Impact of COVID-19 on School Education in India: What are the Budgetary Implications?

A Policy Brief

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Abstract: COVID-19 has had an unprecedented impact on school education. It has affected a large number of children across states, class, caste, gender and region. The shutting down of schools and the decision of shifting traditional classrooms to digital platforms is not only increasing learning inequality among children, but also pushing a large number of children out of school due to the digital divide. Other than learning, the absence of schooling would also have a long-lasting effect on the health and nutrition of children. The role of the budget in the current situation as well as beyond the pandemic is very crucial to ensure inclusive education for all. This policy brief highlights some of the issues associated with school closures which need immediate attention. It also suggests some short-term policy measures that can be implemented in the coming Union and State budgets. However, the overall direction of allocations should not only be limited to addressing issues arising from the pandemic but should go beyond. COVID-19 has created an opportunity for governments to learn valuable policy lessons to deal with such situations and also to revamp the system so that it is better equipped to deal with them. In this context, the policy brief has also put forward a set of long-term measures that the government should implement in the due course of time.

I. Increase in out-of-school children (OOSC) during and over the post COVID-19 period

- In India, school closures have affected 320 million students (UNESCO, 2020a). However, only 37.6 million children across 16 states are continuing education through various education initiatives such as online classrooms and radio programmes etc. (UNICEF, 2020a). A recent survey in West Bengal has found that child labour among school-going children has increased by 105 per cent during the pandemic (HT, 2020). Another survey by Save the Children during the pandemic reports the discontinuation of children's education in 62 per cent of the surveyed households with 67 per cent in rural and 55 per cent in urban areas, respectively (Save the Children, 2020). Widespread unemployment and income loss will hinder the ability of households to pay to keep students in schools. This impact will be greater for poorer households who might face budget constraints. This will cause children to drop out of schools and be pulled into economic activities to support their parents' in earning.

- The situation of dropout rates and out-of-school children was already poor even prior to COVID-19. According to NSS 75th Round Household Survey 2017-2018, around 3.22 crore children in the 6-17 year age group are out of school, 31 per cent of whom have never attended any school (NSO, 2019). These figures were higher for rural areas as compared to urban areas. The major reasons cited for being out-of-school are engagement in economic activities and participation in household chores (NSO, 2019).

- UNESCO estimates that globally, 23.8 million children, adolescents and youth (pre-primary to tertiary) are at a risk of not returning to care centres, schools, and universities. Out of these 5.95 million are from South and West Asia, which is also the highest compared to other regions (UNESCO, 2020b).

Existing policies and budgetary interventions

1. The Centre and States together spend 2.9 per cent of GDP on school education, much lower than the four per cent suggested by the Kothari Commission in 1966 (MHRD, 2019).

2. *Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan* (SMSA), the key programme for providing holistic school education from pre-school to the senior secondary level, has remained under-funded from its very inception. In 2020-21(BE), against a projected demand of Rs. 45,934 crore, the scheme has received an allocation of Rs. 38,750 crore (CBGA, 2020).

3. Specific interventions for mainstreaming OOSC

in the 6-14 year age group under *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan* (now SMSA) have been under-funded for several years now. The allocation remains less than one per cent of the total elementary education budget (SMSA Portal, 2020).

4. The allocations for scholarships are not demand-driven but fund-limited and hence, despite a demand for scholarships, the number of beneficiaries availing scholarships is decreasing overtime.

Policy measures needed

1. The Government should provide scholarships to all the beneficiaries who have applied and distribute monetary (direct cash transfer) and non-monetary incentives (including textbooks, stationary, mobiles, laptops, data package, rations etc.) with immediate effect.

2. The Government should allocate more resources for a survey in identifying out-of-school children. The budgetary provision for mainstreaming out-of-school children under SMSA needs to be increased substantially at least for the next five years.

3. Budgetary interventions should be made to mainstream out-of-school children in the 15-18 year age group under SMSA.

4. The overall budget of SMSA needs to be increased substantially to compensate the existing resource crunch in the scheme.

5. The Government should ensure free public provisioning of secondary education (IX-XII standard) and extend the RTE Act to cover children in the 15-18 year age group.

II. Disruption in school meal services affecting nutrition of children between 6-17 years of age

*   The Mid Day Meal (MDM) is a significant part of the diet of Indian children. It is one of the most important interventions of the Government of India with multiple benefits such as avoiding classroom hunger, increasing school attendance, and addressing malnutrition.

*   The CNN[1] Survey shows that the prevalence of stunting is varied by schooling status, with a higher percentage of stunting among children who were out-of-school, than those going to school (38% vs. 20%); for adolescents, nearly one-quarter (24%) of children aged 10 to 19 had low BMI[2] (CNNS, 2019).

*   As the schools closed across the country, the school feeding programme could no longer provide the much-needed free lunch to 115.9 million children who are enrolled under the scheme (MDM Portal).

*   Even prior to COVID-19, only 50 per cent rural and 21.4 per cent urban children reported that a free mid-day meal was provided by the institution (NSO, 2019).

*   A study by IFPRI[3] shows that as on May 1, 2020, only 15 of the 36 states/UTs had taken steps to adapt to the MDM scheme (Scott et. al, 2020); a survey by Save the Children reports that 39 per cent of households did not receive MDM during lockdown between April and June (Save the Children, 2020). A survey by the Population Council in Bihar shows that 29 per cent received cash in lieu of cooked food or dry ration (PCI, 2020).

Existing policy and budgetary interventions

*   In April 2020, the Union HRD Minister announced that in the wake of COVID-19, the annual central allocation of cooking cost (for procurement of pulses, vegetable, oil, spices and fuel) under MDM has been enhanced to Rs. 8,100 crore from Rs. 7,300 crore (an increment of 10.99%) (PIB, 2020a).

*   In a recent order, MHRD has asked states/UTs to provide pulses, oil etc. (equivalent to cooking cost) along with food grains as Food Security Allowance (FSA) to eligible children instead of

[1] Comprehensive National Nutrition Survey
[2] BMI stands for Body Mass Index. BMI for-age is used to assess underweight.
[3] International Food Policy Research Institute

transferring the cooking cost to children / their parent's bank accounts (MDM Portal).

- Many state governments have reported that they were not getting the funds needed for providing MDM in government schools from the Centre. However, a number of States have taken policy and budgetary initiatives at their respective levels. Some of the State interventions (EPIB, 2020) are as follows:

  Bihar – Transferring money to bank accounts of parents via direct benefit transfer

  Kerala – Home delivery of meal supplies

  Karnataka – Delivery of food grains for 21 days

  Haryana – Delivery of mid-day meal rations and provision of cooking cost to eligible students

  Maharashtra – Delivery of mid-day meal grains to students from rural schools

Policy measures needed

- The Government needs to devise new ways to deliver meals while schools are closed; Take Home Ration (THR) should be fortified with eggs, milk, nutrient-rich vegetables, fruits, etc. to enhance diet quality (Tasneem, 2020).

- The National Education Policy (NEP), 2020 has recommended that provisions be made for serving breakfast along with the mid-day meals to improve foundational learning (MHRD, 2020a). In order to effectively implement these recommendations and also devise appropriate delivery mechanisms with added items such as THR, the Government will have to significantly increase the budget for MDM in the current and forthcoming financial years.

- There is a need to increase the coverage of MDM till the secondary level as also to extend the breakfast scheme to this level. This would demand the allocation of more funds under the scheme in the upcoming Union and State budgets.

III. Online education reinforcing digital divide and learning inequality

- Due to the closure of schools to ensure the health safety of children, teaching has moved to digital platforms either through online teaching methods, government portals, Direct-to-Home (DTH) channels and others. However, remote-learning is a challenge for many students in India given the vast differences in access to basic digital infrastructure, including electricity, devices like smartphones and computers, and internet connectivity.

- While almost 99.9 per cent of homes in India have a power connection, the quality of electricity supply is very poor, especially in rural India. Only 47 per cent of rural households receive electricity for more than 12 hours (Kundu, 2020a)

- While 24 per cent Indians own a smartphone, only 11 per cent of households possess any form of computer[4] and just 24 per cent of Indian households have an internet facility (MOSPI[5], 2019). Unfortunately, only eight per cent of households with children in the 5-24 year age group have both a computer and an internet connection (Kundu, 2020a).

- Further, there is also a huge variation between rural and urban India. Only 4.4 per cent of households in rural India have a computer as compared to 23.4 per cent in urban India; only 15 per cent of households in rural India have an internet facility as compared to 42 per cent in urban India (MOSPI, 2019).

- Moreover, as per the IMRB[6] report, there is a rise in the proportion of data expenditure in comparison to voice expenditure for most users in the last four years. Between 2013 and 2017, the ratio of Data: Voice expenditure went from 45:55 to 84:16 (IMRB, 2017). Having online classes on a regular basis has a cost implication as students have to bear the cost of internet services.

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[4] Here, a computer included devices like, desktop computer, laptop computer, notebook, netbook, palmtop, and tablet (or similar handheld devices).
[5] Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation
[6] Indian Market Research Bureau

• While the internet has played an instrumental role in the continuation of education and learning, it has also given way to multiple cyber related crimes, such as hacking and cyber bullying and also exposed children to explicit and violent content, which can provoke, corrupt and influence young minds.

Existing policies and budgetary interventions

• Recently, the Union Government has launched the PM *e-Vidya* Programme to unify all efforts related to digital/online/on-air education to enable equitable multi-mode access to education. It is envisaged that this will benefit nearly 25 crore school-going children across the country (MHRD, 2020b).

• The major interventions under this programme are: The National Knowledge Network, the National Mission on Education through Information and Communication Technology (NME-ICT), *Swayam Prabha*, *Diksha* Portal, *Bharat Padhe* Online campaign and *VidyaDaan* 2.0. The Government of India is also making use of All India Radio and *Doordarshan* to continue teaching (MHRD, 2020b).

• Some of the initiatives taken by State governments (MHRD, 2020b) to enable easy access to digital education are:

   i. Andhra Pradesh: *Abhyasa* - a self- learning app with e-content and video lectures

   ii. Kerala: Digitalisation of all school textbooks and provision of 57,843 laptops and 25,011 projectors at different schools

   '*Avadikaala Santhoshangal*' (Happy Holidays), '*Akshara Vriksham*' (Tree of Letters), and KITE[7] Victers TV Channel - learning through creative writing, stories, poems, and mathematical experiments

   iii. West Bengal: Use of TV Channels, WhatsApp and phone calls for doubt clearing sessions

   iv. Rajasthan: SMILE (Social Media Interface for Learning Engagement) where 20,000

WhatsApp groups were created

   v. Haryana: *Ghar Se Padhao Abhiyan*–made use of WhatsApp, phone, and SMS

   vi. Bihar: *Unnayan–'Mera Mobile Mera Vidyalaya*' –a mobile application

• In the last few years, the Government of India as well as a number of States have shown an inclination towards digital education. However, there was not enough spending on improving the digital infrastructure. In fact, the MHRD budget for digital e-learning reduced from Rs. 604 crore in 2019-20 (BE) to Rs. 469 crore in 2020-21(BE) (Kundu, 2020a).

Policy measures needed

• The Government should ensure that no children are left behind in education. Hence, as an immediate measure, steps should be taken to distribute text books, and make provision for the supply of free smartphones/laptops/tablets to all school children.

• To avail of online classes, states should provide a free data package or reimburse the cost of data.

• The pandemic exposed the poor digital infrastructure of India and also showed the need for a blended education system.[8] Therefore, substantial investment is required to strengthen this infrastructure, including a regular supply of electricity to all households.

• The NEP, 2020 acknowledges the need to bridge the digital divide and proposes creating a digital infrastructure. A clear roadmap with timelines needs to be developed to ensure that it is inclusive.

IV. Children lose out on early childhood care and education (ECCE)

• In India, the ECCE services are largely provided through the *Anganwadi* Centres (AWCs) under the Integrated Child Development Services

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[7] Kerala Infrastructure and Technology for Education (KITE) is a state-owned special purpose company under education department of the Government of Kerala

[8] A combination of traditional classroom and online education, but online education can be an alternative not substitute of classroom education.

(ICDS) scheme. In 2019, there were 30 million children (3-6 years) who were beneficiaries of this scheme in 1.37 million operational AWCs (MWCD, 2020). Therefore, it is highly likely that the disruption of ICDS services due to the lockdown during COVID-19 would have had huge consequences on the health, nutrition, and learning of these children.

• Not only early learning, pre-schools play a crucial role in laying the foundation of a proper psychological, physical and social development of a child. The closure of schools and other institutions that provide early childhood care and education continues to pose an immense threat to their holistic development potential.

• There is also a growing need to focus on the mental health and the psychological needs of a child during this pandemic. It is highly probable that economic hardships stemming from the loss of employment and income will have an adverse effect on their mental health. Children facing acute deprivation in nutrition, protection or stimulation, or periods of prolonged exposure to toxic stress are likely to develop lifelong challenges as their neurological development is impaired (CRY, 2020).

• India already has the largest number of malnourished children. The National Family Health Survey - 4 reports that the national prevalence of under-five stunting is 38.4 per cent and under-five wasting prevalence stands at 21 per cent (NFHS-IV, 2015-16). The recently released Global Nutrition Report, 2020 shows that in India, the national prevalence of under-five stunting is 37.9 per cent, which is greater than the developing country average of 25 per cent; under-five wasting prevalence of 20.8 per cent is also greater than the developing country average of 8.9 per cent (Global Nutrition Report, 2020). According to a Lancet study, due to reductions in routine health service coverage levels, disruption in live saving immunisation activities and an increase in child wasting, up to 300,000 children could die in India alone in the next six months (UNICEF, 2020b).

• The *Anganwadi* workers (AWWs) are now additionally burdened with COVID-19 duty as also the delivery of rations to households in various states. They are going door-to-door, recording people's travel history, noting flu symptoms and, where needed, even helping trace contacts (World Bank, 2020). Hence, they no longer have the time to address the educational requirements of children.

Existing policies and budgetary intervention

• The pre-school component in ICDS has received relatively less attention as compared to supplementary nutrition.

• The requirement for professional training of pre-school teachers is not always there, due to the absence of any regulatory requirement for training. Some States, particularly in the north and north east, have almost no access to any pre-primary teacher education institutes at all (CECED[9], 2015).

• In light of COVID, the Ministry of Women and Child Development (MWCD) has conducted a nationwide online interactive training for *Anganwadi* workers.

• Many of the State governments have launched schemes to provide benefits to *Anganwadi* workers and *Anganwadi* helpers. For example, the Uttarakhand government has announced a life insurance of Rs. four lakh and Madhya Pradesh government, an insurance worth Rs. 50 lakh (KPMG, 2020).

• The Odisha government in partnership with UNICEF has started '*Ghare Ghare Arunima*', a home-based curriculum for children who are enrolled in *Anganwadi* centres that are closed due to COVID-19. This programme lays emphasis on reaching out to parents with a focus on keeping the children engaged in a host of meaningful calendar activities that will keep them stimulated and improve their psychological well-being. The *Anganwadi* workers share the activities with the parents either digitally or through printed copies (Outlook India, 2020).

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[9] Centre for Early Childhood Education and Development

- The Chhattisgarh government (Department of Women and Child Development) and UNICEF have started '*Chakmak Abhiyan*' and '*Sajag Abhiyan*' for the all-round development of children. In this programme children are given fun-learning activities to be performed with their parents, grandparents and guardians at home (India Education Diary, 2020).

- In a few States, such as Chhattisgarh and Maharashtra, AWWs have been involved in the home delivery of cooked food to children (Madan & Madan, 2020).

Policy measures needed

- Until AWCs reopen, systems need to be developed for the doorstep delivery of supplementary nutrition in the form of cooked food or THR to young children.

- Immediate interventions need to be taken to ensure early childhood education during the closure of AWCs.

- The Government should adequately invest on the pre-school component of the ICDS programme. States also need to plan and budget for this under SMSA.

- There is a need to prioritise the training of AWWs for providing pre-school education.

- The Government should ensure a free provisioning of quality ECCE services to all children and this should be brought under the ambit of RTE.

V. Probability of an increase in gender disparity in education

- The school closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic could lead to a million more girls and transgender children dropping out before they complete their education. This particularly holds true for children living in poverty, those with a disability or the ones living in rural isolated places. Economic hardships caused by the crisis will have spill-over effects as families consider the financial and opportunity costs of educating their daughters.

- Plan International and UNESCO warn that the increased drop-out rates will disproportionately affect adolescent girls (UNESCO, 2020). This will further entrench gender gaps in education and lead to an increased risk of sexual exploitation, early pregnancy and early and forced marriage. India has the largest number of child brides in the world – accounting for a third of the global total. It is estimated that each year, at least 1.5 million girls under 18 get married in India (UNICEF website).

- Schools play an important role in preventing and responding to violence and exploitation. School closures mean that children, particularly girls, experiencing violence have fewer opportunities to seek support and access services.

- Girls in India already struggle to access and complete their school education. U-DISE[10] Flash Statistics for 2016-17 show that adolescent girls are more likely to dropout from secondary education (19.8%) than primary education (6.3%) and this figure is higher for government schools (26.8%) (NIEPA[11], 2017). The Malala Fund estimates that 10 million more secondary school age girls could be out of school after the COVID-19 crisis has passed and a substantial number of these children will be from developing countries like India (Malala Fund, 2020).

- It is also found that the completion rate at secondary stage for girls in 2016-17 was 65.8 per cent, a decrease from the previous years, 2015-16 (72.9%) and 2014-15 (81.1%) (NIEPA, 2017). As per the National Sample Survey (NSS) 30.2 per cent girls reported that they discontinued education due to their engagement in domestic activities. This was higher in rural (31.9%) than urban (26.7%) areas (MOSPI, 2019). Due to the lockdown and economic recessions in households, it is likely that household responsibilities on girls will

[10] Unified District Information System for Education
[11] National Institute of Educational Planning and Administration

increase and even those enrolled in schools will dropout.

- The gender divide in access and ability to use digital infrastructure is also stark. Only 33 per cent women had access to internet, while this figure is 67 per cent for men. This disparity is more prominent in rural India where 72 per cent men and only 28 per cent women had access to internet (Kundu, 2020a). Thus, girls are more likely to miss out on online education and this will lead to an increase in learning gaps.

Existing policies and budgetary interventions

- The lack of a nearby secondary school is an important factor for girls' dropping out at the elementary level. To improve the retention of girls at the secondary level, there is new intervention under SMSA for the expansion of the *Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya* (KGBV) from class VIII to XII. However, it is noteworthy that per girl spending in KGBVs, which are also the government-run residential schools for disadvantaged girls spent around Rs. 13,604 per annum; in contrast, *Jawahar Navodaya Vidyalaya* (JNV), the model residential school of the Union government, the spending was around Rs. 85,000 (Jha et.al, 2015).

- The pattern of resource allocation in girl-specific interventions across different components of SMSA shows that in most states, residential schools and RTE entitlements for free uniforms top the charts as key areas of investments to promote girls' education. However, other critical interventions, like the safety and security of girls, recruitment of female teachers, or gender-sensitisation training for teachers, are either sparsely allocated or have no allocation at all (Kundu, 2019).

Policy measures needed

- The Government should collect gender-disaggregated data to understand the differing impacts of COVID-19 for appropriate policy action. A pan-India survey should be conducted at the earliest.

- There is a need to include low-tech, free and

continued gender-sensitive learning approaches in the education response to COVID-19.

- The Government should prioritise the distribution of learning materials, accessible and inclusive for all children; particularly disabled girls and girls without access to devices and internet.

- Response and recovery planning must target girls in particular to advance gender equality in education.

- Appropriate training methods and approaches should be conducted for teachers, parents, and communities to train and prepare them to respond appropriately to the increased threat of sexual and gender based-violence and child marriage. This should include training or awareness-raising to identify and support at-risk girls and boys. An adequate budget should be allocated for the purpose.

- Governments must ensure that gender-responsive education budgeting is enforced to reduce girls' absenteeism and dropping out.

VI. Disproportionate impact of school closures on marginalised children

- Even though remote learning strategies aim to ensure the continued learning for all children, it is well known that the most marginalised children may not be able to access these opportunities. These include those with disabilities, those from ethnic minorities, children on the move (migrant, refugee and internally displaced children), and the ones that are in the most rural hard-to-reach and poorest communities. The dropout rates among children from the Scheduled Castes (SCs)/ Scheduled Tribes (STs)/ Other Backward Classes (OBCs) is high, especially for secondary education. While the dropout rate at this level is 15.6 per cent for the general category, it is 22.5 per cent, 26.9 per cent and 20.04 per cent for SCs, STs and OBCs, respectively (MOSPI, 2016)

- A survey by the *Swabhiman*[12] organisation reported that about 43 per cent of children with disabilities are planning to drop out of studies due to difficulties faced by them in online education; while 77 per cent of surveyed students shared concerns that they would fall behind in learning due to their inability to access distance learning methods (*Swabhiman*, 2020).

- The Right to Education Act 2009 - Section 12 (1)(c), mandates that all private schools reserve 25 per cent of their seats for children belonging to socially disadvantaged and economically weaker sections. However, due to the pandemic the admission of children from economically disadvantaged families in private schools has been disrupted. Moreover, children who have completed elementary education and entered Class IX in this academic session are facing the risk of being dropped as private schools are charging exorbitant fees as RTE is not applicable after the elementary level.

Existing policies and budgetary interventions

- Governments provide financial assistance to students of Class IX-X from the SC, ST and OBC category. The pre-matric scholarships are 'Funds-Limited', which means it depends on the budget and is not driven by demand. The allocated budget under the scheme is continuously decreasing for SCs and STs and is stagnant or marginally increased for OBC children. The number of students availing the scholarships has also reduced from 24 lakh in 2015-16 to 22 lakh in 2017-18 (Kundu, 2020b).

- SMSA provides Rs. 3,500 per child per annum for interventions related to the education of CWSN[13]. The provision for home-based education covering children with severe/ multiple disabilities under the scheme has also been extended for children till class XII. Rs. 9.22 crore was allocated under this head (SMSA Portal, 2019).

- However, not a single state is compliant with disabled-friendly infrastructure norms. They do not budget adequately for the construction of ramps and disabled friendly toilets in schools. (NIEPA, 2017).

- There is currently no pre-service training offered to regular teachers which prepares them for inclusive classroom teaching and there is a dearth of special educators in schools.

Policy measures needed

- The Government should make an upward revision of scholarship amounts for marginalised children and it should be demand-driven and universalised.

- Inclusive learning solutions to be developed, especially for the most vulnerable and marginalised sections of the society. Governments must ensure accelerated learning and catch-up courses to help address the interrupted learning of the most marginalised children, and girls in particular.

- Policy changes are required to ensure that children are supported by suitable curriculum in alternate formats appropriate for them, alongwith necessary devices to make online learning feasible. This requires substantial resource allocation from both Union and State governments.

- The States should recruit special educators on a priority basis and budgetary allocation should be made exclusively for the purpose.

- The States should adhere to the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 in implementing the system of teaching and learning to meet the needs of students with different types of disabilities.

- An overall focus on equity and inclusion in policy making and investment would help in rebuilding systemic resilience.

VII. Teaching becomes more challenging during school closures

- Distance learning has affected the teachers since most of them are teaching remotely for the

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[13] Children with Special Needs

first time, and have limited or no training to do so. Hence, the quality of teaching is likely to be affected.

- A survey by ASSOCHAM[14] and Primus Partners shows that only 17 per cent of teachers in government schools reported that they were trained to conduct online classes; in private schools, this figure stood at 43.8 per cent (ASSOCHAM, 2020)

- India already faces a shortage of qualified teachers. About 14.6 per cent teachers in government schools, 9.7 per cent in government aided schools, 25.4 per cent in private unaided schools and 58.7 per cent in other[15] school categories did not have any professional qualifications (NIEPA, 2017).

- Along with online classes, teachers are also burdened with COVID duty and this has severely impacted their health and well-being.

- Many teachers, especially those in low fee private schools as also contractual teachers in government schools are going through a period of economic uncertainty; many of them are experiencing irregular salaries, salary cuts or even job loss due to the pandemic.

Existing policies and budgetary interventions

- To ensure a holistic school education, both pre-service and in-service teachers' trainings have been brought under the ambit of SMSA from 2018-19. However, only two per cent of the SMSA budget is being allocated for teachers' education (CBGA, 2020).

- MHRD and NCERT are building capacities of teachers and school heads at the elementary level across the country through *NISHTHA*.[16] The platform has been customised for providing online mode training to the existing 24 lakh untrained teachers and school heads (PIB, 2020b).

- The '*Atmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyan*' launched the '*Manodarpan*' initiative to provide psychosocial support to students, teachers and families to address issues related to mental health and emotional wellbeing. It also provides tips for teachers and families to provide support to children (*Manodarpan* Portal, 2020).

- With online teaching becoming the norm due to the lockdown, the State of Kerala trained 81,000 primary teachers in 11,274 schools across the state. The training was conducted by the Kerala Infrastructure and Technology for Education (KITE) establishment; KITE also rolled out KOOL, an e-learning platform for teachers by the Kerala government, which has benefitted 12,000 teachers (Edex Live, 2020).

Policy measures needed

- As a COVID response to education, the Government should take measures to support the well-being, payment and retention of teachers.

- Teachers play a critical role in providing psycho-social support and in promoting the social and emotional learning of children. As part of the COVID-19 education response, governments must provide training and support to teachers that go beyond academics.

- All teachers have a crucial role to play in post-crisis recovery after schools reopen. The National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT), has recently submitted the draft guidelines on reopening of schools to the Ministry of Education. It is hoped that the process of its development has involved teachers and included their perceptions. If not, they must be included in the finalisation of the guidelines and any other educational policy-making and planning to ensure the safe return of students to school in future.

- Under SMSA, States should demand a planned budget for sensitisation and special training for strengthening female teachers.

- An online teachers' training won't equip the teachers with every aspect of quality teaching.

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[14] Associated Chambers of Commerce of India
[15] Others refer to unrecognised private schools and madrasas
[16] National Initiative for School Heads' and Teachers' Holistic Advancement (NISHTHA)

The Government should work on strengthening teachers' training institutions for physical pre-service teachers' education. It should also increase the number of days for training and the unit cost of in-service teachers' training to make the process more meaningful.

VIII. Inadequate infrastructure facilities to maintain physical distancing in school

- As schools in India prepare to reopen, maintaining physical distancing norms requires some basic school infrastructure to be in place. As per the DISE statistics, 53,533 schools in India are single classroom schools. In 19 per cent schools, the student classroom ratio (SCR) is 35 and above and in 8.3 per cent schools, i.e., around 1.3 lakh schools, more than 50 students sit in one classroom (NIEPA[17], 2017).

- Clean and proper WASH facilities are a key prerequisite for schools to reopen safely in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, only 52 per cent schools have overall WASH facilities, i.e., drinking water, functional toilets and hand wash facility altogether; only 13 per cent schools in India are compliant to all RTE norms (NIEPA, 2017).

- The hygiene of teachers is also very crucial. At present, around six lakh teachers who are above 55 years are serving the school education system. As per the emerging disease pattern, they are also more vulnerable to COVID-19. But the majority of schools have a single staff room for all teaching and non-teaching staff (Kundu, 2020c). A study by WaterAid revealed that in States like Telangana, Odisha, Karnataka, only 28 per cent schools have separate toilets for teachers (Water Aid, 2016).

- The reopening of schools requires the non-teaching support staff to attend to pending administrative and financial work, which has been at a standstill due to the long shut down

period. However, as per DISE 2016-17, there is just one non-teaching staff for serving 312 students in school.

Existing policies and budgetary interventions

- Due to a limited resource envelope for school education, the states are not recruiting regular cadre teachers and non-teaching staff for an extended period of time.

- Because of a low schedule rate for civil works, most of the time states surrender the money for this without spending on infrastructure building.

- At present, in many schools there is a lack of appropriate design for WASH facilities (lack of disabled-friendly toilets) and a dearth of facilities for menstrual hygiene management for students as well as teachers.

Policy measures needed

- Implementing physical distancing norms in schools requires substantial investment for infrastructure. This includes, filling the vacant posts of teachers, their trainings and the recruitment of non-teaching staff.

- There is an immediate need of an upward revision of the schedule rate of civil works, for which an adequate budgetary allocation should be made.

- The maintenance of infrastructure and WASH facilities in schools and *Anganwadi* centres should become an important part of the education budget to ensure the smooth functioning of ongoing services.

- While WASH sector priorities are listed in the 15th Finance Commission grants to the *Panchayati Raj* Institutions, it is important that these guidelines cover WASH services at schools and *Aanganwadi* centres, especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

[17] National Institute of Educational Planning and Administration

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