



## Prioritising school reopening on the road to recovery

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**(Mains GS 2 : Issues relating to development and management of Social Sector/Services relating to Health, Education, Human Resources.)**

### Context:

- Most schools in India have been closed since the national lockdown started in March 2020.
- Although it is risky to reopen schools, the costs of keeping schools closed also create wider socio-economic and psychological issues.

### Cross country analysis:

- Interestingly, various regions around the world which have been worse hit by the novel coronavirus pandemic than India, have kept their schools, especially primary schools, mostly open.
- This includes various European countries such as Portugal, France, the Netherlands, etc.
- The State of Florida (United States) opened schools for in-person classes in late September 2020, and they stayed open through their second wave.
- On the other hand in India, schools have mostly been shut even as other businesses have opened.

### Impact of school closure:

- The costs of school closure are immense as people make considerable investments in their childrens' education, as a way toward a better future and a better living standard.
- Even prior to the pandemic, there was a huge attainment gap across students, especially in higher grades.
- The bottom half of children passing Class 10 are about two years behind in terms of skills and prolonged school closure has already widened this gap.

- Ironically, the poorest families living in dense urban slums, who bore the brunt of the first wave, and are now largely immune from the virus itself are the ones suffering the most from school closures.

### **Interstate survey shows negative results:**

- A survey across 10 States in India in November 2020 estimated that nearly two-thirds of children in rural India may drop out of school, a staggering statistic which is likely to have worsened with continuing closure.
- Haryana has reported a 42% drop in student enrolment in private schools.
- Prolonged school shutdown has severely set back India's fight against ills such as child labour and child marriage.
- Due to the shutdown of schools, mid-day meal schemes have been disrupted; even as early as June 2020, it was estimated that about 800,000 additional children would face underweight and wasting.

### **Health, well-being concerns:**

- Even in well-off urban India and in developed nations, extended school closure is having a severe impact on children's mental health.
- In Las Vegas, US, a surge of student suicides forced schools to reopen in January 2021.
- The United Kingdom reported a 40% rise in the number of children taking antidepressants.
- Surely, life is more important than education but as examples above show, schools are not merely about education.
- Given the costs of prolonged school shutdown, we must probe deeper into the risks of opening schools in the context of COVID-19.

### **Assessing the risk factor:**

- People must realise, and be grateful that the risk of COVID-19 for children is much lower than for adults, and is also much lower than other (already small) risks children face in daily life anyway.
- Based on a study of 137 million school-age children in the U.S. and Europe, Prof. Raj S. Bhopal (University of Edinburgh, U.K.) has observed that COVID-19 in this age group is less than half as risky as seasonal influenza, and over 20 times less risky than death by "unintentional injury".

### **Low impact of Covid on children:**

- A study among the nearly two million children in Sweden (where schools have been open throughout), found that there was not a single child death due to COVID-19.

- As per Mumbai's dashboard data, the COVID-19 IFR (Infection Fatality Rate) for under-19 is minuscule: about 0.003% .
- In comparison, the infant mortality rate in India is about 3% (1,000 times greater) and the infant mortality rate in Japan (one of the lowest) is 0.18% (60 times greater).
- In other words, school-age children are at a negligibly lower risk from COVID-19 when compared to other threats which we consider normal.

### **Third wave concern:**

- There has been a concern that a possible third wave involving newer variants could affect children.
- But a careful look at the data tells that the age-profiles of those affected in the second and first waves are similar.
- However, there is no scientific basis for this fear.
- Further, Public Health England's June 2021 report shows that the newer variant Delta is much less dangerous (case fatality rate 0.1%) than the original (case fatality rate 1.9%), which is the expected evolutionary path of a virus.

### **Teachers as 'essential' staff:**

- There is fear that teachers and parents are at higher risk of catching COVID-19 if schools reopen.
- However over the last year there have been several careful scientific studies across various regions in Europe/U.S., measuring the role of in-person classes in COVID-19 spread.
- The overwhelming conclusion is that the risk of COVID-19 spread in schools is minimal compared to other locations.
- To further reduce the concern among teachers, the Government must treat them on a par with essential workers, and offer them prioritised vaccination.

### **One size fits all policy is not suitable:**

- Despite schools being safe places, it is likely that a "one-size-fits-all" approach may not be suitable, as each individual's risk-benefit analysis could be different.
- For children who lack the resources, whose parents have to go out to work every day, in-person schooling is paramount.
- Parents who can afford to work from home have sufficient resources for their children and may choose to continue with partially or fully online classes for a few more months.
- It is high time to implement such differentiated options.

### **Vaccines for children:**

- There has recently been talk about tying school reopening to vaccines for children.
- Any medical intervention, especially for children, must be based on a careful risk-benefit analysis.
- It is pertinent to note that there are growing concerns in the U.S. of a potential link between heart inflammation and the mRNA vaccine, among adolescents.

**Conclusion:**

- More than the virus, fear stands between our children and their education and normal life.
- Policymakers must make evidence-based decisions toward school reopening so that children get the best possible future they deserve.

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