

Time to sound the bell with class doors reopening

Learning recovery and safety should be top priorities as schools begin to open again across India



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The sight of children going to school evokes normalcy and hope. Our children's lives are centred around schools, and the learning, the routine, and fun that come with it.

But for nearly a year-and-a-half since the novel coronavirus pandemic in 2020, schools had to shut their doors, and shift to remote learning. Children could not meet their friends, or eat hot school meals. Some suffered mental distress. Many faced violence. Millions of children missed critical developmental milestones.

What started off as a health crisis fast turned into an acute child rights crisis. Learning loss was a big fallout of the pandemic.

The gaps in online learning

While remote, online learning is the only resort to connect students with teachers. It is a pale substitute for in-person learning. Many children have been excluded

from online classes, due to the digital divide. There is also grave concern over the learning outcome for children who can connect.

Eight out of 10 parents of students aged between five to 13 years are of the opinion that their children were learning less or significantly less remotely compared to when in school. More than nine of every 10 children in Classes 2 to 6 have lost at least one specific ability in language from the previous year.

Across India, States have started reopening schools as COVID-19 cases plateau. Large numbers are now vaccinated, and it is steadily moving up. The government prioritisation of teachers for vaccination is very reassuring.

Back at school

However, the decision to reopen schools is fraught with emotions, fears, and heated debates. The questions being raised by parents need to be addressed. Schools must put in place and implement all safety protocols.

An online survey conducted by UNICEF reached nearly 11,000 respondents (parents, teachers, and students). By and large, all 6,157 responding parents felt that being vaccinated is the most important



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safety measure for children to return to school. While parents (55%) said they were not keen on sending their child to school yet, parents (60%) did not feel confident that their child's school and staff are ready for safe reopening.

Out of 4,451 teachers who responded to the survey; 65% said they have been provided support and guidance on how to work safely in schools as they reopen. While 93% said school staff should be fully vaccinated before classes resumed. Out of 366 student respondents, 71% were excited to go back to school.

Schools can focus on getting back younger children first, as primary and pre-primary-school age children are the least likely to be infected. Children are mostly

asymptomatic and are less likely to spread the virus when compared to adults.

We have evidence to show that schools are not the main drivers of community transmission and that children are more likely to get the virus outside of school settings. In fact, keeping schools closed for more than a year did not prevent the raging second wave of the pandemic. With measures firmly in place, schools can be safer environments for children than other places.

Teachers have shown remarkable courage and commitment across India. They stepped up to support online and offline learning across high tech, low tech and no tech settings. And used various other platforms for learning and even did door-to-door visits with students.

Learning now and solutions

The novel coronavirus pandemic has paved the way for a blended teaching-learning approach combining online and offline lessons. Teachers may assess the levels of progress in students in remote learning and plan for lessons based on these levels. Parents, teachers, students and school managements need to work to-

gether to find solutions. Positive examples have emerged from different States such as open-air classes under trees.

Despite doubts, there is no better alternative to the safe reopening of schools. The longer children are out of schools, the more difficult it would be for them to return and learn. The social and economic costs of children continuing to be out of school have become too high.

Here is an example of a student's reaction: "When schools were closed, it did not feel right, I got bored and missed my friends. Schools have now opened, we are again meeting every day, playing with friends. We show others how to follow COVID appropriate behaviours in and outside of school. We request our teachers and friends to always wear masks. And that is how we keep everyone safe."

Many children are finding rhythm and normalcy in going to schools, like Anshu Kumari, a Class eight student of Jay Mangal School in Muzaffarpur, Bihar, said.

In India, equity must guide how children return to school, and continue to learn and grow.

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