

Portal Exclusive: Schools must remain open for physical classes

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Locked up at home due to school closure, children are deprived of the routines of socialisation, of human touch, feelings, which enhance social and emotional intelligence, writes Manit Jain, co-founder, The Heritage Group of Schools

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Whether it is related to Covid or pollution, schools are like the proverbial sitting ducks. While across the world, policymakers are focused on ensuring schools stay open, it seems we still do not recognise the emotional, developmental, and economic losses associated with closure. Here are five reasons why schools should be the last places to shut down.

1. Globally, as a policy, schools have been the last to close and first to open during the pandemic:

According to the Boston Consulting Group's (BCG's) 2022 report, *India Needs to Learn: A Case for Keeping Schools Open*, globally, while schools remained closed in the first half of 2020, they were largely open during 2021 -- Australia (85-90% open), Japan

(85-90% open), South Africa (80-85% open), US (75-80% open), UK (70-75% open), Portugal (60-65% open), China (90%+ open). Countries have placed higher priority on keeping schools open as opposed to opening malls, shops, gyms, etc. In India, we have defied the global best practices, schools were shut in March 2020; in 2021, secondary schools opened for 40-50% of the time while younger children were still at home.

2. Schools were not super-spreaders of Covid-19: There is ample global evidence to indicate that schools represent a low risk of virus transmission. For one, as pointed out in a Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) report, "Neither increase in cases incidence among school-aged children nor school reopening for in-person learning appears to pre-date increases in community transmission." BCG's report shows that children below the age of 20 had a lower incidence of the disease. There has been 17x+ lower fatality vs adults even in countries with open schools while infection transmission in school-going children, compared to that in the community, has been lower in terms of new cases per 1,000 population. Also, it is worth noting that when schools did open in mid-2021 in India, cases did not spike in the country. In addition, vaccination penetration has substantially lowered infection severity by at least 40%.

3. Learning losses due to school closure are irreparable, especially in young children: Learning losses across the globe have been incalculable and, in our country, this has been exacerbated by the fact that 70% of the children/households don't have access to digital devices. Covid-19 led school closures have compelled millions of children across the globe to lose out on the appropriate age window for learning -- and these learning losses are irreparable, especially in younger children. In India, surveys point to reversal

or loss of learning gains such as reading comprehension or Math that had been acquired earlier. A UNICEF report states that, in rural Karnataka, the percentage of grade three students in government schools able to perform simple subtraction fell from 24% in 2018 to only 16% in 2020. A late-2021 ASER survey of 46,021 children in Chhattisgarh shows that foundational reading levels among grade 1 to 7 children have come down. BGC reports that over 90% of children have lost at least one specific language ability in India. According to the World Bank, every lost year of schooling represents potentially 9% lower future earnings for a student; India is thus looking at 1.7 trillion dollars of economic losses by some estimates.

4. Children's socio-emotional health is at stake: In evolved countries such as Finland, children have a fundamental right to play, a recognition of how important it is for children to interact with others of their age group in a stress-free happy environment. Covid-19 has seriously curtailed this freedom. Locked up at home due to school closure, children are deprived of the routines of socialisation, human touch, human feelings which enhance social and emotional intelligence. This critical skill, according to the World Economic Forum (WEF), is going to be the next biggest job skill. There has been a significant compromise of children's social and emotional well-being through deprivation of similar-age companionship and their lonely relationships with screens. In a world where depression is likely to be the biggest killer by 2030, this is a dangerous precedence. In addition, in situations where parents are compelled to leave their children unattended at home due to economic reasons, these children are at risk of far greater tribulation than Covid. In rural India, school closure has deprived millions of children of mid-day meals so crucial to their nutritional health.

5. Children are becoming habituated to school-less routines: The impact of staying home for long, is likely to be more profound. Most children do not have a proper schedule (for studying, sleeping, eating, etc). Instead of waking up early, getting ready, commuting to school, children can now simply attend school from bed at 8 am and can often engage as much as they wish to. There is a role of structures and routines in their development. The apprehension is that once schools do open, it will take children a long time to become habituated to following a scheduled timetable and return to a constructive routine. What if children get back to school and after the initial euphoria of meeting friends, quickly get frustrated with the idea of being tied to a routine? What if they become inherently dissatisfied and seek resignation? The earlier we get them back to school and keep them there the better it is.

Experts at UNICEF point to the irreparable learning losses that children are suffering, which will result in bigger economic losses in the labour market in the long term. In comparison to India, globally, many countries have managed to keep schools open to mitigate these losses. Medical experts and psychiatrists say that schools are not super spreaders and worry about the risk of social-emotion health losses leading to depression and other mental health issues. The risk of not opening schools and exposing children to learning and socio-economic losses are far higher than letting them come to school and be exposed to a mild variant of the virus such as Omicron. In a situation where everything is a trade-off, we need to protect our children's future and that of their families which are facing severe professional disruption.