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RESEARCH LETTER

Reopening Schools in India During The Covid-19 Pandemic

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As part of a nationwide lockdown instituted on 23 March 2020, to contain the spread of SARS-CoV-2 in India, all educational institutions were closed. To ameliorate the risk of lost educational opportunities for the county's children, the Indian government invested in a deliberate effort to enhance digital learning. Online resources were made available on a range of platforms; for remote localities, resources were delivered through television and radio [1].

As in much of the world, the COVID-19 lockdown has reinforced social disparities between public and private school systems. The enrolment of children under the Midday Meal Scheme increased from 33.4 million at its launch in 1995–96 [2] to 118 million in 2019–20 [3]. Food is the driving force to attend school for many rural public school students and most of them do not have access to remote and digital learning facilities at home. In contrast, many students attending urban private schools have been able to continue their education through digital platforms. There are data [4–6] to suggest that online school can help children of all age groups but are not an equal alternative to in-person schooling. Although teachers in private schools often have the technology and digital infrastructure to teach remotely, this is rarely the case with most public school teachers in India. Nearly one in five elementary school teaching positions are vacant today, and many schools in rural India are run by just a single teacher. The World Bank has reported that only half of the teachers in India are teaching classes on any given day because of high absentee rates [7].

Child Rights and You (CRY) [7, 8] has identified that poverty and access are major reasons behind school dropouts in India. Children who go to school are unable to help their parents on the farm or at the shop; this makes some parents reluctant to send their children to school even in the best of times. Many parents of children in rural areas are unemployed, already in debt or running out of limited savings. When the lockdown lifts, many rural parents may not return their children to school to help the family financially. In contrast, wealthier urban parents are more able to help children with remote learning and the many psychosocial effects that come with this, although this brings with it a set of new challenges for parents balancing work and parenting in this context.

The situation for schools is also worrisome, as their revenue has decreased markedly during this pandemic, which has made it arduous for many of them to survive. A survey of 18 000 parents from 224 districts in June 2020 found that only 11% of parents were in support of sending their children back to school during the pandemic [9]. Around 16 000 parents were willing to wait until there are no cases in their area, or vaccine had become widely available, or were unsure. Another survey from August 2020 found that 23% of parents of senior class children were willing to send their children back to school upon reopening in September, while 62% were not [10].

The Ministry of Education has left the timing and manner of school reopening to the discretion of each state, depending on COVID-19 prevalence in their area. Numerous options are available, including starting in-person school with younger children initially or alternate models of attendance, such as rotational, alternate day or every 2-day schooling. Continued use of online classes and self-study of essential material is allowed. Teachers in schools without sufficient internet technologies have been encouraged to interact with students and parents by telephone. Instruction has been given regarding the use of masks, proper hand hygiene, physical distancing, sharing of personal belongings and the use of personal transportation to school. Schools with a large number of students are advised to run in two shifts per day. Other recommendations include outdoor classes when the weather permits, no school bags for primary students, learning materials to be kept in the classroom and limiting older teachers in areas with high virus prevalence. Academic assessments will not be done initially, but rather students will be involved in joyful academic activities [11].

The government's reported focus is on good teaching and learning while promoting emotional well-being, a smooth transition from home-based learning to in-school learning and capacity building of stakeholders. In-person attendance is to be done only with the written consent of parents. The extent and severity of COVID-19 are constantly changing and also vary spatially from region to region, requiring constant adjustment according to these dynamics. Sanitization and cleaning precautions are being prioritized. Physical distancing is to be emphasized in classes as well as outdoors. Staggering timetables, avoiding congregations and instruction of clear roles and responsibilities for school staff are planned. Cleanliness and hygiene in food practices and serving mid-day meals with physical distancing have been mandated [12].

The government permitted schools to reopen beginning 15 October 2020. Local reopening decisions were to be taken by individual states based on local risk-benefit assessments. Some states such as Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Andhra Pradesh and Mizoram suffered a setback after reopening schools when hundreds of teachers and children became infected with COVID-19. This compelled the states to either close the reopened schools or delay the opening of those that were still closed [13]. Schools in some states such as Himachal Pradesh, Punjab, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Odisha and Karnataka were about to reopen in February 2021. Most of these states took the decision to reopen schools for classes 9–12 due to forthcoming board exams [14]. But, coronavirus cases rose again in March 2021 due to a second wave; and various states such as Himachal Pradesh, Punjab, Delhi, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu have decided to keep the schools closed for the lower classes. Orders regarding this have been issued, and classroom education is not feasible at present [15].

In summary, India switched much of its educational system to online platforms as a result of COVID-19 lockdowns, as in much of the world. Predominantly rural public school students were left behind during this transition due to a lack of access to remote and digital learning facilities at home. Teacher shortages and absenteeism are high and the financial survival of many schools is tenuous. Parental surveys show many are unwilling to send their children back to in-person schooling. The financial strain has made it likely that many public school children are prone to drop out to help their families financially. School reopening guidelines have been issued by the government, but many details have been left to the individual states. Some states that reopened schools in October 2020 were forced

to close again after a sharp rise in cases among teachers and students; other states postponed reopening after seeing these problems. In February 2021, some states again decided to attempt reopening schools with additional preventive measures. However, this decision was again changed due to a rise in cases. In April 2021, schools in many states remain closed for younger children—the success of further school reopening attempts remains to be seen.

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