines: a critical perspective”) published in the Journal of Public Health and Emergency in September last year suggested that the government must invest in upgraded school facilities that could withstand extreme weather conditions such as green building materials and designs that could naturally regulate temperature.

Extreme heat conditions can cause heat-related illnesses such as heat exhaustion and heatstroke and make it difficult for students to focus during classes. Not all schools, especially public ones, can afford air-conditioning units, which makes ventilation essential in constructing classrooms to provide students with an environment conducive to learning. However, this entails a major redesign of school buildings that might not be considered a priority for education spending.

Garcia also emphasized that, aside from upgrading school facilities, the government must also invest in technology to ensure that learning is not interrupted when classes shift from in-person to remote sessions.

## Climate reality

These issues on technology and inadequate school buildings are not exactly new. That they remain largely unaddressed points to the government’s failure that has only been highlighted by the many corruption cases—from overpriced laptops to ghost students, among others—plaguing the Department of Education. The department’s budget lost to graft and corruption could have built modern school buildings and bought much-needed gadgets for students and teachers.

Millions of students across the country were affected by last year’s class suspensions and the same thing could happen again this year. However, students can’t afford to fall even more behind given the country’s learning crisis.

To be fair, the government has taken various steps such as blended learning and the gradual return to the traditional school calendar but it needs long-term solutions that could withstand weather challenges and adapt to today’s climate reality.

Earlier this month, Malacañang said it was working with the Department of Health and Pagasa to craft an action plan for heat waves—the latest word is that they were still collating data. Hopefully, it would not take another year and several class suspensions before the government can finally get its act together.