

A pandemic-optimized plan for kids to resume their education

: 7/28/2021



A pandemic-optimized plan for kids to resume their education (Photo: HT)

4 min read . Updated: 29 Jul 2021, 07:09 AM IST [Anurag Behar](#)

India's hard-won educational gains could be lost if we don't mount a sorely-needed rescue mission

Schools must reopen and our children must return to education. They have been effectively shut since March 2020. Just as they had started opening up, a second wave of the pandemic overwhelmed India. This period has made the inefficacy of online education clear. Some systematic state efforts and voluntary initiatives by teachers for in-person engagement, including mohalla classes, have been laudable but grossly inadequate to compensate for closed schools. Not only have our children lost over a year of education, they have also lost a lot of what they had learnt before—the phenomenon of learning loss. Economic devastation, combined with a break in habit, may result in large numbers of students dropping out. This would undermine decades of effort and hard-won gains. This pandemic has driven education into an unprecedented crisis. Our response has been insufficient on most fronts and cavalier on others.

We should have done a lot more, and must do so even now, for systematic in-person engagement with children while schools are shut. Our thinking and planning for what we will do once they reopen have been particularly cavalier. We want to restart as though they have operated as usual for the past year-and-a-half. Children are being 'promoted' to the next class with almost no thought in most states given to addressing the lost year of education, let alone the learning-loss from previous years.

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What to do while schools are closed and after they open are critical questions. But a precursor to these is: How and when to reopen schools.

Let's acknowledge the basic facts. It is risky to restart schools before the entire population of India, including children, is vaccinated. But, like all decisions in this pandemic, this one too must be taken in balance and not in imagined ideal circumstances. If done so thoughtfully, there is less risk in reopening schools than in opening shopping malls and theatres, which has happened in most of the country. But even if we reopen schools, they will be shut again in the event of a third wave, regardless of whether it is localized or nationwide. So, like everything else in our country, education will continue to be on the precipice till we have fully vaccinated our population.

With these facts, let's consider how to open our schools.

First, no school should be opened till all its teachers and other team members have been fully vaccinated. This is to protect them and minimize the risk of their being carriers of the covid virus to children and then to their families and communities. This must include pre-schools and Anganwadis.

Vaccination priority should be accorded to school staff in all states right away. They must also get top priority if a booster dose is eventually required.

Second, schools will have to be opened even though children have not been vaccinated. But we should plan our vaccination programme for children in the minutest detail and execute it rigorously. This should include trials and approvals, the procurement and delivery of vaccines, and also demand mobilization, including efforts to address any hesitancy. We must learn from the blunders of our adult vaccination drive.

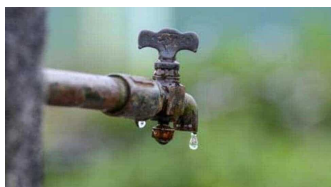
Third, decisions to open schools should be taken for geographic units that encompass relatively proximate communities, and certainly not for an entire state or district simultaneously. As a default option, these units can be panchayats in rural areas and wards in urban areas. Many kinds of realignments will be required within state education systems to enable such different start dates, since the current practice is to go by a single calendar for an entire state.

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Fourth, two parameters should determine whether or not to open schools in any unit. One, how large and dispersed a population does the school serve? Two, what is the extent of vaccination among the

communities that the school serves? The principle should be that schools serving tight and small communities can open with relatively low levels of vaccination of the relevant population. This is because children and adults from such communities intermingle anyhow, and thus open schools do not materially increase the risk of transmission. Those that serve dispersed communities would require higher levels of vaccination before they open. In general, these parameters would lead to early opening of primary and middle schools, particularly in rural areas, with higher classes having to wait longer, especially in large cities. Unfortunately, too many states seem to be doing the reverse.

Careless and misinformed decisions, the kind of which we have seen too often for comfort during the pandemic, would be disastrous for education. Given the country's large student population, unfortunately a few may fall seriously ill with covid. In the wake of the near-apocalyptic second wave, along with unfounded but widespread fears that a third wave would hit children much harder than earlier waves did, reports of such illnesses would fuel a severe political and community backlash. So, a word of caution for all, especially for politicians in power at the state level: We must open schools at the earliest, but we must do so with rigorous procedures along with genuine expert advice, and recognize that the biggest priority today for education is vaccination.

Anurag Behar is CEO of Azim Premji Foundation

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