Re-opening Schools in Pandemic Times
2<u>nd</u> July 2021

About this Note

This paper is based on our direct work on the ground with over 1.2 lakh public (government) school teachers across 50 districts in 6 states over the past 15 months. We have also worked closely with several other states on these issues. This paper is backed by research which has both informed our work on the ground and has been helped by our work.

Summary of the Note

1. School closure has led to a deep, fundamental loss of learning. Most children have not learnt what they should have for their current grades, most have forgotten what they knew earlier. If schools stay closed, this loss will keep accumulating, particularly for children in early grades and those from socio-economically disadvantaged communities.

2. Children learning together in a physical classroom, the most important process through which children learn, has been completely disrupted. Efforts towards alleviation of this situation must centre around bringing students and teachers back together, even if in a 'different' way.

3. Using technology for student learning as an alternative to the regular teaching-learning process does not work - it seriously compromises both equity and quality.

4. Two scenarios are likely in the immediate future - schools reopen or remain closed.

5. **If schools reopen**

    a. Schools must open fully or partially depending on the context. Decisions on school processes (e.g. timings, groupings) must be taken by individual schools or groups of schools in the same geography, adhering to safety protocols.

    b. Key learning outcomes must be prioritized for all classes - the focus must be on recovery of foundational learning and those outcomes required for grade-level learning.

    c. The curriculum, syllabus and classroom processes will need to be redesigned based on the prioritized learning outcomes.

    d. Concerted efforts will be required to ensure children return to and remain in schools. Supporting parents/care-givers financially may help to ensure this.

6. **If schools remain closed**

    a. The priority must remain continuity of learning and recovery of learning loss.

    b. All efforts must focus on reaching children through some face-to-face interaction (e.g. teachers visiting children's homes, meeting small groups of children in open spaces) - this could be supplemented with materials with which children work on their own.

    c. The approach for each stage of schooling will vary - however, across stages, materials must be contextual and approaches centered around the child's lives and concerns.

    d. The local community must be involved including through volunteer efforts.

    e. Spaces where teachers and students meet must adhere to COVID safety protocols.

7. Continuous, contextualized teacher support and decentralised decision-making will create an enabling environment for this.

8. Funds for facilitating school operations must be made available and disbursed on priority.

Detailed Note

A. Context

1. Studies across the world have estimated that three months of school closure could result in long-term loss of one year's worth of learning - the impact is graver in the early school years.
2. Since schools closed in March 2020, there has been a massive loss of learning for most children in India. This loss is not simply of what they would have learnt in the previous academic year (grade-level learning). It has meant the loss of foundational abilities from previous years (regression or forgetting).[1]

Azim Premji Foundation's study on Learning Loss during the pandemic

3. Unless addressed, this loss will keep accumulating, particularly for children in early grades and for children from socio-economically disadvantaged communities.
4. While efforts have been made both by the Centre and States to maintain continuity of learning through various initiatives, it is clear that children are not learning and that inequities are getting exacerbated, putting several children at risk of dropping out of school.

B. Key considerations for school re-opening

1. Learning happens best through face to face interaction in the classroom. Children need mentoring with social and emotional support through the learning process. It is, therefore, important to bring students and teachers together, even if done in a 'different' way.
2. Using technology for student learning as an alternative to the regular teaching-learning process seriously compromises both equity and quality. In any case, most of our students cannot access technology in a meaningful manner.

Azim Premji Foundation's study on challenges of online learning in public schools

 Summary of reports on online education across the world during the pandemic

3. Teachers are central to good education - in times like these, their role is even more important. We must ensure adequate availability of teachers in each school, make them allies in this situation and support them in building the capability to handle it.
4. All schools have students from families who have been deeply affected by this pandemic - schools and teachers must play a proactive role in battling the impact of this crisis.
5. Curriculum, pedagogy and assessment will need to change. Focus will need to be on recovery of learning loss and prioritization of what is important.
6. An enabling environment for functionaries to respond to changing situations at the Block or Panchayat level is critical.

---

[1] To illustrate, most children now in class 4 (academic year 2021-22) have little or no experience of the curriculum of class 3 (2020-21). In addition to this, most children have forgotten what they had learnt in class 2 (2019-20). If schools do not re-open, this cycle is likely to repeat itself and the loss of learning will keep accumulating.

7. While broader decisions related to curriculum and materials may be taken at the state level, planning for curriculum implementation and resource creation must be decentralised to respond to varying situations and ensure as much contextualisation as possible - in no circumstances should planning be above the district level.
8. Funds necessary for facilitating school operations must be made available and disbursed on priority by the State.

C. **Scenario 1: Schools reopen fully**

How to reopen schools

1. Every context should be treated differently
2. Primary schools in villages with enough space for children to move around and play could open as usual. These schools serve children from the local community who anyway interact closely - schools are, therefore, unlikely to be sources of spread if basic precautions are taken.
3. Schools with large enrolments and/or lack of physical space in crowded, semi-urban or urban areas could consider the following options:
    a. Students can come to school in shifts provided enough teachers are available.
    b. Students of specific classes can come to school on specific days of the week.
    c. An alternative building, if available, can be used to ensure availability of extra space.
4. The frequency of classes, classroom arrangements, assembly and mid-day meals will be different depending on specific location, availability of space, age of students, size of school.
    a. Illustratively, a crowded school will follow the most stringent safety protocol, students will come to school on alternate days or in shifts, classrooms will have well demarcated sitting arrangements with space allotted for each student, assembly will take place in classrooms with physical distancing, and the mid-day meal will comprise dry rations or food packets for the children.
    b. Assembly could be conducted every day or on alternate days or within classrooms with due consideration for physical distancing.
    c. The mid-day meal could range from regular meals, food packets or dry rations. Breakfast must be added to the meals as soon as possible. Care must be taken to ensure nutritionally rich and diverse meals.
5. There must be a clear, sensible list of Dos and Don'ts for schools from the School Education Department on safety precautions in schools.
    a. District Education Officers could make revisions based on local context. These communications must ensure that fear and stigma related to COVID-19 are avoided.
    b. Cleanliness and hygiene must become part of the regular routine.
    c. Schools must ensure availability of soap and clean water along with masks for students, teachers and support staff, where necessary.
    d. The School Management Committee (SMC) and the local Panchayat/Municipality must be actively involved to support this effort.
6. Individual schools or groups of schools in the same geography should frame processes (e.g. timings, time-tables) based on the local situation. There must be continuous communication with parents and the community on the redesigned school processes.
7. Vaccinations are critical - all teachers must be vaccinated, children must be vaccinated as soon as permitted/required.

What to do when schools are open

8. **Getting children back to school and into the rhythm of schooling**
   a. Concerted efforts will be required to ensure children return to schools - the combined efforts of teachers and the community will be required to ensure this.
   b. There is a possibility of children moving from other places due to migration or due to family circumstances. New enrolments will have to be facilitated.
   c. Once back in school, children must be eased into the routine – a few days can be spent in re-establishing rapport, and the habits of schools and classrooms. Some activities can be planned to make this return joyous and motivating.
   d. States can plan to reduce the financial burden of parents who have suffered loss during the pandemic, further increasing the chances of children returning to schools.

9. **Systematic assessment of learning levels**
   a. Before classes start, a comprehensive assessment of the learning levels of all students will be required. Once school routines regularize, systematic tracking of the learning of each student will also be required. While SCERT can support teachers by sharing indicators and tools, assessment must be done at the school level, and under no circumstances be used for labelling schools or learners.
   b. During the normal school hours, children must not be segregated into groups according to their learning levels. Besides causing socio-emotional harm, this approach only causes children who are lagging behind to fall back further. Well known strategies for teaching children at multiple levels can be used instead.

10. **Recovery of learning loss due to forgetting/regression**
    a. At least the first month after schools reopen should be spent on foundational abilities related to the grade students were in during 2019-20.
    b. Since all students will be at different levels, creative ways will need to be used to ensure their attention and motivation to learn. This could be done through alternative content, that can be identified by the SCERT and DIETS and teachers using creative approaches.

11. **Re-designing the curriculum**
    a. The curriculum will have to be redesigned and areas of learning prioritized.
    b. Key learning outcomes for each grade must be defined - these learning outcomes must combine what is critical for the students to learn from the curriculum of the current academic year (2021-22) and what had to be completed during the last academic year (2020-21).
    c. This exercise must be carried out in a judicious manner (as opposed to a simple reduction of textbook chapters), identifying outcomes that are necessary for further learning as well as the socio-emotional development of the students. What is realistically possible in the remaining academic year, given the situation, must be carefully considered at the same time.
    d. Stage-specific priorities
       i. The focus at the primary school stage must be on recovery of foundational abilities in language and mathematics.

      ii. This focus should continue for children in middle school, with an integrated approach to achieving learning outcomes across subjects.

      iii. At the secondary and senior secondary level, core learning outcomes must be identified judiciously and mapped to textbooks; additional material could be developed, given that students at this stage are capable of some independent study.

  e. During the curriculum revision process, concepts can be categorised into three kinds - this will cater to the possibility of reduced school timing (allowing children to learn independently at home) as well as any sudden school closures. These categories are:

      i. Concepts learnt by full teacher support: New and complex concepts that will need sustained teaching learning efforts

      ii. Concepts learnt by partial guidance: simple concepts that can be learnt with support from peers/others/some extra time of the teacher

      iii. Concepts learnt through self-learning: that can be learnt by children with minimal support

12. Reorganisation of the academic year

  a. Decisions will have to be taken regarding the duration of the academic year.

  b. Two years of curriculum will have to be squeezed into whatever remains of the academic year, besides spending a few months on recovery of learning loss.

  c. Decisions will need to be taken by States on eliminating vacations, extending the school year, etc.

13. Re-looking at classroom processes

  a. As subjects and content within subjects will be prioritized (e.g. focus on language and mathematics for Grades 1-3), teaching hours in school will also need be streamlined to reflect this (e.g. five hours of work per week for Grades 1-2; three hours per subject per week for Grades 9-10), given a possible shorter time in school. Thus, timetables will need to be flexible.

  b. Classroom processes must maximize student learning during school hours and use this interaction as a basis for follow-up/ further practice at home. Ongoing progress could be assessed through regular classroom assessments.

D. Scenario 2: Schools remain closed

1. During the period schools remain closed, all efforts must be directed towards maintaining continuity of learning.

2. The priority must be the recovery of learning loss at primary and middle school, these would need to be addressed through a thematic approach with an integrated view of all subjects.

3. All efforts must be directed towards reaching learners through some face-to-face interaction, however limited, supplemented with materials with which they can work on their own.

  a. Face to face interactions can be undertaken by teachers with the help of community volunteers through mapping children's residences and scheduling visits carefully. 'Clusters' can be created where 20-25 children live in close proximity, and teachers can visit these clusters in rotation, according to a pre-scheduled timetable, two to three times a week.

  b. Learning activities must be enjoyable – in the form of games and activities that are located in the children's context and draw from their own lives.

    c. Graded worksheets could be given to children at the elementary level to cater to different learning levels; it must be kept in mind that at this point, some children have forgotten how to read. Community volunteers, older siblings or older students could support these children till they can manage on their own.

    d. Since the children will be from different grades, they can be grouped according to grades (e.g. children from the primary grades and those from middle and secondary grades could be grouped together). The strategy should cater to multigrade teaching-learning, and plans catering to a few learning outcomes could be developed with a thematic approach, which will help integrate subjects.

    e. While older students can work independently to some extent, younger students would need more interaction. This must be kept in mind while taking decisions on materials and scheduling interactions.

    f. For middle and secondary school children, textbooks could be supplemented by additional material for concepts that can be covered through independent learning. Other concepts would have to be covered through face-to-face interactions and assignments that can be done by peer groups. The mobile phone could be used to share materials, questions, etc.

    g. Projects related to local activities and occupations could be planned for children of all levels; the pandemic could also feature in these projects.

    h. Teachers would have to work with the community to identify spaces where they can meet children; these spaces must lend themselves to COVID safety protocols.

    i. These visits can be of an hour and a half's duration and must include some informal interaction. These interactions must be used for reviewing materials children worked on independently as well as for orientation to new materials.

    j. While only a few grade-appropriate learning outcomes would be addressed through this approach, it will help mitigate learning loss to some extent.

    k. Assessment of learning can be done by the teacher through observation of and discussions with children, their performance on worksheets, etc.

4. The local community must be committed to this process. This will require advocacy within the community, and a buy-in from local institutions.

    a. The support from the community will range from getting children to the interactions, volunteering to actually support teaching-learning, maintaining libraries, etc.

    b. These volunteers would also need to coordinate with teachers on the phone in case of a lockdown, and help children continue learning within their homes with siblings and neighbouring children.

5. A one-size fits all approach is not possible. While it is desirable that 'kits' for teachers (comprising worksheets, stationery, set of interesting books, etc.) be developed at the district level, the teacher must have the flexibility to use whatever materials are required.

6. Teachers will need support on a range of areas - forums must be available for teachers to raise issues and receive help.

7. Safety protocols are non-negotiable and must be strictly adhered to.

E. Supporting Teachers

1. Teachers will be central to bringing normalcy back in a difficult time. While many teachers have been an integral part of the effort in responding to and containing the implications of the pandemic, there is fear, uncertainty and anxiety among them.

2. It is important to support them, appreciate their efforts and help them return to a positive frame of mind with sufficient and credible information about the pandemic, necessary safety measures and the measures taken by the government and civil society to help those in need.

3. Teacher professional development must continue to happen in the face-to-face mode as far as possible. That remains the best method. But, given the situation, we must prepare for meeting in smaller groups, using larger physical spaces (where available) along with using other modes (e.g. online platforms, digital material repositories). Cluster level mechanisms and follow-ups to online interactions with small groups could be built into these efforts.

4. The re-designed curriculum will need to be the focus of professional development. Flexibility will be very important to address changes in the ground situation and government directives.

5. It is vital to address issues of social and emotional well-being of learners and teachers – they must become part of the design of teacher professional development. This is a difficult time and stresses will be felt by all.

F. Supporting the COVID-19 Effort

1. Teachers and principals are very crucial partners in responding to the COVID-19 situation

2. All schools have children from families who have been deeply affected by this crisis in various ways as described earlier.

3. School holds an important place in building awareness in society. The situation demands several behavioural changes including a stronger focus on simple health routines. Teachers must facilitate this change.

4. Schools should work with all stakeholders - parents, SMC, Health Department, Panchayat Institutions, Department of Women and Child Welfare to build awareness and coordinate the work on COVID-19 in the immediate community.

5. Schools must be fully informed about the different entitlements that are due to parents/community. They could hence act as information centres for COVID-19 entitlements, in collaboration with the different relevant departments. Teachers must keep continuous track of children in difficulty and ensure that their families are aware of and are able to access their entitlement and any other help that they need.

6. A simple Standard Operating Procedure (SoP) for schools to constantly monitor the level of risk they are in could be created by the School Education Department - this would help schools closely watch the alerts put out by the Health Department to understand what area is at what level of risk.

7. A regular rhythm of communication between students, teachers, parents and community on the COVID-19 situation through simple key messages and small capsules on health, safety, wellness and hope could be created and disseminated. The guidelines for this could be part of the SoP that is created by the School Education Department.

G. Systemic Response: Key Responsibilities at Every Level

1. Coherent policies, continuous coordination between the various departments involved, transparent communication and decentralisation of decision-making are key to an effective response to the current crisis.

2. The State Council for Education and Training (SCERT) and Boards of Examinations must:
    a. Relook the curriculum and prioritize learning outcomes, syllabus and assessment across all grades.
    b. Map the textbook content to the revised learning outcomes and syllabus.
    c. Develop and provide material like sample worksheets and projects for relevant

grades.

    d. Develop and offer online training platforms and courses for teachers.

3. The School Education Department at state level must:

    a. Develop Standard Operating Procedures for schools to operate

    b. Fix minimum number of school days during the year that is realistically possible given the circumstances.

    c. Provide for extra funds to enable schools to follow all safety and hygiene procedures.

    d. Provide/arrange delivery of notebooks, stationery, workbooks and self-learning material to students at their homes, where necessary.

    e. Prepare a coordination plan with various departments to enable schools as COVID-19 information centres.

4. The school education system at the district level must:

    a. Have the flexibility to apply the SoP to open, operate and close schools based on different circumstances with adequate rationale - these decisions are to be taken in consultation with District Collector.

    b. Monitor and enable schools closely for ensuring safety of children and teachers.

    c. Enable coordination between various departments involved at the district to ensure schools have all the information regarding COVID-19 entitlements.

5. District Institutes of Education and Training (DIETs) must:

    a. Facilitate in-service training of teachers in both face-to-face and online modes.

    b. Create additional learning material/adapt material developed at the SCERT level for children as per context.

6. Block and Cluster Coordinators must:

    a. Closely monitor all schools, recommend opening, closing and operations of schools as per prevailing conditions.

    b. Ensure safety and hygiene norms are followed in all schools.

    c. Organize face-to-face and online capacity building programmes for teachers, like cluster meetings or weekly teacher discussion forums, focussed on academic issues related to the current situation, health and safety and the SOPs for schools.

    d. Ensure daily mid-day meal/dry ration for all children.

    e. Ensure the operationalizing of schools as COVID-19 information centres.

Bibliography

1. Andrabi, T., Daniels, B., Das, J. (2020). Human Capital Accumulation and Disasters: Evidence from the Pakistan Earthquake of 2005. *RISE Working Paper Series*. 20/039. https://doi.org/10.35489/BSG-RISEWP_2020/039.
2. Azim Premji Foundation. (2020a). *Schools in the Times of COVID*. Bangalore: Azim Premji University. https://azimpremjifoundation.org/Covid-19/resources
3. Azim Premji Foundation. (2020b). *Myths of Online Education*. Bangalore: Azim Premji University. https://azimpremjiuniversity.edu.in/field-studies-in-education/myths-of-online-education
4. Carvalho, S., Rossiter, J., Angrist, N., Hares, S., Silverman, R. (2020). *Planning for School Reopening and Recovery After COVID-19. An Evidence Kit for Policymakers*. Washington DC: Centre for Global Development.
5. Charland, P., Deslandes Martineau, M., Gadais, T, Arvisais, O., Turgeon, N., Vinuesa, V., Cyr, S. (2021). Curriculum response to the crisis. *Prospects*. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11125-020-09526-6
6. Chavez, D. (2015). *Back to school after the Ebola outbreak*. World Bank. Retrieved from: https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2015/05/01/back-to-school-after-ebola-outbreak
7. Das, S. (2020). Digital Divide Biggest Scourge in Online Education. *The Pioneer, 6 August 2020*. https://www.dailypioneer.com/2020/state-editions/digital-divide-biggest-scourge-in-online-study.html
8. Dorn, E., Hancock, B., Sarakatsannis, J., & Viruleg, E. (2020a). *COVID-19 and student learning in the United States: The hurt could last a lifetime*. www.mckinsey.com
9. Dorn, E., Hancock, B., Sarakatsannis, J., & Viruleg, E. (2020b). *COVID-19 and learning loss—disparities grow and students need help*. www.mckinsey.com
10. HAQ Centre for Child Rights. (2021). *Rights of Children in the Time of COVID. A Policy Brief*. https://www.haqcrc.org/child-rights-in-india-the-world/rights-of-children-in-the-time-of-covid-19/
11. International Commission on the Futures of Education. 2020. *Education in a post-COVID world: Nine ideas for public action*. Paris, UNESCO
12. Kaffenberger, M. (2021). Modelling the long-run learning impact of the Covid-19 learning shock: Actions to (more than) mitigate loss. *International Journal of Educational Development*, *Volume 81*, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2020.102326
13. Kuhfeld, M., Soland, J., Tarasawa, B., Jhonson, A., Ruzek, E., & Liu, J. (2020). *Projecting the potential impacts of COVID-19 school closures on academic achievement*. Retrieved from Annenberg Institute at Brown University, (EdWorkingPaper : 20-226). https://doi.org/10.26300/cdrv-yw05
14. McCombs, J.S., Augustine, C.H., Schwartz, H.L., Bodilly, S.J., McInnis, B., Lichter, D.S., Cross, A.B. (2011). *Making Summer Count. How Summer Programs Can Boost Children's Learning*. Santa Monica, RAND Corporation. https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2011/RAND_MG1120.pdf
15. MHRD. (2020). *National Education Policy 2020*. https://www.education.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/NEP_Final_English_0.pdf
16. National Statistical Office. (2018) *NSS 75th Round. 2017-18. Household Social Consumption on Education in India. 75th Round*. http://mospi.nic.in/sites/default/files/publication_reports/Report_585_75th_round_Education_final_1507_0.pdf
17. OECD. (2020). *The Impact of COVID-19 on Student Equity and Inclusion: Supporting Vulnerable Students during School Closures and School Re-openings*. https://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/the-impact-of-covid-19-on-student-equity-and-inclusion-supporting-vulnerable-students-during-school-closures-and-school-re-openings-d59

[3b5c8/](3b5c8/)

18. Oxfam India. (2020). *Status report – government and private schools during COVID-19.* https://www.oxfamindia.org/sites/default/files/2020-09/Status%20report%20Government%20and%20private%20schools%20during%20COVID%20-%2019.pdf

19. Prendergast, T., Diamant-Cohen, B. (2014). Investing in early childhood. What's the ROI? *Children and Libraries, Winter 2014*

20. Quinn, D.M., Polikoff, M. (2017). *Summer learning loss. What is it, and what can we do about it?* https://www.brookings.edu/research/summer-learning-loss-what-is-it-and-what-can-we-do-about-it/

21. Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools (REMS). (2020). *Supporting Continuity of Teaching and Learning During an Emergency.* Retrieved from:
https://rems.ed.gov/docs/supporting_continuity_of_learning_and_education.pdf

22. Renaissance Learning, Inc. (2020). *How kids are performing. Tracking the impact of COVID-19 on Reading and Mathematics Achievement.* https://www.renaissance.com/how-kids-are-performing/

23. Taylor, K., Silver, L. (2019). *Smartphone ownership is growing rapidly around the world, but not always equally.* Pew Research Centre.
https://www.pewresearch.org/global/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2019/02/Pew-Research-Center_Global-Technology-Use-2018_2019-02-05.pdf

24. The Center for Research on Education Outcomes. (2020). *Estimates of Learning Loss in the 2019-2020 School Year.* Stanford University.
https://credo.stanford.edu/sites/g/files/sbiybj6481/f/short_brief_on_learning_loss_final_v.3.pdf

25. The *Lancet* COVID-19 Commission. India Task Force. (2021). *Reopening Schools After COVID-19 Closures.*
https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5ef3652ab722df11fcb2ba5d/t/60a3cff2b425ae21a5b49405/1621348340073/India+TF+Reopening+Schools+April+2021.pdf

26. UNDP. (2015). *Socio-economic Impact of Ebola Virus Disease in West African Countries. A call for national and regional containment, recovery and prevention.* Retrieved from
https://www.undp.org>Reports>ebola-west-africa

27. United Nations World Food Program. (2020). *Making the Mid-Day Meals Functional Following School Re-Opening.* New Delhi: UNWFP Delhi Office.
https://www.wfp.org/publications/wfp-india-making-mid-day-meals-functional-following-school-re-opening-covid-19

28. World Bank Group. (2020). *Simulating the Potential Impacts of COVID-19 School Closures on Schooling and Learning Outcomes: A Set of Global Estimates.*
http://pubdocs.worldbank.org/en/798061592482682799/covid-and-education-June17-r6.pdf

* * * * * *