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Reopening Schools in India post-COVID

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By Shambhavi Naik and Nitin Pai



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Executive Summary:

As part of the response to COVID-19 in India, various state governments had closed all schools by mid-March. Maintaining social distancing and hygiene is difficult in schools and hence, schools can easily become a hotspot for the spread of the virus. Further, since this is a novel virus, its impact on children's health is still being researched and largely unknown. The Indian Council for Medical Research (ICMR) estimates 30-80% of those infected in India to be asymptomatic¹ and it is possible that children may also be asymptomatic carriers of the disease. However, keeping schools shut will impact the development of children and take a toll on parents' who are working at home and taking care of young children. In this context, various state governments are considering re-starting schools for the new academic year. This document highlights the following recommendations to assist governments in their decision on re-opening of schools.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Defer decision to re-start physical school till at least October 2020.
2. Employ technology for delivery of education – use Television, internet and phone to reach students.
3. Allow flexibility in attendance
4. Enforce social distancing and hygiene in schools.
5. Focus on mental health of students and teachers

1. Defer re-starting physical school till at least October 2020.

The spread of COVID-19 appears to have been contained in many districts in India. However, re-opening of states' borders has resulted in migration of people and a consequent spike in COVID-19 cases across the country. Further as intra-state migration increases, there will be a risk of the disease spreading to new areas. Additionally, the on-coming monsoon will usher in fresh spates of other diseases that are typical of this season. The combined impact of monsoon and re-opening of operations is likely to result in an increase in illnesses, including COVID-19, and threaten overwhelming the healthcare system.

Children may be more vulnerable to some of these diseases and may act as carriers for others such as COVID-19. We recommend that the decision to restart physical schools be deferred post the monsoon in an evidence-based manner. The cases of various illnesses should be monitored and if there is no significant increase in disease burden, the decision should be reviewed.

This time period will also give teachers and administration to prepare and enable other modes of education delivery. This preparation will help schools navigate any further closures to physical schools.

A nationwide online survey of 12,000 respondents by ParentCircle, a Parenting platform found that 92% of parents were unwilling to send their child back to school immediately upon reopening².

2. Employ technology for delivery of education – use Television, internet and phone to reach students.

Given the unpredictability of the ongoing pandemic, it is in the students' best interest if alternate modes of education are evolved to cope with closures of physical schools. However, such technology development need to account for the demands its put on students and guardians.

The Government should consider approving the use of television to broadcast educational content along with online tools that are already being rapidly developed. The Government can set up standards for governing these modes of education delivery and assessment of their impact on students. It is estimated that about 90% of households in Karnataka own a television, making it an excellent resource to utilise for delivering educational content³.

This could be a good opportunity to standardise education across the state – a state-wide school system can be run on television with one channel per grade at a time. If two grades time-share a channel, the requirement is for six channels for 10 hours a day. The content can be pre-decided and the best teachers in the state can be used for content delivery. The same content can also be streamed online.

The television channels can raise revenues through advertisements, besides being able to broadcast commercial content during the evening peak hours. In some places, it might do better than physical schools that suffer from poor teacher quality and absenteeism.

3. Allow flexibility in attendance

Even when physical schools are re-started, mandatory obligations on attendance should be removed. This is in keeping with WHO guidance on re-opening of schools⁴.

Local administration can be empowered to assist schools with the decisions of re-opening and staggering schools based on local spread of disease and target audience.

4. Enforce social distancing and hygiene in schools.

The WHO guideline on re-opening schools suggests measures for preparing schools for re-opening⁵. This includes maximum number of students per bench,

hand washing and contingency plans in case of any illness. Measures for social distancing should be scientifically proven - there are reports of schools considering installing sanitation tunnels, despite the technology having no benefit to users.

An additional measure to facilitate social distancing is to allow younger students (up to grade 2) to be given a primary option to attend physical school, with schooling from home offered if required. Elder students who are not dependent on parental care may be allowed schooling from home as a primary option.

5. Focus on mental health of students and teachers

The past few months of pandemic have taken a toll on mental health of young children. Hence, for the next academic year, there needs to be a focus on mental health of students and teachers. Conventional goals and examination patterns used by schools may need to be changed for this year.

The decision to restart physical schools should be taken in parallel to preparation for social distancing and taking into account the impact of COVID-19 on students and teachers. In this regard, it would be recommended not to restart schools without adequate monitoring of diseases over the next few months.

References:

¹ Srishti Chaudhary. “80% of cases could be asymptomatic: ICMR.” Livemint, April 20, 2020

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² Glynda Alves. “92% Indian parents unwilling to send their child back to school immediately upon opening.” The Economic Times, May 13, 2020

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³ Nitin Pai. “When should Indian schools physically reopen? The best answer is: not yet.” ThePrint, June 2, 2020.

⁴ UNICEF, WHO and IFRC Report. “Key messages and actions for COVID-19 prevention and control in schools. March 2020.

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⁵ World Health Organisation. “Considerations for school-related public health measures in the context of COVID-19.” May 10, 2020.

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