THE IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON PUBLIC SCHOOL EDUCATION

The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Public School Education

Contributors

Researchers
Mridusmita Bordoloi
Udit Ranjan

Reviewers
Avani Kapur
Anuradha De, Director, CORD (Collaborative Research and Dissemination)

Editors
Avantika Shrivastava
Rimli Borooah

Designer
Atul Verma

Acronyms

AWC	Anganwadi Centre
CBSE	Central Board of Secondary Education
DEO	District Education Officer
DIET	District Institute for Education and Training
DTH	Direct-to-Home
ECCE	Early Childhood Care and Education
FY	Financial Year
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GER	Gross Enrolment Ratio
GoI	Government of India
ICDS	Integrated Child Development Services
ICT	Information, Communication and Technology
MDM	Mid–Day Meal
MoE	Ministry of Education
MSCERT	Maharashtra State Council of Educational Research and Training
MWCD	Ministry of Women and Child Development
NAS	National Achievement Survey
NCERT	National Council of Educational Research and Training
NEP	National Education Policy
NROER	National Repository of Open Educational Resources
NSS	National Sample Survey
PTR	Pupil-Teacher Ratio
RMSA	Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan
RTE	Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education
SDMS	Student Database Management System
SC	Scheduled Caste
SSA	Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan
ST	Scheduled Tribe
TE	Teacher Education
U-DISE	Unified District Information System for Education

Introduction

India has one of the largest schooling systems in the world. In 2018-19, there were as many as 1.5 million schools and 247.8 million students. As with students in most countries around the world, the COVID-19 pandemic and associated school closures have significantly impacted school-going students in multiple ways. Pre-existing issues — such as high income inequality, a large share of population from socially disadvantaged groups, low literacy levels among those in the lower economic strata, and the large digital divide — have added to these woes. This brief outlines the challenges posed by the pandemic specifically for children aged 6-18 years enrolled in government schools. The brief begins with a discussion of the state of India's school education prior to the pandemic. It then explores the impact of COVID-19 on school students and the government's initiatives to address the immediate challenges on education. It also offers a future outlook for the sector beyond the pandemic and looks at measures either to be undertaken or already initiated. Other areas of impact — such as education administration, regulatory mechanisms, and functioning of teachers — are beyond the scope of this brief.

Pre-pandemic situation

Focussing on the pre-pandemic period, this section looks at overall enrolment, the status of schools and teachers at the all-India level, followed by a brief analysis of expenditures incurred by the government and households on school education. It then presents some important policy initiatives implemented by the government in the last five years and key debates around them.

Status of school education

Even though India has progressed significantly towards the goal of universalisation of elementary education (Grades I-VIII) as mandated under the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act, the last-mile is yet to be covered. According to the latest statistics available from the Unified District Information System for Education (U-DISE) Plus, in 2018-19, the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) at primary and upper-primary levels was 92.6 per cent and 90 per cent, respectively.[1] Further, even though successive national education policies have sought to increase access to, and resources for public school education, progress has been slow. In 2018-19, only 17 per cent of schools in India offered secondary schooling, and those that offered higher secondary grades stood at 8 per cent. This is reflected in the low GER at these two levels. In 2018-19, the GER was 79 per cent at secondary and 59 per cent at higher secondary grades.[1]

In 2018-19, around half of the total enrolled students were in government schools (52 per cent), 11 per cent in government-aided ones, and 34 per cent in private schools. The share of private school enrolment was far higher in urban areas at 54 per cent, compared to 26 per cent in rural areas (Table 1). While around half of the country's school enrolment is still in government schools, there has been a steady decline in this respect and a corresponding increase in private school enrolment over the last decade. For instance, elementary enrolment in government schools declined from 13.1 crore in 2009-10 to 10.3 crore in 2018-19, as per U-DISE data. As per the National Sample Survey (NSS, 2017-18), the most common reason for households' preference for private schools is a better learning environment, followed by the perceived quality of education.

Table 1
Indicators of school education by type of school management: Rural vs urban, 2018-19

| Indicator	Area	School management type				
		Government	Aided	Private	Others	Total
Enrolment	Urban	27%	17%	54%	3%	100%
	Rural	62%	9%	26%	3%	100%
Schools	Urban	34%	11%	50%	6%	100%
	Rural	77%	4%	16%	3%	100%
Enrolment per school	Urban	233	456	319	147	294
	Rural	109	266	221	139	135
Teachers per school	Urban	8	12	12	7	11
	Rural	4	8	9	6	5

Financing school education: Government and households

India's public education spending has persisted below the recommended levels. Several committees and policies — including the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 — have underscored the need for public investment in education to be 6 per cent of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP). However, India has consistently fallen short of this level — in financial year (FY) 2017-18, the public expenditure on education was only 2.7 per cent of GDP. Moreover, there is wide variation across states in terms of their per-student expenditures on school education, implying existing inequalities in public financing. Figure 1 presents per-student expenditure across eight states in India. This includes funds contributed by both the Union and state governments. Among these states, while Bihar had the lowest per-student spending (₹11,935), Himachal Pradesh had the highest (₹61,751) in FY 2018-19.

Figure 1
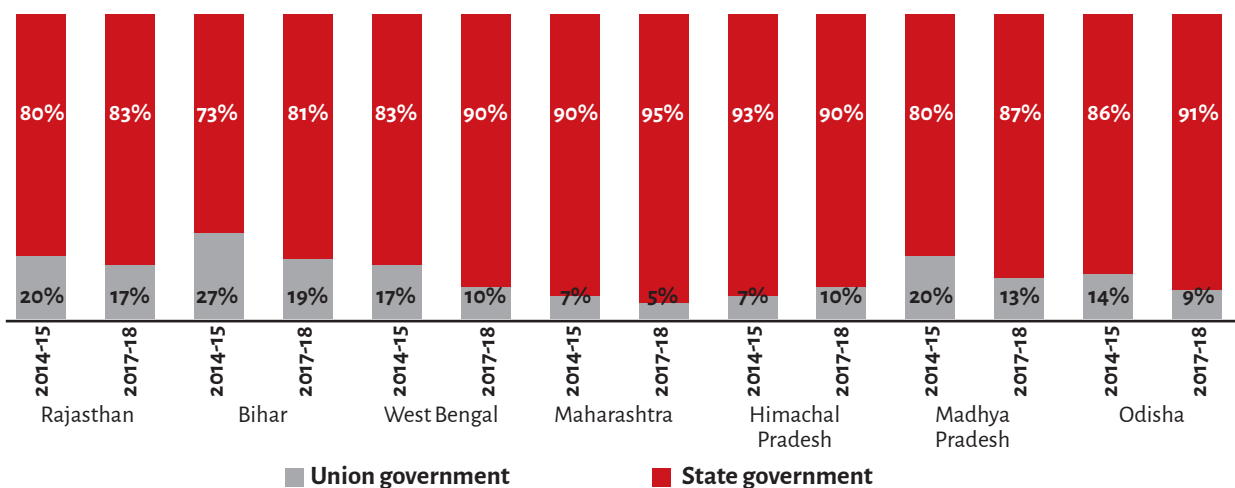## Per-student expenditure (₹ per annum) on school education by the government
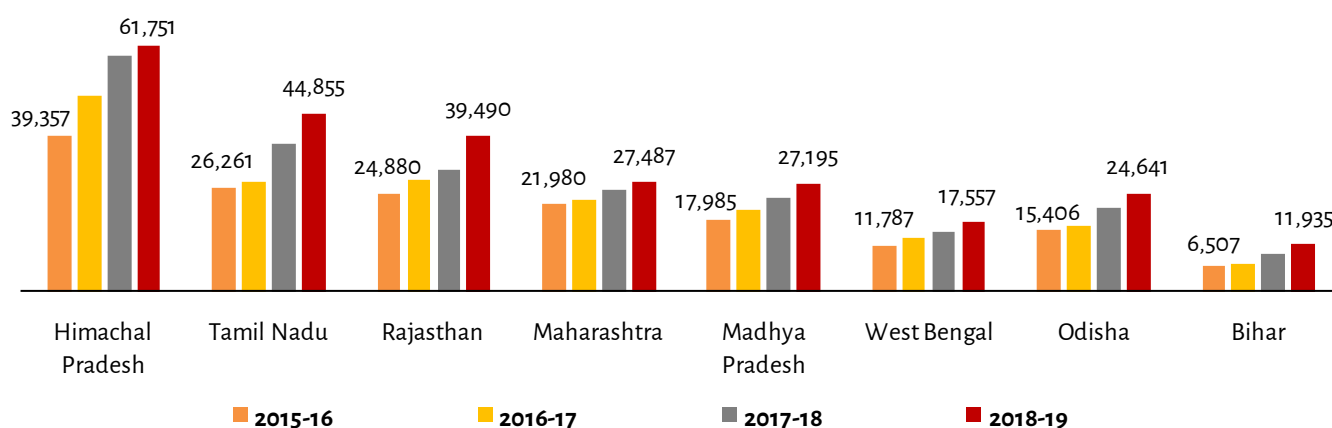
Source: (1) Expenditure: Collated from states Budget documents from FY 2016-17 to FY 2019-20. (2) Enrolment: U-DISE, U-DISE Plus.

It is important to note that state governments have been the primary spenders on school education in India, contributing the bulk of finances (including state shares for Centrally Sponsored Schemes) (Figure 2). Among the seven states presented here, in FY 2017-18, while the Union government's contribution was lowest in Maharashtra at 5 per cent, it was considerably higher in Bihar at 19 per cent.
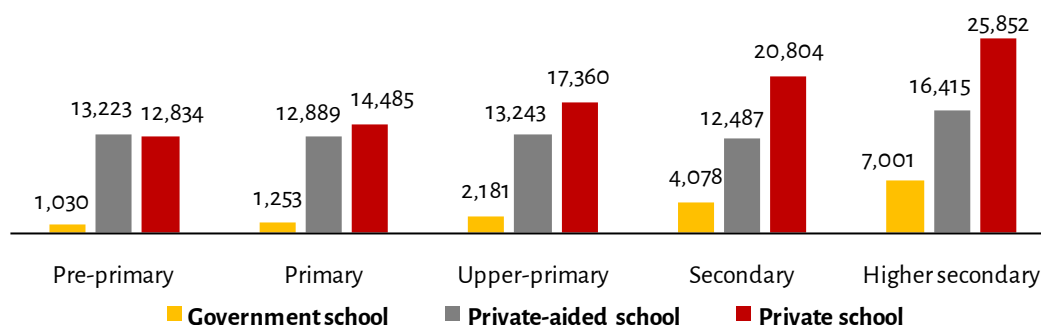
Despite the RTE Act's mandate for free universal elementary education, households still pay from their own pockets to access education. According to the NSS 2017-18, average annual household sector expenditure on education for a student attending government school was ₹1,253 in primary and ₹7,001 in higher secondary grades. In comparison, average expenditure for a student attending a government-aided school was ₹12,889 in primary and ₹16,415 in higher secondary grades (refer Figure 3).

Contribution of Union and state governments to school education expenditure

	2014-15	2017-18	2014-15	2017-18	2014-15	2017-18	2014-15	2017-18	2014-15	2017-18	2014-15	2017-18	2014-15	2017-18
State government	80%	83%	73%	81%	83%	90%	90%	95%	93%	90%	80%	87%	86%	91%
Union government	20%	17%	27%	19%	17%	10%	7%	5%	7%	10%	20%	13%	14%	9%
	Rajasthan		Bihar		West Bengal		Maharashtra		Himachal Pradesh		Madhya Pradesh		Odisha	

■ Union government   ■ State government

Source: Bordoloi M., Pandey S., Irava, V., and Junnarkar, R. (2020), "State Education Finances", Accountability Initiative, Centre for Policy Research, Delhi.

Per-student average household sector expenditure (₹ per annum), 2017-18

Pre-primary: Government school 1,030; Private-aided school 13,223; Private school 12,834
Primary: Government school 1,253; Private-aided school 12,889; Private school 14,485
Upper-primary: Government school 2,181; Private-aided school 13,243; Private school 17,360
Secondary: Government school 4,078; Private-aided school 12,487; Private school 20,804
Higher secondary: Government school 7,001; Private-aided school 16,415; Private school 25,852

■ Government school   ■ Private-aided school   ■ Private school

Source: Bordoloi M., Pandey S., Irava, V., and Junnarkar, R. (2020), "State Education Finances", Accountability Initiative, Centre for Policy Research, Delhi.

Key policy initiatives and challenges

a. Holistic approach towards school education for all

In the two years prior to the pandemic, the Union government, through its policies, has clearly indicated that school education should be approached as a continuum from pre-primary to higher secondary levels. In April 2018, the Government of India (GoI) launched Samagra Shiksha, that SS subsumed three important schemes for school education: the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan (RMSA), and Teacher Education (TE). The scheme aims to achieve quality education through systemic efficiency and optimum allocation of resources. Similarly, the draft NEP 2019, followed by the final NEP 2020, calls for universal access to school education for all children by 2030.

However, like many other government schemes, Samagra Shiksha suffers from a host of implementation bottlenecks. The rate of utilisation of scheme funds has been low. During FY 2018-19, two-thirds (66 per cent) of the total approved budget for the scheme was spent. During the first seven months of FY 2019-20 (till 31 October 2019), states had spent only 22 per cent of the approved budget.[2]

One of the reasons behind low utilisation could be the delay in release of funds by the Union government. While 95 per cent of GoI allocations for Samagra Shiksha were released in FY 2018-19, only 58 per cent were released till mid-December 2019.

The scheme framework gives states the flexibility to prioritise elementary or secondary education, depending on their needs. However, annual plans are prepared separately for SSA and RMSA in many states as before, especially at the block and district levels. Eventually the plans are simply aggregated at the state level. Discussion with Samagra Shiksha officials across five states (Bihar, Himachal Pradesh, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan) revealed the absence of clear guidelines to the project offices below state level on the functional and operational changes required under the combined scheme. Consequently, block and district officials still function in silos with little collaboration. With functional and process-related changes only partially implemented, the objectives of Samagra Shiksha are yet to be fulfilled.

Further, the policy intent to treat pre-primary as an integral part of formal school system has its own set of challenges. So far, the provision of pre-school education as part of the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) policy, has been the undertaken by the Ministry of Women and Child Development (MWCD) through the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) scheme. Although the Anganwadi Centres (AWCs) are supposed to ensure pre-school learning of the enrolled children, their primary focus is on the provision of supplementary nutrition. Thus, the choice of AWCs for pre-primary education is low among households. As per NSS 2017-18, of the children in pre-primary education, the proportion attending a privately-run schools was 47 per cent in rural and 69 per cent in urban areas. To formalise pre-school education, Samagra Shiksha has prescribed that states co-locate existing AWCs within primary schools or start pre-primary sections within formal schools. This would require teachers to be trained in pre-school education, which needs substantial investment. Moreover, guidelines clarifying the roles of MWCD and Ministry of Education (MoE) were yet to be issued at the time of writing this brief.

b. Poor grade-specific learning outcomes

One of the steps the government has taken to focus on quality education is the assessment of current levels of learning in schools. The first district representative National Achievement Survey (NAS) was conducted by the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) in 2017 for elementary Grades III, V and VIII. Another round of NAS was conducted in 2018 for Grade X students in government, government-aided and private schools. These competency-based tests were developed in a manner that reflected learning outcomes developed by the NCERT.

The NAS results revealed significantly low grade-

specific learning levels, though there is considerable variation across states. The proportion of Grade V students who scored more than 75 per cent in Mathematics ranged from 12 per cent to 40 per cent (Figure 4). The situation was worse for Grade X students. At the all-India level, the proportion of Grade X students who scored more than 50 per cent was only 13 per cent for Mathematics and 11 per cent for Science.

Percentage of students who scored more than 75 per cent in Mathematics, NAS 2017
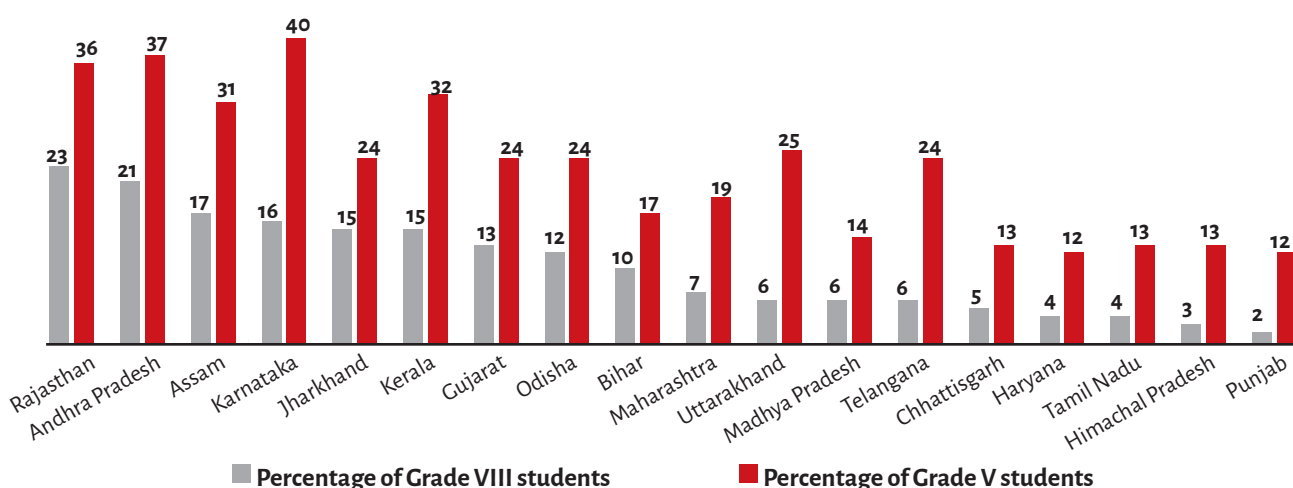
Source: National Achievement Survey (NAS), Classes III, V, and VIII – 2017, State Report Cards, NCERT

c. School consolidation

Between 2011-12 and 2015-16, there was a significant increase in the number of small schools (with 30 students or less and a maximum of two teachers). Despite the pupil-teacher ratio remaining within the specified RTE norms, a lack of teachers at each grade has led to multi-grade teaching. Many state governments have undertaken school consolidation – combining two or more nearby schools into one administrative unit – keeping the RTE norms intact. The rationale is that better-resourced and larger schools can be efficiently managed, which will eventually enable improvement in learning. States that consolidated schools at scale include Andhra Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Odisha and Rajasthan. However, the consolidation policy has been criticised, primarily with respect to non-compliance with RTE norms on distance of the consolidated school from neighbourhoods. This potentially led to increased difficulties in reaching schools, and children dropping out of school or shifting from government to private schools in some cases.[3]

d. Teacher vacancies

Teacher vacancies have remained a major challenge in ensuring quality education in government schools for many states in India. U-DISE data indicates that in 2016-17 there were 92,275 government schools in India with just one teacher. The problem is compounded by the lack of qualified teachers and many states recruiting a considerable number of contractual teachers. Moreover, there is a skewed distribution of teachers, with a surplus in urban areas. The total vacancy rate in 2018-19, including both state government and Samagra Shiksha teachers at elementary-level, was 20 per cent overall. Uttar Pradesh recorded the highest rate of vacancies (44 per cent), followed by Jharkhand (42 per cent).[2]

Impact of the pandemic

To mitigate the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, India announced lockdown measures in end-March 2020, including a cessation of school sessions. UNICEF estimates that the temporary suspension of education will affect 247 million children enrolled in primary and secondary schools, as well as 28 million children registered with AWCs.[4] This section identifies the current and potential challenges for the education sector in the wake of the pandemic. Some of the issues discussed here are unfolding and, therefore, the eventual impact might be different from the projections here. The section also discusses the major responses of the government.

Challenges emerging from the pandemic

a. Drop-outs from school

The economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic are likely to lead to school drop-outs, especially among the rural poor. The decline in livelihoods and stress on household finances are likely to increase the opportunity cost of education for families, thereby halting children's schooling and increasing their participation in the labour force.[5], [6] This particular pathway to discontinued education may be more pronounced for male children. NSS data indicates that among ever-enrolled males in rural areas, 35 per cent of school drop-outs occur due to involvement in economic activities and 26 per cent due to financial constraints.[7] These factors are likely to be aggravated.

b. Disproportionate impact on girls

The pandemic is likely to create a gendered impact, with a marked effect on girls' education and well-being. The outbreak of Ebola in West Africa in 2014 led to an increase in household and care-giving responsibilities for girls, limiting their access to learning. This further resulted in higher school drop-outs among females; many older girls did not rejoin school even after the epidemic.[8], [9] During the pandemic, girls may be required to shoulder additional responsibilities, especially where parents increase their hours of labour to mitigate households' economic hardships. In India, 32 per cent of rural females drop out due to domestic duties.[7]

In addition to a decline in learning, girls are likely to encounter increased gender-based violence. In the past, pandemics have been accompanied by rising sexual abuse and intimate partner violence experienced by women. School closures during the Ebola epidemic resulted in early and forced marriages, and increased rates of pregnancy.[9] Girls may also face increased risk of child abuse and trafficking. This highlights the necessity of ensuring continued education for girls and adopting a gender lens in devising policy responses to the COVID-19 pandemic.

c. Adverse consequences for socially disadvantaged groups

There is variation in access to education across students from different social groups. For instance, NSS data show that in 2017-18 net attendance rate at secondary level (including higher secondary) for "General" category students was 71 per cent, while that for Scheduled Tribe (ST) and Scheduled Caste (SC) students was 54 per cent and 60 per cent, respectively. The pandemic is likely to have a disproportionately high impact on children from vulnerable backgrounds, including those belonging to marginalised castes, tribes and religions.[5] UNESCO has assessed that education system responses of several countries have not taken into account learners who face risk of exclusion, including children with disabilities and linguistic minorities.[8] The expansiveness and adaptability of the digital learning measures initiated in India may determine how the country has fared on this front.

d. Increasing burden on government schools

Private schools — which account for a significant proportion of school enrolments — are facing severe resource shortages. This is likely to have a cascading effect on the public education system. Low-fee private schools have found it challenging to extend online learning to their students due to device and internet access issues faced by households and teachers. Further, to manage the household economic situation, parents are likely to shift their children to more affordable schools and opt for public education. This may further constrain

finances for low-fee private schools and trigger school closures which will, in turn, increase demand for and exert pressure on government schools.[10]

To understand the experiences of parents and teachers of students enrolled in public schools in rural areas during the pandemic, Accountability Initiative conducted interviews with 30 parents and 30 teachers across five states: Bihar, Himachal Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, and Rajasthan. Some key insights are presented in **Box 1** and **Box 2**.

Box 1
Insights from the Field – Experiences of Students and Parents

- With the use of distance learning methods, teaching has largely become a one-sided activity as children are unable to ask questions or clarify doubts.

- Parents have tried to offer support to children by tutoring them, viewing televised lessons, and ensuring that tasks assigned by teachers are completed. Consequently, parents' engagement with their children's education has increased, but they are facing difficulties on this account. Parents face challenges due to their limited educational levels, erratic internet connectivity and inability to ensure continued access of mobile phones to children. Older children have been advised by teachers to take on the responsibility of teaching younger ones.

- Children are largely relying on lessons broadcasted on TV and radio. Exercises are shared over WhatsApp groups; however, the tasks assigned differ for children who do not have access to smartphones. In some cases, assistance is also provided by NGOs. In some instances, children have received textbooks from teachers.

- Children belonging to SC/ST households and poor families do not have access to TV or mobile phones, and are unable to continue their education, particularly in rural areas.

Box 2
Insights from the Field – Experiences of Teachers

- Teachers have collected WhatsApp details of parents and shared links on activities, provided by the Education Department.

- The medium for sharing lessons and contacting students includes WhatsApp messages, videos and phone calls. Teachers have been instructed to keep track of students who are viewing televised lessons and report on completion of tasks by students. However, a single teacher has been able to interact with only four to five students per day.

- In some instances, teachers conduct home visits with learners to explain lessons, answer questions and check homework. Some teachers have also organised monthly meetings with parents at the school premises to follow-up on children's learning.

- Maintaining contact with students has become difficult with parents resuming work. Although some teachers attempted to organise classroom sessions over video calls, this was rarely achieved.

- Interventions to enrol out-of-school children have been carried out for children of returning migrants, as reported in Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Rajasthan.

e. Increased likelihood of child labour arising from large-scale job loss for casual labourers

Children of returnee migrants may face severe challenges on continuing with their education. During the extended periods of lockdown across states, large numbers of migrant workers have returned to their home states due to loss of their livelihood. Their children are likely to be cut-off from their earlier schools and teachers. Over the years, policies for unorganised workers have acknowledged the need to track their movement so that access to social security benefits are not always linked to the place of origin. In 2016, U-DISE started an extensive exercise across all states to create a Student Database Management System (SDMIS) to dynamically track children enrolled in schools. However, these efforts were not successfully executed. Weak systems of tracking migration, therefore, may mean that the children are not immediately enrolled in schools at their place of return. They may also be unaware of services offered by the state governments.[11] As a result, the education of these children would suffer and they may also be at a heightened risk of child labour.[6]

f. Access to ICT-based education services

Access and ability to use digital education services remains a major roadblock in India, despite the high penetration of mobile phones and telecom services.[12] For instance, a survey conducted by UNICEF and the Maharashtra State Council of Educational Research and Training (MSCERT) in July 2020 revealed that only half of the state government's school students in Grades I-VIII had access to online learning facilities. The challenges of the 'digital divide' are further exacerbated in rural areas, and for women and girls. NSS 2017-18 revealed that only 25 per cent of households had access to internet facilities (ranging from 10 per cent in Odisha to 56 per cent in Delhi), with the proportion being 15 per cent in rural areas. The proportion of persons aged 5 years and above who are able to operate internet facilities was 20 per cent in rural and urban areas, and was even lower – at 15 per cent – for females.[7] Access to mobile phones is also limited for girls as compared to boys, with the gap in access increasing with age.[13] NITI Aayog also reported lack of mobile network coverage in over 55,000 villages in the country, particularly in the north-east region.[14] In addition to

students, navigating online learning platforms may be difficult for teachers and parents as well.

g. Effect of school closures on children's nutrition and health

One of the critical effects of school closures is the challenge in implementation of the Mid–Day Meal (MDM) Scheme. MDM is the largest school feeding programme in the world,[15] with around 116 million children currently enrolled.[16] On 20th March 2020, the Union government directed states and Union Territories (UTs) to ensure the continued supply of hot cooked MDM to children, or substitute it with a 'food security allowance' (comprising of each child's entitlement of food grains and cooking cost) while schools remain shut due to the pandemic.[17] However, reports of several states lagging behind in providing these entitlements have emerged.[18] The inability of children to access cooked meals during the lockdown is likely to have a detrimental effect on their nutrition and health. The impact may be worse for girls and other children from marginalised groups.[5], [19], [20]

Initiatives by the government to ensure education delivery

The Union government has operationalised several new and existing remote learning measures to ensure that students can continue their education during the pandemic. The PM eVidya initiative, launched in May 2020, brings together disparate services to offer equitable and multimodal access to education.[21] Government data indicates that the use of these services has witnessed an uptick since the implementation of lockdown.[22] Its principal components include the following[23]:

● **Diksha:** The platform contains e-books for Grade XII developed by the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE), NCERT and states/UTs, with the materials available in different languages.

● **SWAYAM:** This is the flagship national online education platform offering courses for school children (Grades IX-XII) as well as higher education.

● **SWAYAM Prabha:** This is offered through 32 Direct-to-Home (DTH) television channels with a 24-hour service, available for free. The channels

offer teaching for schools (Grades IX-XII) and higher education. They also cater to out-of-school-children, and offer vocational courses and teacher training.

- **e-Pathshala:** NCERT has provided audios, videos, e-books, and flipbooks for students from Grades I-XII. A mobile application is also available.

- **National Repository of Open Educational Resources (NROER):** This is a knowledge repository of audio recordings, videos, images, documents, and other media in several languages.

Several other steps have been taken. NCERT has prepared an alternative academic calendar – with a weekly plan of activities for different subjects mapped to learning outcomes – pertaining to Grades I-XII.[24] Development of e-content was also initiated. For Grades I-V, the content will focus on foundational literacy and numeracy skills. However, content development for higher classes– particularly, Grades IX-XII – has been accorded higher priority. Capacity building of teachers is being carried out to enable them to utilise e-learning resources.[21]

States and UTs are also implementing an array of measures to support continued education. Many of these steps rely on online media and mobile technologies – for instance, access to e-books and e-content, and the use of mobile applications (such as WhatsApp). These include the creation of virtual schools under the 'Padhai Tunhar Duvaar' initiative in Chhattisgarh, and Whatsapp-based campaigns – 'Ghar Se Padhao' in Haryana and 'Har Ghar Pathshala' in Himachal Pradesh. 'Conventional' technologies – particularly, Doordarshan and the radio network – are also being leveraged, such as by the 'Mera Doordarshan Mera Vidyalaya' programme in Bihar. Other initiatives include the distribution of paper-based materials and collaborations with civil society.[21]

Future Outlook and the Way Forward

The Union government announced a new National Education Policy (NEP) for the country in July 2020 amidst the ongoing pandemic. The NEP recognises the growing importance of ICT-based education delivery and the potential risks involved. At the same time, it also recognises the limitations of existing digital platforms for education and calls for expansion in the future. In the long-run, the NEP envisions creating a dedicated unit within the Ministry of Education (MoE)[25] to oversee building of digital infrastructure, digital content, and related capacity.[26]

Whenever schools reopen a host of measures will need to be implemented. Whether it is the blended mode of education delivery, higher involvement of parents and community, remedial teaching, and ensuring hygiene and social distancing norms, a greater role for teachers and frontline government officials will be essential. Equally important will be a focus on addressing the broader challenges facing the sector in relation to ICT-based education delivery and overall financing. We discuss some crucial aspects of the outlook for public school education in India.

a. Ensuring education delivery across economic strata and in remote areas

NEP 2020 acknowledges the challenges posed by the current digital divide. State governments have tried various interventions to reach students in remote areas with poor internet connectivity and sporadic electricity supply. For instance, while Lakshadweep (UT) distributed tablets equipped with e-content, Nagaland handed out study material through DVDs or pen drives. The UT of Jammu and Kashmir distributed free tablets and laptops to students, along with braille tactile readers for visually-impaired learners.[21] NCERT

released a set of guidelines in August 2020 to help overcome learning gaps of children who are using various alternative ways of learning – radio, TV, smartphones, and other media. Particularly for students with limited digital resources, these guidelines suggest that communities work closely with schools, and learning materials are delivered to the doorsteps of students by teachers and volunteers. Another recommendation is teachers and volunteers teaching local students by setting up TV sets at the community centres while maintaining social distancing.[11]

b. The new normal: Blended learning

After the schools reopen, it will be essential to implement a blended model of education delivery using a combination of physical classes and technology-driven remote learning from home. The MoE has released a set of guidelines, called PRAGYATA, on digital education. It covers recommended screen time for children, tips on coping with mental and physical stress, and other aspects. PRAGYATA also includes eight steps of digital learning: Plan, Review, Arrange, Guide, Talk, Assign, Track, Appreciate. The MoE has also directed NCERT to design guidelines on how teaching should be delivered in the new scenario.[27] It has also recommended creating open and interoperable digital infrastructure that can be used by multiple platforms, and extending current e-learning platforms to include two-way online audio or video communication facilities.

c. Redesigning curriculum suitable for multiple modes of learning

Acknowledging the extraordinary situation brought on by the pandemic, CBSE has revised school curricula to reduce the course load for Grades IX-XII for the academic session 2020-21.[28] For elementary education, the Union government has asked schools to follow the alternative academic calendar released by NCERT in April 2020, and learning outcomes specified by NCERT. The calendar provides guidelines to teachers on the use of various technological and social media tools.[29]

Going forward, NCERT has been directed by the MoE to prepare supplementary or alternative academic learning material for the curriculum of each grade. The timelines for finalising this content has been set as December 2020 for Grades I-V and June 2021 for Grades VI-XII.[30] As per one of the major reforms envisaged in NEP 2020, NCERT has already begun the process of drafting a new National Curriculum Framework (NCF) for ECCE, school education, teacher education, and adult education.[31] This presents an opportunity to redesign the present curriculum to provide a holistic learning environment for students and equip them with relevant skills.

d. Filling in teacher vacancies and imparting teacher training

According to UNESCO, among the strategies that developing countries intend to adopt when schools restart are increasing teacher recruitment and raising the number of class hours.[8] Considering the high teacher vacancies in public schools in India, it will be important to expedite the process of teacher recruitment by state governments. Globally, steps to enhance teachers' ability to use online media – by conducting virtual trainings, offering lesson plans, and suggesting pedagogical techniques – are also being considered. Additionally, policymakers may explore collaborations with NGOs and private players to improve the ability of teachers and parents to support learning through remote methods.[32] NEP 2020 highlights teacher training on pedagogy and student assessment mechanisms in the ICT-based education system. It calls for training on developing questions that can be asked in online tests, handling network and power disruptions, preventing unethical practices, and creating sessions blended with activity-based learning.

e. Special focus on girls

Varying educational experiences of boys and girls in India call for the adoption of a gendered perspective in the education system's responses to the pandemic. It is critical to ensure equity in access to technology and skills for girls. Digital training to girls may be imparted and parental support should be garnered

to foster equitable opportunities. Teachers can play a crucial role in ensuring access to government interventions on technology adoption and delivery of digital content to girl students. Relevant education departments should collect gender-disaggregated data on the utilisation of remote learning during the pandemic, and on school enrolment in the post-pandemic period. Further, women decision-makers should be actively engaged in determining the next steps in the education sector.[9]

f. Remedial teaching and bringing children back to schools

As noted, many children from marginalised and disadvantaged communities have been forced to drop out of school during the pandemic due to the socio-economic hardships of their families. It is vital to identify such children by tracking out-of-school children in each locality and enrolling them in schools. The process should start in a phased manner considering the status of the COVID-19 situation in that particular state. Once the pandemic is under control, and children start returning to schools, the role of remedial teaching becomes critical to identify the learning gaps and impart education accordingly. There could be communication campaigns for students to return to schools.

Ensuring a safer learning environment in schools, along with remedial teaching programmes with higher involvement of teachers and communities, would require public additional investment, both financial and organisational. As per UNESCO estimates, by investing in remedial and re-enrolment programmes at present, low and middle-income countries could reduce the additional costs in future and prevent worst educational outcomes.[33]

g. Greater role of parents as stakeholders in education

A survey conducted by NCERT found that more than one-third of the sampled students enrolled under CBSE found online education either difficult or burdensome. Accordingly, NCERT's online education guidelines recommend orientation of parents for greater participation in children's learning during the pandemic.[11] It suggests that parents or guardians with low literacy levels, especially of children at the primary level, may be oriented on foundational literacy and numeracy, by visits to schools following staggered timings. Schools can also guide them as to how, through daily activities at home with children, some of the learning outcomes outlined in the alternative academic calendar can be achieved. In case there are no digital devices at home, guidelines for parents can be developed by each school with support from the District Institute for Education and Training (DIETs) and District Education Officers (DEOs).

h. Planning for adequate infrastructure

As mentioned, the pandemic is likely to lead to an increasing burden on government schools. Households that were sending their children to private schools may need to return to government schools due to lower incomes. This is a good opportunity to plan for improving school infrastructure to be able to accommodate more children. A focus on infrastructure could also help generate employment in an economy that is facing a pandemic of jobs.

i. Need for a boost in public financing of school education

The pandemic has caused a steep decline in government revenues, which has limited the fiscal space for financing education in the medium-term. To address the evolving fiscal scenario, the Ministry of Finance issued instructions in April and June 2020 directing ministries to rein in expenditures; the Department of School Education and Literacy was to curb overall expenditure in the first two quarters of FY 2020-21 to 15 per cent of budget estimates.[34] Curtailment of public expenditure on education will make it more difficult to mitigate the effects of the pandemic. Moreover, NEP 2020 envisages universalisation of school education from pre-primary to secondary levels across the country by the year 2030. In light of this long-term goal and the ongoing pandemic, there is an opportunity to innovatively design public investment in school education that is adaptable and flexible.

One immediate step already undertaken by the government is the call to utilise previously unspent funds on priority basis. Therefore, the Union government should explore and identify avenues for funding school education and share this with state governments. For instance, at present the devolution of funds from Union government to the states is mainly in the form of central taxes and grants-in-aid. Education cess has not been devolved to the states so far. Approaches to extend funds to the states can include sharing of education cess, along with providing special grants-in-aid and increased borrowing.

References

1. U-DISE Plus website. Accessed via URL on 21 August 2020: <http://dashboard.seshagun.gov.in/mhrdreports/#/reportDashboard/sReport>

2. Accountability Initiative (2020). "Budget Briefs: Samagra Shiksha, GoI 2020-21". Retrieved via URL on 31 August 2020: < https://accountabilityindia.in/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Samagra-Shiksha-2020-21.pdf>

3. Bordoloi, M. and Shukla, R. (2019). "School Consolidation in Rajasthan: Implementation and Short Term Effects". Retrieved via URL on 31 August 2020: <https://accountabilityindia.in/publication/school-consolidation-in-rajasthan-implementation-and-short-term-effects/>

4. UNICEF (2020). "Urgent action needed to safeguard futures of 600 million South Asian children threatened by COVID-19". Retrieved via URL on 21 August 2020: <https://www.unicef.org/india/press-releases/urgent-action-needed-safeguard-futures-600-million-south-asian-children-threatened>

5. Alvi, M. and Gupta, M. (2020). "Learning in times of lockdown: How COVID-19 is affecting education and food security in India". Food Security, Vol. 7. Retrieved via URL on 21 August 2020: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7338145/>

6. International Labour Organisation and UNICEF (2020). "COVID-19 and Child Labour: A Time of Pandemic, A Time to Act". Retrieved via URL on 24 September 2020: <https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_norm/---ipec/documents/publication/wcms_747421.pdf>

7. Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (2018). "NSS 75th Round: Key Indicators of Household Social Consumption on Education in India". Retrieved via URL on 21 August 2020: <http://mospi.nic.in/sites/default/files/publication_reports/KI_Education_75th_Final.pdf>

8. UNESCO (2020). "Global Education Monitoring Report 2020". Retrieved via URL on 21 August 2020: <https://en.unesco.org/gem-report/report/2020/inclusion>

9. UNESCO (2020). "Addressing the gender dimensions of school closures". Retrieved via URL on 21 August 2020: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000373379>

10. Central Square Foundation (2020). "State of the Sector Report: Private Schools in India". Retrieved via URL on 21 August 2020: <https://centralsquarefoundation.org/Highlights-Version_State-of-the-Sector-Report-on-Private-Schools-in-India.pdf>

11. Ministry of Education (2020). "Students' Learning Enhancement Guidelines". Retrieved via URL on 24 August 2020: <https://static.pib.gov.in/WriteReadData/userfiles/PIB%20Delhi/Learning_%20Enhancement_Guidelines.pdf>

12. Ministry of Communications (2018). "Telecom Statistics India – 2018". Retrieved via URL on 21 August 2020: <https://dot.gov.in/sites/default/files/statistical%20Bulletin-2018.pdf>

13. IndiaSpend (2018). "Wide Gender Gap in Mobile Phone Access is Hurting India's Women". Retrieved via URL on 2 September 2020: < https://www.indiaspend.com/wide-gender-gap-in-mobile-phone-access-is-hurting-indias-women/>

14. NITI Aayog (2018). "Strategy for New India @75". Retrieved via URL on 21 August 2020: <https://niti.gov.in/sites/default/files/2019-01/Strategy_for_New_India_2.pdf>

15. World Food Programme (2013), "State of School Feeding Worldwide". Retrieved via URL on 21 August 2020: <https://documents.wfp.org/stellent/groups/public/documents/communications/wfp257481.pdf?_ga=2.210266709.1163973912.1597988027-932978979.1597988027>

16. Ministry of Education (2020). Mid Day Meal Scheme website. Retrieved via URL on 21 August 2020: <http://mdm.nic.in/mdm_website/>

17. Ministry of Human Resource Development (2020). Circular: F. No. l-212020 Desk (MDM). Retrieved via URL on 28 August 2020: <http://mdm.nic.in/mdm_website/Files/OrderCirculars/2020/JS_DO-Letters/DO%20Letter_20-3-2020-COVID-19.pdf>

18. The Economic Times (2020). "Midday meal scheme: Shoddy implementation by states keeping kids hungry amid lockdown". Retrieved via URL on 28 August 2020: <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/midday-meal-scheme-shoddy-implementation-by-states-keeping-kids-hungry-amid-lockdown/articleshow/77305936.cms?from=mdr>

19. Jukes, M. (2005). "The long-term impact of preschool health and nutrition on education". Food and Nutrition Bulletin, Vol. 26, No. 2 (supplement 2). Retrieved via URL on 24 September 2020: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/15648265050262S210>

20. Chang, S. M. et al. (2002). "Early childhood stunting and later behaviour and school achievement". The Journal of Psychiatry and Psychology, Vol. 43, Issue 6. Retrieved via URL on 24 September 2020: <https://acamh.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1469-7610.00088>

21. Ministry of Human Resource Development (2020). "India Report: Digital Education". Retrieved via URL on 21 August 2020: <https://www.mhrd.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/India_Report_Digital_Education_0.pdf>

22. Press Information Bureau (2020). "Digital Learning sees a big upsurge during COVID-19 lockdown period". Retrieved via URL on 21 August 2020: <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseIframePage.aspx?PRID=1612546>

23. Press Information Bureau (2020). "Students to continue their learning by making full use of the available digital e-Learning platforms". Retrieved via URL on 21 August 2020: <https://pib.nic.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1607521>

24. Press Information Bureau (2020). "Union HRD Minister releases alternative Academic Calendar of NCERT for schools". Retrieved via URL on 28 August 2020: <https://pib.nic.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1615009>

25. Previously the Ministry of the Human Resource Development (MHRD)

26. Ministry of Human Resource Development (2020). "National Education Policy 2020". Retrieved via URL on 21 August 2020: <https://static.pib.gov.in/WriteReadData/userfiles/NEP_Final_English_0.pdf>

27. Press Information Bureau (2020). "Union HRD Minister virtually releases PRAGYATA Guidelines on Digital Education". Retrieved via URL on 24 August 2020: <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1638541>

28. Press Information Bureau (2020). "Union HRD Minister announces revision of syllabi by CBSE for classes IX-XII for the academic session 2020-21".

Retrieved via URL on 24 August 2020: <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1637012>

29. Press Information Bureau (2020). "Union HRD Minister releases Alternative Academic Calendar for the upper primary stage today in New Delhi". Retrieved via URL on 31 August 2020: <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1617408>

30. Press Information Bureau (2020). "Ministry of HRD releases roadmap for NCERT for the year 2020-21". Retrieved via URL on 24 August 2020: <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1633937>

31. Press Information Bureau (2020). "National Education Policy 2020 Announced". Retrieved via URL on 24 September 2020: <https://pib.nic.in/PressReleseDetail.aspx?PRID=1642061>

32. UNESCO (2020). "COVID-19 pandemic and curriculum: Sustaining quality outcomes in the context of remote learning". Retrieved via URL on 23 august 2020: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000373273>

33. UNESCO (2020). "Act Now: Reduce the Impact of COVID-19 on the Cost of Achieving SDG 4". Retrieved via URL on 24 September 2020: <https://en.unesco.org/gem-report/COVIDcostSDG4#:~:text=2020-,Act%20now%3A%20Reduce%20the%20impact%20of%20COVID%2D19%20on%20the,cost%20of%20achieving%20SDG%204&text=Additional%20costs%20due%20to%20COVID,by%20as%20much%20as%2075%25.>

34. Ministry of Finance (2020). Retrieved via URL on 21 August 2020: <https://dea.gov.in/sites/default/files/modified%20Cash%20Management%20System%20-%20guidelines%20OM%20dated%208.4.2020_0.pdf>

We are a research group which works on strengthening transparency and accountability in governance which is responsive to citizen need. We do this through evidence-based research on state capabilities and factors affecting efficient public services delivery in India.

We are a part of the Centre for Policy Research, one of India's leading public policy think tanks.

Accountability Initiative

🌐 www.accountabilityindia.in

🐦 @AccInitiative

f @accountabilityindia

in @Accountability Initiative,
Centre for Policy Research