

# The Pandemic and Reopening Schools



Photo: AIDMI.



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## ABOUT THIS ISSUE

It has almost been 18 months since India announced a nationwide lockdown in March 2020 to curb the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic. As a consequence of this lockdown, schools in India have been indefinitely closed. Due to this protracted lockdown, the education outcomes of more than 320 million students in India have been adversely affected.

It is only now, that state governments are prioritising the re-opening of schools to ensure continuity of education for the country's students. This issue of Southasiadisasters.net is titled 'The Pandemic and Reopening Schools', and it takes a detailed look at the impacts and implications of COVID-19 on school safety in India.

While discussing school safety amidst the pandemic, it is important to deliberate upon not just the safe re-opening of schools but also on innovative mechanisms of education delivery to the vulnerable and at-risk children in the country. This issue of Southasiadisasters.net takes a look at all such diverse themes under the broad umbrella of school safety in India. This issue also documents the experiences of various state governments such as Assam, Tripura and Uttar Pradesh in their efforts to safely re-open schools in their respective states. ■

- Kshitij Gupta, AIDMI, India

## PREFACE

# The Implications of Schools Re-Opening in India

*Major General Manoj Kumar Bindal, VSM, Executive Director, National Institute of Disaster Management (Ministry of Home Affairs), New Delhi, India*

This issue of Southasiadisasters.net in collaboration with UNICEF India focuses on the theme of school re-opening in India. It has been almost 18 months since the schools in India were closed indefinitely following the lockdown in March 2020 to curb the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. While the adverse impacts of the pandemic have been felt across all sectors ranging from public health to the economy, it is perhaps the learning outcomes of India's school going children that have been the hardest hit. According to an estimate by UNESCO, the indefinite school closures have impacted more than 320 million students in India.<sup>1</sup>

While there has been a thrust on online education to counter the protracted school closures, the limited reach of internet connectivity in India (24% for the entire country and 15% for rural India) has been a major concern. The double whammy of falling incomes and job losses have also been manifested in the increasing number of out of school children. According to the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER), there has been a sharp jump in the number of dropouts as it has gone up from 1.8% (in 2018) to 5.3% (in 2020) and among all children up to 16 years from 4% to 5.5%.<sup>2</sup>

The impact on female students and the girl child has been particularly debilitating. India has 158 million female students<sup>3</sup> who have been disproportionately impacted with the closure of their schools. Even before the COVID-19 crisis, it was found that girls who engage in two

hours of housework per day had a lesser probability of finishing secondary school in the country. In India, where limited social security nets are in place, the financial and social hardships caused by the pandemic can only exacerbate the gender inequality in education.<sup>4</sup> This in turn can leave scores of young women and girls living in rural communities across India exposed to domestic violence, abuse, discrimination and malnutrition.

There is also a food security and malnutrition dimension to the closure of schools due to the pandemic. India has the largest school feeding program in the world called the Mid-Day Meal Scheme which caters to 120 million children in over 1.26 million schools across the country. But due to the lockdown and disruptions associated with the COVID-19 outbreak, many states and union territories have had to stop this initiative, thereby depriving children of this concession to life. While several Indian States and Union territories have tried to run parallel programs by providing "Food Security Allowance" to the families of the children registered under the mid-day meal scheme, it has met with limited success. And this may have a profound impact on public health sector in future adversely affecting economy of the country.

The National Institute of Disaster Management (NIDM) believes in pushing the knowledge envelope on various risks in India for better preparedness against disasters and emergencies. Even the Hon'ble

<sup>1</sup> <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.theleaflet.in/covid-19-impact-six-million-children-out-of-school-in-india/#>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/gender-dimensions-of-school-closures-in-india-during-covid19-lessons-from-ebola-66643/>

<sup>4</sup> McKinsey Global Institute, THE POWER OF PARITY: ADVANCING WOMEN'S EQUALITY IN ASIA PACIFIC: FOCUS: INDIA (May 2018)

Prime Ministers' Ten Point Agenda on DRR states every disaster is an opportunity to learn lessons and best practices for improving policy and governance. This issue is a compendium of such best practices and lessons that has dealt with the important themes of schools re-opening. It consists of contributions from notable academicians as well as practitioners from the government, civil society and educationalists. Some of the important areas highlighted in the issue include the guidelines and SOPs issued by the government on school re-opening, the early impact of schools re-opening in some Indian states; the impact of protracted school closures

on students' learning outcomes; the role of technology in bridging the education gap, etc. ■

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## RESULT BRIEF

# Building Capacities of School Institutions for COVID-19 Response and Risk Reduction in Urban Ahmedabad

*Shyam Dave and Krati Jain, UNICEF, Gujarat*

## COVID-19 and Children

COVID-19 pandemic and the nationwide lockdown from March 25, 2020 in India have brought the country to a grinding halt. Just like every other aspect of life, the pandemic has adversely affected children's learning outcomes too, especially in low-income localities in Indian cities and towns.

According to the World Bank, COVID-19 related lockdowns have affected the access to education for over 90% of the world's student population<sup>5</sup>. UNICEF estimates that learning outcome of 247 million children in India have been affected due to COVID induced school closures<sup>6</sup> and have stopped another 28 million from attending their *Anganwadi* centres.

Online education has got the thrust but with its own challenges of digital literacy and access to technology. "Pre-COVID, only a quarter of households (24 per cent) in India had access to the internet and there is a large rural-urban and gender divide."<sup>7</sup>

This disruption of education has caused significant alarm among the government and other concerned stakeholders (teachers, students, parents, etc.). As various state governments try to re-open schools, many parents and caregivers are rightly worried about their children's safety and security.

With reduction in infection spread, the Indian government issued guidelines for the safe reopening of secondary schools outside containment zones twice with special impetus on educational continuity,

health and safety protocols.<sup>8</sup> However, the onset of multiple waves of COVID-19 has deter the efforts to reopen the schools avoiding putting children at the risk.

The pandemic induced lockdown has adversely affected children's access to essential health and nutrition services facilitated from schools such as access to gender segregated toilets, handwashing, MDM (Mid-Day Meal), MHM (Menstrual Hygiene Management), and BCC (Behavior Change Communication) activities to build hygiene practices, especially for children from the poor communities. Hand and respiratory hygiene are scientifically considered to be the most effective IPC (Infection Prevention and Control) measure and hence required to be ingrained in the school students and staff for

<sup>5</sup> The impact of COVID-19 on education in Brazil (April 2020), The World Bank, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/events/2020/04/29/the-impact-of-covid-19-on-education-in-brazil>.

<sup>6</sup> <https://science.thewire.in/education/closing-of-schools-due-to-covid-19-impacted-247-mn-children-in-india-unicef/>

<sup>7</sup> COVID-19: Schools for more than 168 million children globally have been completely closed for almost a full year, says UNICEF

<sup>8</sup> The Ministry of Home Affairs vide Order no. 40-3/2020-DM-I (A) dated September 30, 2020, had issued guidelines for re-opening schools outside containment Zones.



preparedness towards safe reopening.

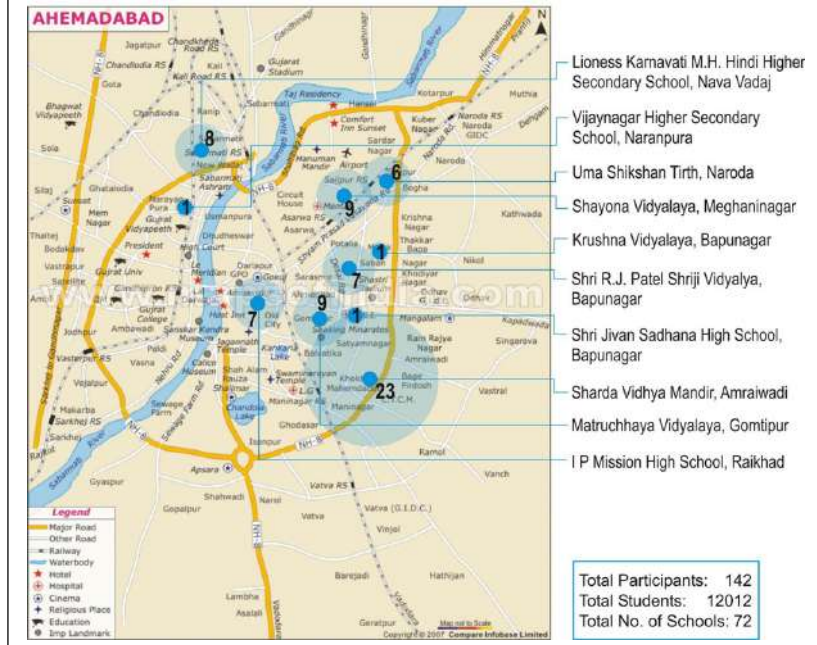
### School Reopening in Gujarat

The Indian state of Gujarat is home to 11.48 million students, 0.4 million teachers and 54,000 schools<sup>9</sup> all of whom have been adversely affected by the pandemic and its concomitant lockdown. The Government of Gujarat (GoG) had announced complete closure of schools with the exception of online classes from **15<sup>th</sup> March, 2020**. The State government had earlier announced the re-opening of schools from **November 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2020** but had to shelve these plans due to a sharp spike in COVID-19 cases during November 2020. With the vaccination programme underway, that GoG had announced partial re-opening of schools in the state with following reopening dates:

- January 11, 2021 – Std 10<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup><sup>10</sup>
- February 1, 2021 – Std 9<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup><sup>11</sup>
- February 18, 2021 – Std 6<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup><sup>12</sup>
- July 26, 2021 – Std 9<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup><sup>13</sup>

However due to second wave of COVID-19 schools reopening plans have been postponed until further

The below map shows the location of 10 schools for field testing the proposed SOP and IEC covering 142 educators coming from 72 schools with around 12012 students covered under the project.



notice in March 2021. Class 12<sup>th</sup> CBSE exams have been postponed, Class 10<sup>th</sup> exams cancelled and all primary schools to remain close until July 2021<sup>14,15</sup>

For supporting and facilitating safe reopening of schools, All India Disaster Mitigation Institute

(AIDMI) and UNICEF Gujarat initiated building capacities of school institutions for COVID-19 response and risk reduction in Urban Ahmedabad. It was a consultative process with District Education Office (DEO) of urban Ahmedabad and other education stakeholders. The initiative was piloted in 10 schools where students from low income communities are enrolled.

The selected 10 schools were SVS (*Shala Vikas Shakul- School Development Networks*) which provided an opportunity to reach to a larger number of schools. The government authority has formed SVS for effective function and monitoring of schools. Each SVS



The products are effective as they are based on the involvement of schoolteachers and experienced educators who provided feedback. Schools are taking very good initiatives that encourage students and parents towards required safety measures within and outside of schools.

**Shri D.H. Parmar**, Assistant Education Inspector, DEO Office, Ahmedabad City.

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/11/india-gujarat-education-model-covid19-pandemic/>

<sup>10</sup> Gujarat schools reopening for classes 10 & 12 from January 11, SOPs (January 6, 2021); Timesnownews - Education, <https://www.timesnownews.com/education/article/gujarat-schools-reopening-for-classes-10-12-from-january-11-sops-to-be-followed/703733>.

<sup>11</sup> Gujarat schools reopening for classes 9 & 11 from February 1, SOPs to be follows (January 27, 2021), <https://www.timesnownews.com/education/article/gujarat-schools-reopening-for-classes-9-11-from-february-1-sops-to-be-followed/712559>.

<sup>12</sup> Classes 6 to 8 to resume in Gujarat schools from February 18 (Feb 13, 2021), <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/home/education/news/classes-6-to-8-to-resume-in-gujarat-schools-from-feb-18/articleshow/80897660.cms>.

<sup>13</sup> Schools in Gujarat to reopen from July 26 from Class 9 to 12 (July 23, 2021), <https://www.indiatoday.in/education-today/news/story/schools-in-gujarat-to-reopen-from-july-26-from-class-9-to-12-1831487-2021-07-23>

<sup>14</sup> Amid surge, Govt puts off Class 12 boards, will take a call in June; Class 10 exams cancelled (May 24, 2021), <https://indianexpress.com/article/education/cbse-class-12-board-exams-postponed-class-10-exams-cancelled-7273257/>.

<sup>15</sup> Education board GR circular no. ૪૨૧૫/1220/874/૭ dated 14/07/2021. State has announced reopening of Higher secondary schools from July 26, 2021 with prior consent from parents.



I have taken a pledge along with my friends in school to join the fight against COVID-19. We have been oriented about safety measures through various posters and displays available in my school.

**Arab Sumaiya M.,** Student, Matruchhaya High School, Gomtipur, Ahmedabad.

school has a network of around 40 to 50 schools.

#### Key Results Achieved

The project has strengthened the capacities of key stakeholders by helping them to better coordinate, plan for, respond and mitigate the adverse impacts of COVID-19 in school institutions, resulting in COVID-19 risk reduction for students, parents, and staff.

This project has achieved the following key outputs:

#### The Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) for schools

- More than 300 students, parents, and teachers have been consulted about school re-opening needs in November - December 2020. Based on which school reopening SOP was prepared. Consultation was done either through direct one to one meetings, group meetings, focus group discussions and telephonic consultation.
- The SOP is divided into two main parts, 'Before Opening' and 'After Opening,' under each the protocols for schools, parents/guardians, and students. For simplicity and usability, the SOP is prepared in the form of a check-list. It can be used as an

assessment form to evaluate the level of preparedness of a school.

The specific objectives SOP are to:

- o contextualise the national guidelines to help school administrators and authorities (hereafter referred to as "schools") to prevent the spread of COVID-19 among students, teachers, and support staff;
- o help schools to understand the protocols to be followed, should a case of COVID-19 be suspected or identified and;
- o elaborate the procedures for monitoring and reporting to appropriate authorities.

The SOP guideline was disseminated using the SVS reaching to more than 300 schools in urban Ahmedabad. More than 75 educators were oriented on SOP and provided feedback during the field testing SOP.

#### Development of Key Messages and Communication Materials for Schools

- The IEC products facilitated to remind the IPC protocol and bring behaviour change among students and staff. 23 IEC products were designed for COVID-19 IEC and awareness. Inputs were taken from experts and locals. In various 23 products, over 10 clear consistent and coherent messages (on WASH, mask, physical distancing, sanitization, to-do checklist, pledge, IPC measures, educational A to Z alphabets, do's and don'ts) were co-created by UNICEF, AIDMI and most importantly the teachers, students and staff. Individual recall rate of key messages after

the session was between sixty to seventy per cent.

- The IEC products were displayed at strategic locations during field testing in 10 schools reaching out to benefit 12,012 enrolled students. It was highly appreciated and demanded by other schools attending the consultation workshop.

#### Field Testing of Products (SOP and IEC) with Schools

- The field-testing of SOP and IEC with 10 schools gave an opportunity to demonstrate and orient the direct stakeholders resulting in improved preparedness of schools. It also captured the feedbacks relating to simplicity of the language, font, avoiding jargons, display location and visualization of the messages. Incorporation of feedbacks also led to widespread ownership of SOPs and IEC products. It was suggested to change the size and number of IEC products based on the school size and age group of a particular school.
- The field-testing experience also captured schools' challenges and needs related to responding to COVID-19 pandemic and school safety aspects. The field-testing revealed that teachers were overburdened due to online sessions and administration was not clear about the government guidelines. The school staff found it challenging to maintain 6-feet distance among students and also worried to managing these safety norms once the remain classes will be re-opened. Mandatory mask wearing is possible to implement as awareness is increasing and there can be an



The SOP and IEC products resulted from a consultative process. This supported the team of schools towards organized and collective efforts to build safety against COVID-19.

**Shri Bharatbhai Patel,** Principal, Shriji Vidyalay, Bapunagar, Ahmedabad.





The IEC products at crucial locations of the schools have led to positive behaviour change.

effective monitoring mechanism at entry gate of the school. However, ensuring WASH practices by each student was found to be challenging in the schools because that requires constant repetition of the risk communication with the students. The placement of IEC products at strategic locations in the school is found one of important step towards addressing this challenge. Teachers also believe that it is time consuming process to convert these safety norms into habit and also involves some logistical challenges such as ensuring the constant availability of water in all schools and an adequate number of hand washing stands in the schools. Schools should be supported to increase their WASH capacities (installing more hand washing stands, etc.) for engendering effective behaviour change among their students.

- The intervention was thought to be timely and effective for building capacities and was

suggested by participating schools to reach out to other schools as well.

#### Key Learnings

Based on the project activities and observations from the selected 10 schools, the following gaps, lessons and learnings have been distilled:

- Government guidelines for school reopening is generalised and it is essential to contextualise it. Checklist-SOPs makes it easier to use for educators and school staff.
- Parents, teachers, students and education staff, all have vital role in safe school reopening. Stakeholder participation and consultation is crucial to successfully reduce the

risk of COVID-19 spread during school reopening.

- Not only is there a need for contextualised IEC products for personal and environmental hygiene, it is also essential to put it on strategic locations to grab attention during concerned activities. For instance, specific message posters were placed on main entrances, outside hand washing facilities and toilets, near the notice boards, assembly area, reception area, staff room and outside classrooms.
- Scientific awareness of the COVID-19 pandemic is crucial, when shared with students also reaches families and neighbourhood.

Target based IEC products (Information Education and Communication) are very effective to build school readiness against COVID-19. Every schools should have access of such products in Ahmedabad.

**Shri Navinchandra Vitthalbhai Prajapati,**  
Principal, Uma Sikshan Tirth, Naroda,  
Ahmedabad.



- Schools receive differential grants based on the number of students and education performance. However, financial resources to ensure hand and respiratory hygiene shall not be in line with performance, as poor performing schools might need more support for safe operations. Each of the schools needed additional logistic and financial support. For instance, in order to safely resume operations, the schools needed to be run in two shifts (to prevent overcrowding and to ensure social distancing); and to install enough number of hand washing stands, material stock for cleanliness considering safety against the pandemic.
- A testing and follow-up mechanism between the Urban Health Centres (UHCs), local COVID-19 hospitals, and schools for effective monitoring and response can be useful to build faith among parents as well as minimize fear.

Building capacities of schools have strengthened them to best

The IEC materials are really useful to my school. These products are specific to school communities, simple, short and specific to school locations.

**Darshna Pradipbhai Acharya**, Teacher, Vijaynagar Secondary School, Naranpura, Ahmedabad.

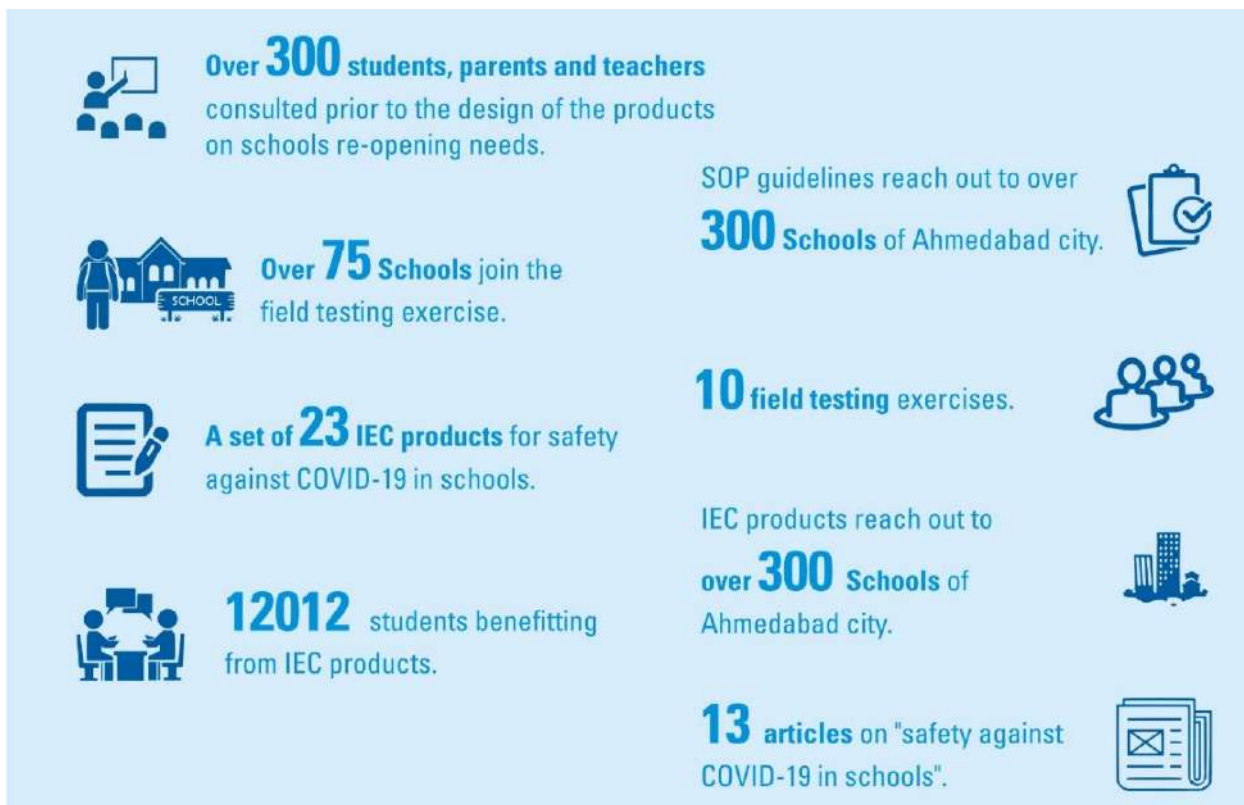


implement the national guidelines in alignment with local contextual requirements of the schools. Design and development of IEC materials based on need assessment, and child-friendliness is crucial. Impact of the COVID-19 on students belonging to migrant families, especially the girl child, needs to be further studied.

Based on the intervention, it was found that the project activities have improved the preparedness levels of the schools by adoption of the safe re-opening SOPs. For instance, the use of IEC products like posters at critical WASH facilities and locations (hand washing station, taps, etc.) have led to positive behaviour change. Similarly, effective risk communication and education have

led to better engagement of students. This was highlighted in the pledge taken by the students to inculcate COVID-19 appropriate behaviour such as wearing masks, washing hands and maintaining social distancing at all times.

Due to second wave of COVID-19 in India, schools were again closed from March 19, 2021. With some apprehensions, schools are gearing up for reopening with latest announcement for class 9-12. However, results of the study indicate that schools would need booster support to prevent children from risk of COVID-19 during predicted 3rd wave in India. ■



# Handbook for Reopening Schools?

*Mihir R. Bhatt, All India Disaster Mitigation Institute, India*

Ever since the national lockdown was imposed in March 2020 to curb the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, schools across India have been closed indefinitely. It has been almost 18 months to the school closures, which have adversely impacted almost 320 million<sup>16</sup> students in India. Consequently, the national and state governments are considering re-opening of schools to help India's students achieve their learning outcomes. However, the proposed re-opening of schools has been very challenging for a variety of reasons including the risk of infection and logistical challenges of ensuring physical distancing and safe scheduling of classes.

While these challenges of re-opening schools have come to dominate the narrative, there are certain opportunities to make the teachers and students safe from the pandemic that have been overlooked. The All India Disaster Mitigation Institute (AIDMI) was invited by local schools in Ahmedabad, Gujarat to help find safer ways to reopen. When the demand became substantial AIDMI found UNICEF's support to reach out to such and other schools in Ahmedabad more systematically. A list of strategic activities was identified with the help of local authorities, school management, parents, teachers, school staff, and students. While implementing these activities the demand for a Handbook for Reopening Schools became louder and came from all quarters of the school community. So what did come out of this demand?

One, that such a handbook must be multi-sectoral. Two, that such a handbook must be useful for coordination purposes. And, three, that such a handbook must focus on preparedness for response.

More questions come up about and around the demand for the handbook. For example, how will this process of making the handbook be managed? Who are the obvious stakeholders? Who are the stakeholders who must be brought in with special efforts? How this process must be authored? And who all can contribute into this authoring process and reviews of the product?

The demand for such a handbook also demanded more clarity about the role and functioning of the stakeholders in terms of who must lead, what functions to coordinate, and the composition of the steering committee for reopening?

But any of the above is not possible without assessing and reflecting upon the larger education ecosystem including status of schools, reality of students, and reopening process underway in India. What is the nature of the need, type of risks, project planning skills, and more available at local level?

How do we develop a strategy for reopening the schools? What should be the objectives? And steps to be taken, and scope of mitigation and preparedness measures?

And most importantly, where will the money come from to raise awareness for transformative reopening? Money for structural changes in the school building and its campus and the surrounding areas? And who will cover the cost of governance of the reopening process? And how to ensure that the reopening is transformative to sustainable ways to reduce risk and build resilience of the schools in the light of the pandemic as well as other multiple lists? As a result, AIDMI has developed some tools that are of

significance. One, the school vulnerability index focusing on the pandemic; and scorecard for reopening schools. Both are drafts and in the process of wider inputs and value addition. More of such tools are needed to go with the handbook.

The ongoing process of piloting safe re-opening the schools in the current context offers valuable inputs and material to later on turn into a handbook that is of use to all.

In addition, the challenges of accountability to and of reopening have come up again and again in various forms which have been indicated in the demands that a wide range of reopening school case studies will be of interest and of use to all schools. And accountability cannot be addressed leaving behind a wide range of ethics, alternative ethics, that the reopening field is demanding. There are ethical assumptions about and around reopening schools that I find are put in place by the dominant forces with funding and power. But I also find in these demands that these assumptions are challenged from within, outside, and below by the officials, school staff, teachers, parents, and students themselves. Obviously, this ethical concern goes beyond the idea of the usable and useful handbook to local use, it is an important and a fundamental idea for all stakeholders to reflect upon before they pick up the handbook and aim its use. In the end, any tool, such as this proposed handbook is as good as the concept it is based on, and the process it goes through in being realized, as late Jhabvala, the architect and director of School of Planning and Architecture Delhi often said. ■

<sup>16</sup> <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse>



# Suggested Protocols for Reopening of Schools

Brig (Dr) BK Khanna, SM, VSM\*\*, CEO UNDRR ARISE India

## Introduction

These are unprecedented times for schooling systems. Schools cannot be made to remain shut for more than one month (except during scheduled vacations) is the direction of Supreme Court of India. We cannot see children lose up to an entire year of their education as a result of possible school closures caused by COVID-19. On 05 Oct 2020, Union Ministry of Education issued the SOPs for reopening of schools from 15 Oct 2020, with choice to the children to attend classes on-line or physically. Education being a State subject, the States have taken the safer route, by keeping the schools closed, till the vaccine is made available publically. Children being most precious, parents/care-givers also would not like to send their wards to schools till they are sure that the schools are safe for learning. An attempt has been made in this article to suggest a protocol which can become basis for re-opening of schools.

## School Routines

As and when the green signal is given for schools to reopen fully, they would have to change routines, at least till the containment of COVID-19. Some recommended changes in the routine are:

- Staggered school timings for primary, middle and senior secondary classes.
- Ceasing all international school/departmental travel for students and teachers;
- All full school assemblies to be cancelled
- Inter-school Sport competitions to be cancelled
- Postponing or cancelling external school activities like fetes,



concerts, fairs, trips, camps, excursions, etc.

- In schools with more than 500 students, arranging staggered lunch breaks where possible and rescheduling other large in-school student gatherings and events.
- Class teachers may go ahead with their own classroom activities; however, parents should not be allowed to attend.
- All students whose parents/guardians are CORONA Warriors, should be allowed to learn from home, as their parents may not be able to attend to their wards.
- Those children who are declared vulnerable due to their disabilities or chronic diseases should also be allowed to learn from home.

## School Hygiene

Schools should pay close attention to the cleaning of school premises. The dedicated safai-karamcharis (SKC) should be provided additional equipment, material and training on cleaning techniques. SKC should pay extra attention to periodic cleaning of high touch point surfaces, such as door handles, light switches, desks, toilets, taps and sinks. SKC

deservedly should be paid extra to keep them motivated.

Teachers should also focus on the importance of effective hand washing and sneeze/cough hygiene with students. School website should include information on Healthy Steps to Success, with short videos for effect.

## Social Distancing

During drop off and pick up, social distancing of at least 1.5m should be kept, to avoid gatherings of parents, students and bus/van staff. Some recommended special instructions are:

- Schools should earmark separate gates for buses, vans and parents. Stop, Drop and Go Zone during drop/pick time. There should be no halting delay at the respective gates.
- For nursery and KG class students, the parents to drop children off at the most appropriate place as close to start timing of school as possible. Those children who require support may be dropped off near the bell/designated place. Timing for nursery and pre-primary classes should be different than the normal school opening/closing timing.
- For afternoon pick, children should leave via the designated gates. Teaching and non-teaching staff should be deployed to ensure safe distancing between children and correct wearing of mask. Parents of younger students and students who require support, should wait at the gate. Class teachers would bring such children to the designated gate for pick up. It has

to be ensured that all are following the 1.5m social distancing. Students, parents, bus/van staff must leave the school grounds as soon as pick-up is done.

- Stop Drop and Go Zone. Students will be spread out along the zone as much as possible.

To assist in social distancing, there should be no congregating at the classroom door or outside classrooms in groups. Posters regarding social distancing should be put up on gates and areas throughout the school as a reminder of what the expectations are. Parents should not enter classrooms unless they have an appointment or interview with their child's class teacher. Initially the schools may also deploy marshals to ensure safe distancing and wearing of masks correctly.

These measures are important and will further help support the health and safety of children, staff and families. By everyone following these expectations and working together, we can make a difference.

### Students Who Are Unwell

Parents should not send their children to school if they are unwell. If a child arrives at school unwell, or becomes unwell whilst at school, school should immediately contact parent/caregiver to come and take him/her home. In a COVID-19 situation, parents should not place any unnecessary stress on the school staff, by their sending unwell child to school. Class teacher should have start a whatsapp group with all the parents/care-givers in the group.

### Talking with Children about COVID-19

While there should be informal talk in school, on precautions to be taken against COVID-19, parents should also find the time to educate their

children with stories, news and medical precautions to be taken by children, depending on the age of the children.

### Religious Instruction

Whilst schools remain open, in order to further strengthen our efforts to contain the spread of COVID-19, there should be NO religious ceremonies in the schools, till such time the pandemic is over.

### Learning Program

The learning initially would be hybrid, with some children learning from home and others attending regular classes. The recommended learning program would be on the following lines:

### Students Learning from Home

- The class teacher will communicate with parent/student on learning at home program. The learning materials will be uploaded to the online learning platforms that the teacher is using.
- Adjusted timetables will be sent out to families at the beginning of term – these are a guide and can be adapted to family context and needs.
- Teachers and support staff will provide support for students and families whilst students are at home learning.
- Students will be in contact with their own classroom teacher as well as other teachers from the year level and support staff.
- Any guidelines and instructions received from the Central/State Govt and District administration and others like police, fire services, health department, district disaster management authorities will be shared with parents/care-givers.

### Students learning at school

- Students will wear their school uniform as hitherto fore.
- Where will students be learning?
  - Students will be grouped in year levels and be situated in

one or two of the year level classrooms.

- To maintain good social distancing at school, number of students per classroom should be limited to a maximum of 16.

### Who will be supervising the students?

- Teachers and their helpers, where applicable, will be supervising students throughout the day.
- Throughout the week, the children will have contact with their own classroom teacher as well as other classroom teachers from that year level, support and specialist teachers.

### What will learning look like?

- Students will participate in the same online learning program as those students learning at home.
- Students will receive support to participate in the learning program, including technical support for their devices, logging on etc.
- There will be routines throughout the day, however these may differ for different year levels.
- Students will also be participating in other activities organised by specialist teachers, like music, computer, etc. These activities will be similar to those that students will be doing at home.

### Absenteeism

- If any child is unable to attend because he/she is unwell, school office will be informed via email or phone.

### Health and Safety at School

School will provide liquid soap to allow staff and students to regularly clean their hands. High touch points as mentioned earlier would be cleaned periodically by *safai karamcharis*.

If any child is unwell, it is important to keep him/her at home. ■

## The Pandemic and Schools: Key Measures by ASDMA

*Mridusmita Borah, Assam State Disaster Management Authority (ASDMA), Assam, India*

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the societal functioning and day to day service delivery to the citizens. The pandemic impacted almost all sections and sectors of the society. However, the severity of impact was faced by vulnerable groups and economically weaker sections of the society. With disruption of basic services, newer patterns and methods of business continuity emerged and people started adapting to those new methods. While adaptation was a challenge, the Assam government tried its best to help the people cope with these new challenges and adapt to the new normal situation. All other services resumed slowly, however there was no plan for recovery of education services in the early stages. Education is a critical sector and the impact on education was not visible in the short term as people slowly started coping with the pandemic. As a series of lockdown orders were imposed in the State, the fear of contracting the disease started creeping into minds of adults and they restricted the outdoor movement of their children. With the closure of schools from the end of March, only a handful of private



schools could cope up with the online classes, whereas the govt. schools suffered since they had no plan for continuity of education. Most of the students in Govt. schools belonged to marginalized families, who could not afford online education of their children. The Govt. could not manage any alternative mode of education, as there was dearth of adequate resources to promote online education of children in the initial days of the pandemic. As a result, education services could not be continued in the absence of a proper execution plan.

Assam faced multiple hazards like storms, flood and blowout in oil industry in the midst of the pandemic, which posed as a challenge for the State Government to tackle the situation. Assam State Disaster Management Authority (ASDMA) prepared advisories and shared IECs on precautionary measures to stop the spread of COVID-19. IECs were disseminated in English as well as vernacular language for school authorities and general public explaining safety measures to be taken during COVID-19 to keep the children safe. Messages were also disseminated through video modules developed in sign language for people with disabilities. ASDMA supported in effective distribution of safety measures for children via. print media, radio, social media platforms and other sources.

This year, the situation faced by Assam was unique as flood occurred in the midst of COVID-19 pandemic. Hence, it was a challenge to keep children of flood victims safe in relief camps setup across the State. In view of the situation, Assam State Disaster





Management Authority (ASDMA) collaborated with UNICEF to develop an “SOP on Relief Camp Management for operationalization during Flood vis. a vis COVID-19”. The SOP was prepared with special focus on adherence to the COVID-19 protocols, identification of additional Relief camps for ensuring social distancing norms, provision of psychosocial support to flood affected families in relief camps and operationalization of Child Friendly Spaces for expecting mothers and children affected by floods. The SOP was circulated to Govt. Departments like Education, Health, Social Welfare, PHED as well as DDMA for operationalization during flood. Child Friendly Spaces (CFS) provided opportunity for the departments to continue child centric services like provision of age specific food and nutrition services, health services, infection control and WASH services, education and recreational services and protection services. Child trafficking is a common scenario during calamities and therefore Child Friendly Spaces



were monitored by Child protection officials. All protocols for COVID-19 containment including safety and security of children were ensured in Child Friendly Spaces (CFS). Welfare services for well-being of pregnant and lactating mothers was also provided in the CFS. During distress due to multiple calamities, CFS provided scope for parents to seek livelihood opportunities while the children were taken care of by the Govt. field staff and NGO members.

In 2020, severely flood hit districts like Goalpara, Barpeta, Biswanath, Bongaigaon, Dhubri, Dibrugarh, Karbi-Anglong, Jorhat, Lakhimpur, Majuli, Nagaon, Tinisukia and Sivasagar had operationalized Child Friendly spaces (CFS) in the relief camps to address the needs of the flood affected children. Total 125 CFS were reported to be operational during the floods as per reports received from 14 Districts. Community Volunteers were also engaged by Assam State Disaster Management Authority (ASDMA) to support the government in containment of COVID-19. The services provided by the volunteers encompass activities ranging from emotional support, spreading awareness on social distancing in markets & public places, hygiene practices, encourage hand washing etc. One of the tasks of these volunteers is ensuring effective functioning of Relief Camps, supporting mid-day meal distribution and relief distribution to support the district administration. Moreover, they also provided emotional support to the elderly people. E-Help desk was also provided in Govt. relief camps to give tele- counselling support through psychologists to the disaster affected families. ■

Sl. No.	District	No. of CFS in the district	No. of Children in CFS (0-19 years)	No. of Women in RC (pregnant & lactating women)
1.	Barpeta	6	73	0
2.	Biswanath	1	26	0
3.	Bongaigaon	2	167	24
4.	Dhubri	33	1187	81
5.	Dibrugarh	7	480	18
6.	Karbi Anglong	5	245	104
7.	Goalpara	40	1450	184
8.	Jorhat	3	34	5
9.	Lakhimpur	4	131	0
10.	Majuli	7	58	1
11.	Nagaon	3	34	10
12.	Sivasagar	4	222	33
13.	Tinsukia	8	66	8
14.	Dhemaji	2	72	2
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>125</b>	<b>4245</b>	<b>470</b>

## The Pandemic and School Reopening in Tripura State

*Dr. Sarat Kumar Das, State Project Officer, Tripura Disaster Management Authority, Tripura, India*

The unprecedented COVID-19 global pandemic affected Tripura with widespread damage to its economics and communities as a whole. It's been about a year, but it is not clear that when the restrictions will be over. During this pervasive gloom and doom background, education has been the one of the most affected sectors. The impact on schools has been particularly debilitating.

Tripura being a small state, there are 4,945 schools in the state including Madrassas. About 22% population of the state are school students and teachers. Overall literacy rate of the state is 87.2% (2011 census) which is better than the country and many other states, and may be the result of the state's various initiatives to push for school education. Due to COVID-19, the schools have been closed since

March 2020 during the lockdown period and continue to be so. The State Government deliberated several times to reopen the schools but considering the fear of mass infection and the safety of the larger education community decided against it. However, the state government has continued to take innovative and need based measures for continuation of studies and examinations during COVID-19 restrictions. Some of the measures are as follows:

1. Live classes in local TV channels: Education Department took the initiative of broadcasting phase wise live classes from the studios of 10 local TV channels. The classes are being taken by the selected renowned teachers of different subjects for different classes. A lot of students benefitted

because of mass publicity and positive response from the students and parents' community.

2. Broadcasting of recorded video classes by Doordharshan and local cable TV channels: Pre-recorded classroom videos of different subjects of class X to XII broadcasted through DD Agartala centre for two months (July and August 2020).
3. YouTube channel renamed as "Vande Tripura": 714 pre-recorded high-end e-classroom videos were uploaded in the YouTube channel "Vande Tripura" which were viewed by 6,54,344 viewers. The channel has been subscribed by 17,400 subscribers as on date. The channel has received very good mileage from the students and guardians.



4. “Ektu Khelo Ektu Poro” activities for children: This is specially an activity based learning initiative by the state government launched on 25 June 2020 with an objective to engage the elementary school students by disseminating audio-visual contents which are focussed on hands-on learning activities, simple projects with games and fun through WhatsApp for android based mobiles and SMS who don’t have smart phones. Through this scheme, the teachers give tasks in the morning and collected feedback in the afternoon. So far 4,470 schools have been covered and reached 70% student communities.

5. Classes by teachers through various video conferencing platforms: At par with other state governments and government of India initiatives, the state government also launched virtual and online classes from first week of May 2020 through video

conferencing applications such as google meet etc. Students those who have android mobile got benefitted to the virtual classes but it has reported that many students who are poor and from remote areas could not avail the benefits of virtual classes. For those deprived students, government introduced call centres and neighbourhood classes.

6. Call centres (student’s helpline): The State Government opened a call centre in Tripurainfo.com as student helpline to support the students and guardians for clarifying the doubts, support for attending online classes and any other related issues. The call centre was running upto 31 October 2020. A good number of teachers had been engaged for attending the calls of students. The response was overwhelming.

7. Neighbourhood classes: During the first week of August 2020, the neighbourhood classes started for class III to XII

comprising of one teacher with maximum five students in each group in open spaces nearby the school maintaining COVID-19 safety measures. The neighbourhood classes were specifically launched for those who do not have mobiles to attend online classes.

The Education Department, Government of Tripura is trying to cope with COVID-19 situation with utmost precautions to ensure uninterrupted studies of the students. Cooperation from all round has been very positive due to active involvement of key agencies and media. The Department used to publicise the initiative and decisions from time to time for welfare of the education fraternity with its utmost capacity so that the information is reached to all students, parents and teacher communities.

With a hope “this difficult time will pass soon”. ■  
 (Note: the data shared in the topic are collected from Education Department and reference of 2011 census)

A ROADMAP FOR REOPENING SCHOOLS IN UTTAR PRADESH

# The Pandemic and School Reopening Plans in Uttar Pradesh

Ashwin Srivastava, CEO, Sapio Analytics<sup>17</sup>, India

The pandemic has brought new perspectives to school safety and delivery of education. We shall be making a mistake if we consider these perspectives to be common across India, as contextual realities of different regions of India need to be taken into account for making comprehensive plans of reopening the education system and keeping it afloat during and post the pandemic.

### The Visible Shift

Let us first address the various shifts in the educational ecosystem that have happened due to the pandemic. All of them need to be considered while implementing the reopening plans and ensuring its sustainability.

- **Increase in use of open spaces:** A new structuring of the architecture of classrooms is needed and schools with access to open spaces can do it in a much better way. Open spaces

reduce the possibility of spread of virus, as proven scientifically.

- **Increase in use of virtual modes of communication:** This is an obvious need that has permeated into the behavior of students and teachers, having made online classes the new normal.
- **Special focus on Mental Wellness:** Our research shows that there has been a significant

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Precautions during reopening.

increase in domestic violence over the last few months, establishing a correlation between the crisis and the same. Based on the increased numbers, it is highly expected that there is a negative impact happening on kids, and they may need special mental care as the reopening becomes mainstream.

- **Special focus on Health and Hygiene:** This goes without saying that schools must increase their health and hygiene focus by a few notches, by following strict protocols designed for the same.
- **Social Distancing:** Crammed classrooms have to become a thing of the past and well-designed scheduling of classes shall be needed to maintain the desired social distancing for at least the end of the next academic year.

#### The Context of Uttar Pradesh

The above-mentioned points are valid for the entire country. Let us look at some data points in the context of Uttar Pradesh:

- **Special focus on gender integration post re-opening:** Research (on ground surveys) shows that the crisis has led to increase in girls being involved for domestic chores, increasing

the possibility of reduced attendance from girls upon full scale re-opening, effectively creating the need of a special focus on girl students while planning policies for sustained re-opening.

- **Families in the unorganized sector:** Government of Uttar Pradesh is looking at the unorganized sector for its economic revival. This sector forms a major part of the backbone of the state's economy and the number is expected to have increased during the pandemic. The state is making moves to integrate businesses in this sector into the mainstream. This is an opportunity for the

education system to be specially focused on students from such families, as this can lead to a combined socio-economic growth for the sector.

- **More students in Class I-V:** The ratio of students in Class VI-VIII to students in Class I-V is 0.35 for the state of Uttar Pradesh, while the same number is 0.48 for rest of India. This significant difference means the schools in Uttar Pradesh will have a greater challenge at hand in maintaining the right discipline required for social distancing and hygiene, thus necessitating a special focus on the same.

#### Recommendations for Reopening

Based on a detailed evaluation of the changed situation for the country and then considering the special contexts for the state of Uttar Pradesh; the reopening plans must include a well-designed structure of classroom attendance for different classes, not making the same mandatory except at specific intervals, while delaying normal re-opening for students from Classes I to V even further and having programs to increase their accessibility to the possibilities of virtual learning, with a special focus on girl students and overall mental health as well. ■



back-to-school pegboard.

## The Pandemic and School Reopening in India

*Brig (Dr.) BK Khanna, SM, VSM\*\*, CEO UNDRR ARISE India; and  
Dr. Nina Khanna, Director, BNK Crisis & DM Services*



### Introduction

Corona cluster was reported by China to WHO China Office on 31 December 2019. The Chinese authorities identified a new type of corona virus, which was isolated on 7 January 2020. WHO announced COVID-19 outbreak as a pandemic on 11 March 2020, after a gap of more than 2 months. The first fatality from COVID-19 in India was reported on 30 January 2020. Since March 2020, we are going through unprecedented times, never in our living memory has humanity faced such a challenge - medical, social and economic that threatens the viability of all human systems. One major challenge is education of our children. The subject requires a deep understanding of interlinked and causal issues from the perspective of all concerned stakeholders. Schools in India have been shut since 22 March 2020 due to continuous lock downs and unlock periods. They are not opening for varied reasons. In the intervening period, education is

being imparted through e-learning, the new norm, from KG class onwards. Virtual learning has its advantages but can also be harmful in long run. Students initially enjoyed the freedom of not going to school, but are now feeling edgy to go back to school, to enjoy the company of peers in their school's setting.

### Challenges

Reopening of schools faces numerous challenges. The schools will need to be logistically prepared with the teaching staff ready; they will need to have plans specifically for supporting learning recovery of the most disadvantaged students.

One of the bigger challenge in reopening of schools in India, could be 53,533 single class rooms schools (as per District Information System for Education (DISE), nearly 15 lakh schools and in one-fifth of them, the student classroom ratio is 35 and above, making it almost impossible for the school to follow any kind of

social distancing norms if all students turn up.

Moreover, in 8.3% schools involving 1.3 lakh pupils, more than 50 students sit in one classroom (Report by Centre for Budget and Governance Accountability (CBGA) and Child Rights and You (CRY). Since majority of schools have a single staff room for all teaching and non-teaching staff, maintaining the social distancing norms would be equally challenging for the teachers.

While availability of water is essential for frequent hand washing to ward off the virus, only 52% schools have overall water, sanitation and hygiene systems such as drinking water, functional toilets and hand washing facilities in place. To compound the problem there are approximately six lakh teachers of age 55 years and above serving in the schools, who are more vulnerable and cannot be allowed to come physically to schools.

There is a growing digital divide in the online education system. Especially in middle class families, sons are being given i-phones over daughters for e-learning, resulting in dropout rates likely to increase for girls. The school closures due to Covid-19 pandemic could lead to a million more girls and transgender children dropping out before they complete their education. Due to the lockdown and economic recession, it is likely that household responsibilities on girls will increase and even those enrolled in schools will drop out.

The other question, which arises, is, how will the children come to school? Who would ensure that buses/vans carrying them to school are sanitized. They could become source of infection for older parents and grandparents at home. Can parents be made responsible to drop/pick up their wards from school? All of them may not have personal transport or time. How do we ensure that those infected, even mildly or having symptoms do not attend classes but attend virtual classes? Thus, the role of parents becomes equally crucial. Checking at School gates would slow down entry and long queues, with difficulty of safe distancing. If some are found with temperature or coughing and sneezing, work security staff would get tougher and heavy on resources.

**New Norms on Reopening**  
In new normal, we are likely to see

schools with hybrid teaching i.e. one in which students learn online as well as attending classes physically. Once in school all must maintain proper hygiene standards, cleanliness of hands by frequent hand washing, wearing of masks properly and covering mouth and nose, as well as social distancing, etc., while at the same time ensuring that we do not limit the interaction amongst the students. How to achieve that in a class-room where everyone is sitting at least 6 feet apart and most facing in one direction, since there is a need for these classes to be broadcast to the students? What protocols need to be followed to ensure that when children step out of the classroom, they follow safe distancing? Corridors have to be broad enough for students to pass each other? Will cafeterias be a no go zone in schools, with children bringing their tiffin from homes? Will students be asked to submit their hand-written work? How do children do laboratory work for the sciences? All these are questions school managements need to pay attention to before they reopen schools, whenever allowed to do so.

As per Union Ministry of Education guidelines issued on 05 Oct 2020, "Schools must arrange and implement for thorough cleaning and disinfecting of all areas, furniture, equipment, stationery, storage places, water tanks, kitchen, canteen, wash rooms, laboratories and

libraries, etc. on school campus and ensure air flow in indoor spaces,". Guidelines are very elaborative. UNESCO, UNICEF, WFP and World Bank have also issued guidelines on school reopening.

### Conclusion

There are no ready answers. There are psychological, behavioural and educational impact of not opening schools. The issue of screen time, safeguarding of at-risk students as well as how to support those with Special Education Needs are required to be debated. Ways to assess students for learning and how to hold end of term/ year examination in a virtual or hybrid classroom are issues that need to be discussed. There can be no one-size fits all solution and it will require the close coordination and cooperation of students, staff and the parents. We may rephrase the proverb "It takes a village to raise a child" to "It will take the world to educate a generation amidst change."

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## NEW SCHOOL SAFETY AGENDA FOR THE PANDEMIC

# Reopening Schools in India

*Kanchan Gandhi, Postdoctoral Research Fellow, IISER, Mohali, India*

The Covid-19 outbreak that was declared a pandemic by the WHO in March 2020 led to a sudden lockdown in India. Students and professionals have been working from home since then. This has led to

several struggles related to adaptation to online modes of teaching and learning both from the end of the students and the teachers. Some of these challenges include poor internet connectivity, loss of

content due to it, lack of eye contact between teachers and students, lack of interest by the students in online mode of learning, increased screen time for both teachers and students



which may have severe health implications.

Climate Change experts believe that as polar ice-caps will melt, viruses that were trapped in ice centuries ago will get released in the atmosphere and create new kinds of public health emergencies which could be similar to the pandemic. Given the fast-changing physical environment, it is time to prepare the education systems for more 'work from home' arrangements and normalise online teaching and learning. For achieving this, the above-mentioned challenges must be overcome.

The reopening of schools during and after the pandemic will pose certain challenges that school administrations should be prepared for. The most significant challenge will be to ensure physical distancing norms among children. Schools will have to run awareness camps for students to learn the importance of physical distancing and personal hygiene to counter the pandemic.

Due to the lockdown, children's physical activities have been severely limited. This can create another public health emergency. Increased screen time has made the students lifestyles sedentary at a much younger age than expected. Therefore, schools should put special emphasis on resuming sports, dance and other forms of physical activity. This will prevent the proliferation of lifestyle related diseases such as diabetes and heart-issues among the younger generation. While online modes of teaching and learning need to be normalised as preparedness measures for future pandemics, schools must ensure that while the

situation is "normal", students must be made to engage in more physical activities than before. In a fast-changing world, necessary life skills such as farming, raising a kitchen garden and cooking must form an integral part of school education.

The children of today are adults of tomorrow and they will inhabit a vastly different world from their parents and grandparents. The exposure to all kinds of electronic gadgets and media influence is at an all-time high. Hence when schools re-open they should focus on reduction of screen time of their teachers and students and more promote more outdoor activities that will create healthy citizens of tomorrow.

Thus, to ensure a healthier, safer and sustainable future in the post-pandemic phase, the schools must:

- Put greater emphasis on physical activities such as sports and dance to counter the adverse health impacts of "study from home" during the pandemic

- Make farming a necessary part of learning to adapt to future changes in climate and environment
- Reduce screen time of their faculty and students by shifting the teaching back to the classroom
- Prepare for future pandemics by training teachers and students for online teaching and learning
- Run awareness camps to emphasise the importance of physical distancing and personal hygiene to counter contagious diseases
- Run more vocational courses and emphasise the importance of working with hands
- Provide more scholarships and laptops and mobile phones for the Economically-Weaker-Section (EWS) students so that they are able to cope up with online teaching during future pandemics.

These measures will contribute to increased resilience in the events of future pandemics. ■



A school in Baghpat. (Picture by Kanchan Gandhi).

# COVID-19 Pandemic and School Reopening Agenda

Chandra Bhakuni, Principal Structural Engineer, Ahmedabad, Gujarat, India



Primary school in Kerala showing teaching authorities try their best in providing a safe controlled environment for the children.

The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic comes as a surprise for India at a time when, as a developing country, it has been undertaking important reforms to improve its health and education infrastructure covering its population of over a billion people. Schools are a vital part of this infrastructure as they play a vital role in improving the learning outcomes of India's children and helping the country reap its massive demographic dividend.

Of India's twenty million classrooms, more than half belong to rural and tribal areas, and most schools in urban areas have children who are from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. All of these schools have been closed during the pandemic. While better-resourced schools have tried to restore their normal operations using internet classrooms, they also haven't reopened fully to assume their normal operations; none of the schools have. This puts students in a threatening scenario where their individual growth is hampered,

mental health issues are a threat, and they have to be dependent on individual parenting. Of these, the most vulnerable are the girl children, orphans, children with disabilities and parents who face economic and food hardship where children may not return to the school the same way the longer the closure remains. Recall too, most schools in India run on mid-day meal schemes.

Therefore, reopening of schools becomes a priority amidst the pandemic that is here to stay. A recent document titled 'Framework for Reopening Schools' by the UN, WFP and WB is a good step in this direction and can be accessed over the internet. The annexes provided in the document are subsequently useful too. In India's case, the reopening agendas may be prioritized as below:

1. Consider reopening in lowest risk (non-containment) zones.
2. Carry out consultation with parents wherever possible.
3. Formulate country-wide detailed standard operating

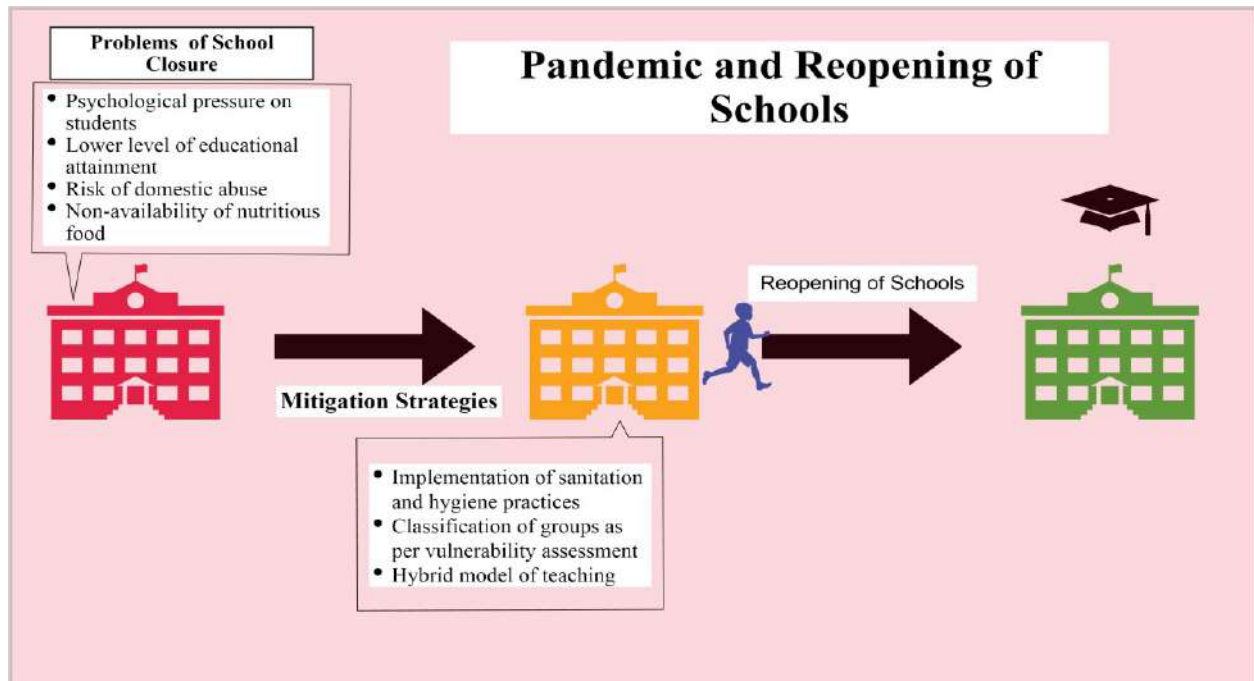
procedures (SOPs) and guidelines.

4. Reopen schools that are ready with school facility specific action plans.
5. Use the pandemic as an opportunity to promote better drinking water, hygiene and sanitation practices.

Also, it is a serious practical paradoxical situation we find ourselves in when unsafe building facilities are required to be closed unless they are retrofitted for safety and at the same time their continual function is critically important, made even more evident by current crisis. This multi-hazardous situation calls for creativity and new solutions. For instance, an obvious way through is improvement in health protocols, COVID-19 specific guidelines, phased manner of opening of schools and standard operating procedures (SOPs), and action plans which are school facility specific. It should be noted that although the closedown of schools has been mandated by the government, the onus of reopening lays with the assurance of a safe environment in each individual school facility. The problems essentially remain the same- water and sanitation provisioning, hygiene, strict adherence to COVID-19 safety protocols, and densely packed classrooms, to name a few. And, these come at a price. Wonder why most schools in India are poorly resourced? Essentially, for a country the functioning of schools should be as important as functioning of its economy. ■

# The Pandemic and School Reopening in Uttarakhand

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On 15 December 2020, Indian Institute of Technology Madras (IITM) announced that it had detected 168 cases of COVID-19 in the institute campus. So, the administration halted the phased reopening and closed all the departments and research labs till the situation improves. Other IITs are still struggling to reopen their campuses and start the process of teaching-learning as was practiced before the pandemic struck. If this is the case with some of the most well-funded but relatively small centres of higher education, one wonders the condition of hundreds and thousands of schools, with great diversity in their student populace, spread across the country.

When in March 2020 the government of India decided to shut down the entire country, it gave them a notice of just four hours. Schools, colleges, universities, factories, offices and everything in between were closed down so that the spread of the novel

coronavirus could be halted. However, while doing so neither the cause of the crores of migrant labourers was taken into consideration, nor the plight of the crores of school going children who could only have a decent meal under the mid-day meal scheme was thought of. Teachers, students and the latter's parents were forced into a situation where teaching-learning would take place only through computers and cellular phones.

Writing about the problem of school closures on the three stakeholders, namely, the children, parents and teachers, Ziauddin et al. mentions that with online teaching students are reeling under immense psychological pressure, lower level of educational attainment, risk of domestic abuse and food. At the same time, parents have to juggle their time between their own employment and home-schooling their children. Finally, teachers are under immense pressure to generate

new materials for teaching online classes and interacting with students. At the same time, school closures prevented young children to contact the virus and spread it to different categories of people within and outside the households. Meanwhile, families also got quality time to spend with each other. Now, the million-dollar question is should schools and universities remain closed, while everything else seems to have opened up, including festive celebrations and electioneering?

As a political slogan reopening of schools like everything else seems interesting, however, if not done with care reopening of schools will put the lives of both the teacher and the taught at risk. Unlike a festival or an election, which are events spread over a few days, schools and universities are more interconnected with the wider society for a prolonged period. Most of the schools in India have classrooms which are overtly crowded and



maintaining physical distancing will be next to impossible. As the case of IIT Madras showed, once the virus enters this crowd, it would infect a very large number of students, teachers and the staff. The hybrid model in which certain number of students are imparted classroom-based teaching while others get online ones puts the teachers at greater stress to navigate the lessons.

Does that mean schools should remain closed till the entire

population is vaccinated? As a proposition, I have three suggestions of how to mitigate the risks while reopening the schools. First, a majority of schools in India are not known to practice adequate sanitation and hygiene. If this can be implemented with care, then any infection can be detected at an early stage and measures can be taken to contain it. Second, a vulnerability assessment of each individual needs to be done, so that classification of groups based on risk probability can

be created and even if physical distancing is not always possible to maintain, emergent risks can be taken care of. Finally, the hybrid model of teaching needs to be followed, while keeping in consideration the different socio-economic uncertainties faced by different sections of the students. If these steps can be followed rigorously, I am hopeful that schools can reopen to a new normal. ■

#### CASE STUDY IN SCHOOL SAFETY

## The Challenges of Education Continuity after the Lockdown: Vidya Bhawan's Experiences

*Mr. Hardy Dewan, Azim Premji University, Ex Vidya Bhawan Society; and Pushpraj Ranawat, Principal, Vidya Bhawan Senior Secondary School, Udaipur, India*

Vidya Bhawan is an organisation that has many institutions dealing with education of different age groups from Nursery up to post graduate degrees and beyond. The institutions work with different types of courses and have different reflections. This reflection is largely based on the view from one school but is broadly correct for all others as well. We will add a few points for the other institutions of education beyond school at the end.

The COVID-19 pandemic struck all aspects of life affecting the poor and vulnerable sections of society the most. Migrant workers, small stall owners and daily wage workers all suffered loss of vocation and income. Poor children were tied up at home and unable to meet their friends and schools were closed adversely impacting their learning outcomes. Vidya Bhawan has many children from deprived categories and some from relatively better situations. The first need for children was some access to interaction and

sharing formal teaching sessions. We realised early into the lockdown that we need information about home digital environment -the access to smart or even basic phones for family, ideally for each child. Only then, could we begin interaction with them and build upon formal learning classes much later.

This interaction was needed not just for the upper primary, secondary and the more senior students, but also for primary and even the beginning classes. We internalised the total lack of quiet space for study in the house and virtually no possibility of any support, neither academic nor motivational encouragement for study and learning.

The extent of rural urban divide was also staggering. As a boarding school we have children from rural areas and the gap in resources for interaction was huge. This is because the internet and basic mobile telephony have limited penetration

in the rural areas of the country. For parents even if education was important it could not be the then priority. In contrast well off parents were putting pressure to somehow start teaching. Partial participation of a few poor children became possible much later due the extraordinary efforts made by their parents. Still many could not continue and in spite of the intense parental desire to continue education there would be many children whose journey back to school and education would be difficult.

It is the low fees private schools that have been hit hard with parents not able to pay fees and children not able to attend classes. This inability to pay has led children to shift to govt. schools or completely give up education.

Government schools have not opened. They cannot match the resources that high or even middle end private schools and better off parents can collectively make

available for children. The poor children with the benefit of the Government scholarships have to miss schools and the support for learning available there. Our experience with government scholarship hostel resident students shows that these children are also not able to continue studies. Many have no access to on line interaction processes. Post COVID, students must know what support can help them tide over the break in learning. Many children have to learn to break in to the school schedules afresh. For some categories of children like those from interior rural areas, education may suffer permanently. As soon as the Vidya Bhawan hostels were closed, some of the students were forced to withdraw from the school as they did not have any facilities to stay in Udaipur nor could their families afford to invest in education. The job and income losses suffered by parents also disrupted the education of a lot of students who simply couldn't afford to continue with their education.

All those who remained with school cannot join the line sessions. Only 60-70% children with the schools can attend online sessions and that too irregularly. Most connections allow data for only 2-3 classes in a day. The connections are not very cheap yet the data per day availability makes it impossible for most to afford. Siblings have to share device and data which can lead to bigger problems. The lock down came upon suddenly and teachers and system were ill- prepared. Teachers are used to classroom teaching, where they can see students and judge from faces their engagement, learning and interest. They are unable to build interactive sessions that gets them feedback.

However, the necessity of conducting online classes helped us overcome many of our previously held prejudices against technology. Teachers who were earlier reluctant to learn technology have now fully embraced it and have started exploring, learning and using it well. Teachers have also come to realize

the need for multiple resources to enable children's learning. The school as a body is now convinced about the interest and capability of children to learn using multiple resources including internet meaningfully and text books and how teachers are not the only mode of learning. Children must be allowed and encouraged to use external sources including mobile phones. Responses and questions from the students are welcome and use of phones and extra materials is not taboo.

We realise that the assessment system did not help understand what the students had learnt and knew. Assessment meant memorised information, much from the text book itself. To send questions to them at home we needed questions that excluded copying books. This helped the school system understand assessment better. Teachers now think about the quality of learning and realise the need for alternative questions that had so far not been



accepted. They learnt to make and choose such questions and recognise an assessment tool as one where answers cannot be copied or memorised. Importance and use of worksheets in the classrooms has increased.

Our experience says that online education even for those who can afford it is inferior to a face to face system of instruction. Parents and adults have felt engaged with children and their support will be used going forward. Some of the ideas used would stay with us. Our

understanding of how education can be best transacted would change after this.

Teachers and parents will look at children and education differently.

#### INEQUALITY AND SCHOOL SAFETY

## Education Inequality and School Reopening during COVID-19 Pandemic

*Campelo Koslinski, Associate Professor, Federal University of Rio de Janeiro; and Tiago Lisboa Bartholo, Associate Professor, Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil*



Kids protecting themselves with face masks. (Photo credit: [www.freepikcompany.com](http://www.freepikcompany.com))

The COVID-19 pandemic has had dramatic consequences for schools across the world. According to UNESCO, at the end of April 2020, school closure measures had affected close to 69.3% (of the total learners enrolled around the world. The period of school closure has varied widely according to local contexts. Brazil has faced one of the lengthiest periods: all schools had closed since March, with a few exceptions that have reopened in October – usually schools with high socioeconomic intake. Even those schools have experienced intermittent reopening as coronavirus transmission increased and, according to estimates, only 3% of students aged 4-17 are currently attending schools (Folha de São Paulo, 2020).

Why should we expect the reopening of schools, especially those focused on early childhood education (ECE) provision, to reduce social inequality? It is widely recognized that children's early development and their progress during the first years at school are crucial for their later success. Good quality ECE provision works as a protective factor, especially for vulnerable children (Sylva, et al., 2010; Tymms et al., 1997). Although there is an increasing number of publications aiming to estimate the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on the development and well-being of young children, it is not clear what are the effects of the school closures. But what do we know so far? Recent studies suggest that during the period of school closures: a)

education inequality will most likely increase (EEF, 2020; Halterbeck et al., 2020); b) there will be a negative impact on children's learning and well-being (Engzell et al., 2020; Maldonado; De Witt, 2020). The studies are mainly from developed countries, and we should expect an even higher negative impact in societies with high levels of poverty and social inequality that have experienced more extended periods of school closures.

The reopening of schools is one important step to prevent further harm to poor and vulnerable children. The lack of proper nutrition, care, and good quality interactions between teachers and the children can produce a long-term negative impact on their development. In Brazil, researchers from the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, with the support of Maria Cecília Souto Vidigal Foundation, are analyzing the impact of school closure in a random sample of children (around 2,000 children) in a natural experiment design. The aim is to produce reliable evidence to guide educational policy in a post-COVID context (Lapope, 2020). For example, the study has observed high figures for ECE teachers' mental health measures, especially for those



that experienced more life events related to the coronavirus, suggesting that reopening plans should consider supporting the teachers. Moreover, rigorous sanitary protocols are not just a health-related issue, as they can also guarantee a more sustainable reopening, avoiding drawbacks.

However, while social distancing measures are still necessary, we can expect some limitations to the impact of the reopening of schools, especially in developing countries with larger children-adult ratios in ECE provision, with fewer resources and, schools lacking adequate structure. These contexts impose a greater need for having fewer pupils at one time at school. In order to have an impact on inequality such strategies would have to give priority to more vulnerable children.

Ultimately, considering teachers as a priority group for covid-19 vaccines can help to restore school activities and their impact as a protective factor for vulnerable children and undermine some of the damage and increase in inequality that has already been observed. ■

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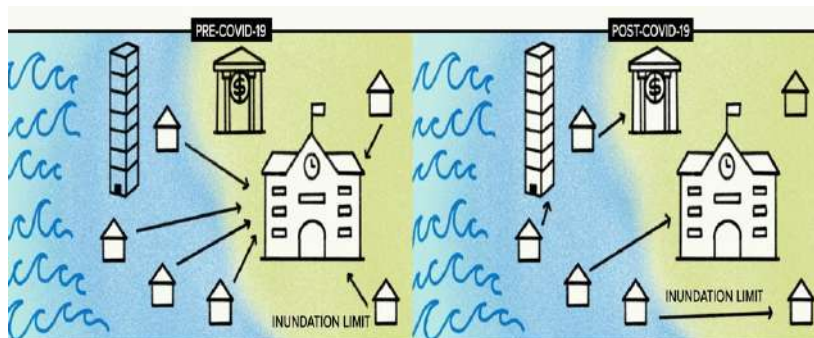
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**CASE STUDY IN RESILIENCE**

**The Pandemic and Schools: Role of ADRC in Reopening**

NAKAGAWA Masaaki, Executive Director, ADRC, with Gerald Potutan, Senior Researcher, ADRC, Japan

In Asia, which is the most disaster-prone region in the world, disaster risk reduction (DRR) in schools is an essential aspect for reopening amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. School reopening is important not only to support every child’s ability to learn in a classroom environment, but also to ensure continuity of essential school-based services (e.g., immunization, school feeding, mental health, and psychosocial support) that are enhanced through children’s interactions among themselves. However, reopening must be safe from both COVID-19 and the intensifying disaster risks that could impact school services and activities.



**Fig. 1** Planning Evacuation Center Post-COVI-19, UNDP2020.

Integral in the activities of the Asian Disaster Reduction Center (ADRC) is the advocacy for safer schools from disasters. ADRC implements a range of activities that promote *School DRR*, such as: facilitating the sharing of *School DRR* experiences at the Asian Conference on Disaster Reduction

(ACDR)<sup>18</sup>; supporting ADRC Visiting Researchers who take interest in *School DRR* research<sup>19</sup>; and collaborating with partner organizations (e.g., JICA, UNICEF, and ASEAN) in implementing DRR Education programs in the region. In the context of school reopening

<sup>18</sup> Session 3 of ACDR 2019, [https://www.adrc.asia/acdr/2019\\_index.php](https://www.adrc.asia/acdr/2019_index.php)

<sup>19</sup> Paper of Visiting Researcher from Maldives in 2018,

[https://www.adrc.asia/aboutus/vrdata/financialreport/FY2018A\\_MDV\\_fr.pdf](https://www.adrc.asia/aboutus/vrdata/financialreport/FY2018A_MDV_fr.pdf)

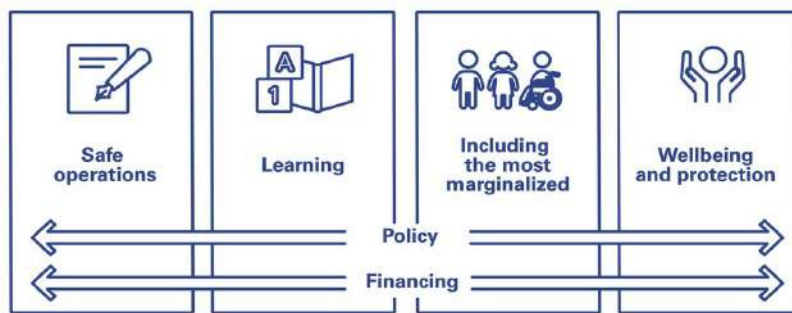


Fig. 2 Key Dimensions to Reopening Schools, UNICEF 2020.

following the COVID-19 pandemic, ADRC continues to advocate for *School DRR* by organizing learning events to disseminate disaster lessons and evacuation guidance. At the first series of ADRC's Online Tsunami Seminar, the publication, "Tsunami Evacuation during COVID-19: A Guide for School Administrators" was discussed. This guide provides preparedness measures, instructions for evacuation, and activities within the evacuation center during a tsunami event – with the view to prevent the spread of COVID-19. For instance, governments need to designate more tsunami evacuation centers (not just schools) during a pandemic to conform with the health protocols such as social distancing (Fig. 1).

In support of the implementation of the global "Framework for Reopening Schools"<sup>20</sup>, ADRC continues to advocate for *School DRR* and disseminates relevant information to ensure safe school operations, which is one of the six key dimensions of how to reopen (Fig. 2). In addition to school-based hygiene promotion (e.g., use of disinfectants, hand sanitizers, and face coverings) and fever/cough screening, ADRC advocates for

continued DRR education, mitigation training, and evacuation drills in schools. While preventing the spread of COVID-19 is an uphill challenge, governments should not ignore or be complacent with 'disaster readiness' in schools.

In 2020 alone, many Asian countries were impacted by large-scale disasters caused by typhoons, cyclones, torrential rains, and earthquakes. In particular, typhoons *Vongfong* (May), *Goni* (November), and *Vamco* (November) impacted the Philippines; Cyclone *Amphan* (May) impacted India and Bangladesh; and Typhoons *Maysak* (September) and *Haishen* (September) impacted Japan

and the Republic of Korea. As disasters continue to occur, and may be even intensified due to climate change, it is critically important to ascertain readiness of schools to save lives. There is a well-documented case in Kamaishi City (Iwate Prefecture, Japan), where the lives of more than 3,000 students were saved from gigantic tsunami of the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake.<sup>21</sup> When the magnitude 9.0 earthquake occurred, students and staff from East Junior High School followed the procedures they learned through school DRR education, mitigation training, and drills. As students ran to higher ground, other students and teachers of nearby elementary schools followed (Fig. 3).

Since 'simultaneous disasters' (e.g., experiencing earthquake and typhoons at the same time) continue to occur on top of the coronavirus pandemic, *School DRR* should likewise continue to evolve through a dynamic integration of DRR education into new policies and programs. ■



Fig. 3 Students and Teachers Moving to Higher Ground, Kamaishi City 2011.

<sup>20</sup> Framework for School Reopening, <https://www.unicef.org/documents/framework-reopening-schools>

<sup>21</sup> The Miracle of Kamaishi, <https://mni.gov-online.go.jp/kamaishi.html>

## What are the Best Ways to Reopen Schools?

*Steve Glovinsky, Advisor, Peer Consult, New York*

This query, from Mihir R. Bhatt, Director of AIDMI, sought to ensure their efforts to reopen Ahmedabad schools were informed from available experiences and guidelines. Nineteen Covid Action Community members contributed insights, suggestions and guidelines issued by international organizations, Union Ministries and the states.

Reopening schools has been a pressing topic in both India and around the world, affecting more than 1.3 billion students worldwide. Internationally, a “Framework for Reopening Schools” was jointly issued by World Bank, UNESCO, UNICEF and WFP; WHO published considerations for school-related health measures; and the UN issued a policy brief for decision-makers. Nationally, the Indian Ministry of Education issued reopening guidelines; the Ministry of Home Affairs State produced safety protocols and social distancing guidelines; the Ministry of Human Resources Development formulated safety guidelines for when classroom learning is resumed; the Indian Central Board of Secondary Education was offering an abridged syllabus and was beaming classes through dedicated television channels; and the University Grants Commission published reopening guidelines for colleges and universities. Contributors submitted a sample of state-level guidelines from Uttarakhand, Odisha, Delhi, Himachal Pradesh and West Bengal.

Guidelines generally covered precautions to minimize contagion, sustaining school operations, engaging the school community

decision-making, and adapting the curricula. The Ministry of Education was addressing pandemic mitigation actions such as increasing enrollment (including from migrant families), preventing dropouts, and addressing learning loss and deterioration of the gains made in providing universal access, quality and equity.

Even with a wealth of guidelines, school reopening decisions remained fraught. Frequent student testing, as suggested, was proving to be impractical in some cases. Sensitization and engagement of teachers and parents was proving inadequate – surveys were finding parents apprehensive about sending children to school and school managers reluctant to be responsible for children becoming infected. Substituting online learning for classroom time was impractical for those with limited internet access. More attention was needed to address concerns of children with special needs, home-bound girl children facing pressure to work to support their families, families returning to their home towns, alternatives for schools with limited resources or capacities, and adapting teaching to online formats and accommodating the loss of learning time. In some cases, decisions on dues and school fees to cover teacher salaries and maintenance were proving problematic; rooming facilities and transport remained unavailable to higher level students attending opened schools; using weekends for test preparation for Standards X and XII was causing teacher resentment.

Contributors supplemented these documents and actions with their own suggestions:

- Understand the importance of psychological, social and emotional well-being of students, and develop structured activities for emotional support, in order to deal with the fears of catching the virus, the lack of social interaction, the adjustment of migrant children, and COVID-induced anxieties such as family illness/loss and reduced economic circumstances.
- Introduce health check-ups, medical advice and immunity-boosting foods or supplements for school children.
- Be vigilant about precautionary measures – thermal screening, campus sanitation and access to sanitizers, mask-wearing, hand-washing, social distancing, visitor access, and pick up/drop off protocols, frequent testing, “do’s and don’ts” lists prepared with student input, and setting up a COVID monitoring team.
- Prepare protocols for students displaying symptoms – waiting areas, examination, informing parents, referrals and transport to health facilities, etc.
- Introduce fact-based awareness efforts on COVID, to dispel misinformation.
- Establish a clear responsibility for decision-making by local or district-level authorities for school reopening-related decisions, including legal redressal mechanisms.
- Prepare teachers to adapt to the new environment, including online instruction.



- Consider opening the higher grades, relying on student's greater maturity for lowering transmission possibilities, before early grades, where vaccinations could be emphasized.

Emerging lessons from the ongoing experiences were also available from UNICEF (covering safe operations, focus on learning, wellbeing and protection, and reaching the most marginalized), as well as from recently published research. An ongoing series of articles in the New York Times provided a window into what is happening in the US; a publication from a Washington think-tank published experiences from 15 countries.

The query also generated suggestions for taking advantage of the pandemic response to reimagine the future of education in a post-COVID world, introducing hybrid education models that placed greater stress on home-based learning. Home-based nursery to 5th grade instruction could expose children to literature and encourage critical thinking; middle and high school students could be introduced to the wealth of knowledge available online; admission to higher studies could be based on merit and opened up to all, taking advantage of the expanded ability to access classes. These suggestions, however, would require investment to provide universal internet access. Additionally, UNESCO's

International Commission on the Future of Education offered nine ideas for public action, and Brookings published a report on how education can emerge stronger than before COVID-19.

Generally, decisions on reopening schools rest with the local authorities. Widely varying local conditions make it difficult to apply uniform procedures, and there are likely to be as many approaches as there are schools. The situation offers an opportunity for wide sharing of experiences, so that, like the Ahmedabad example, each school district is able to take informed decisions on the best ways to proceed in their unique context. ■

## WAY AHEAD

# Reopening Schools: A Way Ahead\*

*Mihir R. Bhatt, All India Disaster Mitigation Institute, India*

So what do we do to improve the quality of reopening and extent of safety of schools, especially for the students and teachers, but also the neighborhoods they live in? This question has again and again come up in AIDMI work with schools in 2020. The following are some directions for thinking ahead.

First, and most importantly, we need to re-think what is thought so far with a serious and appreciative reflection. The entire formal and informal process of reopening must be thought again with a critical eye in order to draw lessons for us to move ahead.

Two, re-opening must be a transformative process for the schools and students, both. This may address scoping the context, ways of

participation of stakeholders, and a "road map", and reopening through collaborations.

Three, agency of design—architecture to film to video to graphic to art—must be re-deployed to find creative ways ahead. Perhaps too much textual thinking and formal framework have dominated the thinking around reopening process. And this creative approach should not be limited to school buildings but the entire educational infrastructure in its comprehensiveness. A new door to safer schools must be opened.

Four, cascading—the pandemic in flood affected delta or cyclone in the pandemic affected coastal towns—or shall we say compounding, risks and related uncertainties must be

addressed in the reopening process and objectives as a normal and common possibility.

Five, the reopened schools must be pilots or demonstration of inclusive and just energy transition to "green" and "clean" schools and education. Safer schools cannot be leading us to a future of climate calamities. Schools must be examples of "green" risk reduction, both in physicality but also in intersectionality. This relates of transformative objective mentioned above.

The above five are ways ahead for reopening schools as the pandemic seems to tapers down in South Asia. ■

*\* From discussion with Dr. Shyamnarayan Dave, UNICEF, February 24, 2021*

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