



UN agencies urge countries to reopen schools. Is India ready?



With classrooms still shuttered in 19 countries, affecting more than 156 million students, the UN officials warned that the losses children and young people incur from missing out on school may never be recouped (AP)

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- UNESCO, UNICEF, World Bank, and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development conducted a survey among 142 countries including India, which found that one in three countries are still not implementing remedial programmes to help students catch up on their learning

NEW DELHI: United Nations agencies have urged countries, especially low and middle-income nations, to [reopen schools](#) to minimise the risk of learning loss and dropouts.

The survey by UN educational and cultural agency, UNESCO; the UN Children's Fund, UNICEF; the World Bank, and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), conducted in 142 countries, including India, found that one in three countries had not yet implemented remedial programmes to help students catch up on their learning, in the wake of school closures due to the covid-19 pandemic.

The survey, covered between February and May, spanned four levels of education, from pre-primary to upper secondary. The report said that only one-third of countries, mainly high-income nations, are taking steps to measure learning losses at the primary and lower-secondary levels. With no or minimal safety measures against covid, India is likely to face difficulties in sending students back to schools.

“Measuring learning loss is a critical first step towards mitigating its consequences. It is vital that countries invest in assessing the magnitude of such losses to implement the appropriate remedial measures,” said Silvia Montoya, director of the UNESCO Institute for Statistics.

India has seen the strictest lockdown due to the pandemic and has so far failed to resume in-person schooling due to a resurgence in covid-19 cases. The halt has left many children devoid of basic to secondary education. “Remote learning has been a lifeline for many children around the world during school closures. But for the most vulnerable, even this, was out of reach. It is urgent that we get every child back into the classroom now,” said Robert Jenkins, UNICEF Global Chief of Education.

“But we cannot stop there; reopening better means implementing remedial programmes to help students get back on track, and ensuring that we prioritize girls and vulnerable children in all our efforts,” Jenkins said.

The report was released during the ministerial segment of UNESCO’s Global Education Meeting on Tuesday, held on the margins of the annual UN High-Level Political Forum for Sustainable Development. With classrooms still shuttered in 19 countries, affecting more than 156 million students, the UN officials warned that the losses children and young people incur from missing out on school may never be recouped.

“From learning loss, mental distress, exposure to violence and abuse, to missed school-based meals and vaccinations or reduced development of social skills, the consequences for children will be felt in their academic achievement and societal engagement as well as physical and mental health,” UN officials said.

“The most affected are often children in low-resource settings who do not have access to remote learning tools and the youngest children who are at key developmental stages.” The report pointed to evidence that shows schools are not among the main drivers of coronavirus transmission, and the decision should be based on risk analysis and the “epidemiological considerations” in communities where they are located.

“Closing schools mortgage our future for unclear benefits to our present. We must prioritize better. We can reopen schools safely, and we must,” the UN officials said.

According to a separate UNICEF report, the closure of 1.5 million schools, due to the pandemic and ensuing lockdowns, impacted 247 million children enrolled in elementary and secondary schools. This was in addition to the 6 million girls and boys already out of school before the crisis hit.

In India, only eight states/UTs have opened classes from 1-12, while 11 have reopened classes for 6-12, and 15 states have opened classes for 9-12. Three have reopened anganwadi centers, with younger children losing out greatly on crucial foundational learning.

Online education is not an option for all as only one in four has access to digital devices and internet connectivity. Pre-pandemic, only a quarter of households (24%) in India had access to the internet and there is a large rural-urban and gender divide, the report highlighted.

“Some children may be at increased risk of getting covid-19 or may be at increased risk for severe illness from covid-19. For these children, parents and caregivers may need to take additional precautions with regard to school re-entry,” said Dr Jugal Kishore, professor and head, department of community medicine, Safdarjung Hospital.

In India, the government has already started planning to deal with the third covid-19 wave with a special focus on children. The planning comes in the backdrop of the warnings being flagged by the public health experts that children will be the new targets of the coronavirus crisis.

With no vaccines available for children against covid-19, several states have opted to continue with online learning. While majority of government schools seem to be struggling with adhering to the social distancing norms, the risk remains high.

“Continuity of other special services is important for student success and lack of access to these services and supports have the potential to widen existing disparities and cause long-term effects on children’s educational outcomes, health, and the economic wellbeing of families and communities,” argued Kishore.

Private school education sector representatives believe that while some of the well-resourced private schools have created robust virtual learning programmes for their children to mitigate learning losses during the pandemic, majority of the schools across the country have not been able to provide the same due to lack of resources.

“However, virtual learning cannot compensate for the significant socio-emotional losses that our children are currently facing. They are getting isolated day by day with the new way of learning resulting in psychological impact that may continue for years to come,” Manit Jain, Co-Founder, The Heritage group of schools and Chairman, FICCI Arise told Mint.

“We now need to see a concerted effort towards re-opening of schools. I would urge the government to create and implement a strong national policy that prioritizes the opening of schools with measures such as vaccination of teachers as frontline workers and introduction of vaccines for ages 12 to 18 years,” said Jain.