

(RE)BUILD BACK BETTER

10 recommendations to make
'Schools Children Ready'
during and after the pandemic

THOUGHT PARTNERS



The Covid-19 pandemic has generated an unprecedented global crisis, starkly visible in the dire consequences it has had on health and livelihood across nations. Increasingly, there is recognition of another less conspicuous but deeper generational crisis that is unfolding in terms of access to quality education due to the closure of schools.



In India alone, ~250 million children have been out of school for over 15 months (and counting). With barely 40% of children in India being able to access any form of digital learning, it is likely that learning for children enrolled in government and low-fee private schools have been minimal.

Additionally, the impact of school closure has been disproportionately heavy on children in primary grades who are dependent on parents or older siblings for access to digital learning and were last on the priority list to return to school during the brief period when schools operated physically in early 2021.

To address this situation, 16 leading Indian organizations working in the education sector have collaboratively drawn on their learnings from the past year to develop a concerted strategy to (re)build back the education system. As a collective, we converged on three critical challenges facing us when children return to school:



Learning loss due to missed and forgotten learning during school closures

- 92% of children have lost at least one specific language ability
- **82%** of children on average have lost at least one specific mathematical ability



A threat of continuous disruptions even when schools reopen

- Epidemiologists predict **multiple waves of Covid-19 resurgence over the next 2 years** until a considerable populace is immune



Increased inequity in access to education

- **24 mn** additional children globally at risk of never returning to school
- **230 mn** people pushed into poverty during the pandemic reducing the demand for education
- **11 mn** less children likely to enroll in primary and secondary education
- **1.6 mn** girls aged 11-14 dropped out pre-pandemic; added risk of this number growing post pandemic

Despite multiple challenges, the pandemic has presented us with several opportunities to review and reimagine how learning could occur and continue. For instance, since professional development training for teachers was delivered virtually last year, we have observed increased engagement, reduced cost, and low cascade loss. Thus, a blended model of face-to-face and online teacher training holds great promise for the future. Additionally, in a country like India where the penetration of low-cost internet is high, prospects abound for mobilizing the private sector to provide a device to every child, and further, for channelizing the EdTech boom to supplement teacher efforts and impart learning at scale.

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Thoughtful and urgent steps need to be taken to avoid irreversible damage to an entire generation of children who stand to lose an average of 3-5% of their lifetime earnings when they enter the workforce. Over the last few months, the education sector, including government bodies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs)/ civil society organizations (CSOs), has worked to investigate the stated problems and identify possible solutions. We are proposing the following 10 recommendations to address these challenges.

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REOPENING SCHOOLS



1 Ensure **EQUITABLE ACCESS** to schools as they reopen: gender, caste



2 Rebuild for **SAFETY** and increase effective **INSTRUCTION TIME**

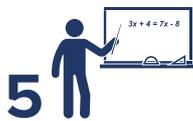


3 Ease children back through **SCHOOL READINESS PROGRAMS** focused on socio-emotional learning

THE CURRICULUM



4 Focus on **FOUNDATIONAL LITERACY & NUMERACY (FLN)**



5 **RESTRUCTURE** what children are learning and how they are learning



6 Identify where children are and **MEET** them at **THEIR LEVEL**

THE STAKEHOLDERS



7 Redefine the roles of **TEACHERS** and teacher mentors



8 Build **PARENT CAPACITY** to support home learning



9 Mobilize community **VOLUNTEERS**



10 Decentralize **DECISION MAKING**

REOPENING SCHOOLS

1. ENSURE EQUITABLE ACCESS TO SCHOOLS

Identify and target at-risk groups

Decentralize approach to identify at-risk groups

Incentivize their return and retention through engagement strategies



Equitable access to schools as they reopen physically + incentives to enroll and stay in school

Nearly [24 million children](#) are estimated to drop out of school due to the pandemic with about [nine million additional children](#) at risk of being pushed into child labor. With threats of early marriage, early pregnancy, and child trafficking looming large, the impact of the pandemic on education is being disproportionately felt by the marginalized groups. Young girls form one such vulnerable group with [1.6 million girls](#) aged between 11–14 years already out of school prior to the pandemic. Further dropouts among girls can be expected, making it critical to bring adolescent girls back to school and focus on enrolling girls in primary school. Therefore, as schools reopen, efforts to bring all children back must include a targeted focus on at-risk populations. A decentralized approach can be used to identify these groups and design engagement strategies such as mass media campaigns and PTMs to incentivize their return to school.

2. REBUILD FOR SAFETY AND INCREASE EFFECTIVE INSTRUCTION TIME

Increase the effective in-person instruction time to make up for lost learning over the past year

Reduce holidays, free up teachers' administrative burden, and increase their effective teaching time

Devote 2–3 hours to FLN instruction in Grades 1-3 on a regular basis



Rebuild for safety and increase effective instruction time; devote daily hours for FLN

As schools reopen in a staggered manner, children will be expected to attend school for shorter periods and in batches. While ensuring their infrastructure is upgraded to follow the required Covid-19 safety protocols of social distancing and hygiene, schools must also increase the effective in-person instruction time to make up for lost learning over the past year. Even though the RTE mandates 220 days of instructional time, the effective instructional time before the pandemic was only [19% of this figure](#). Reducing holidays, freeing up teachers' administrative burden, and increasing their effective teaching time should be prioritized. Additionally, two to three hours must be devoted to FLN instruction in Grades 1-3 on a regular basis.

3. SLOWLY EASE CHILDREN BACK INTO SCHOOL

Help children understand and manage emotions



Ease children back into school gently, through readiness programs that focus on socio-emotional development

The pandemic has forced children to spend most of their time at home, leaving them vulnerable to physical, mental, and sexual abuse. The resultant loss of social interaction, especially with peers, coupled with fear of the disease could have had a negative [cognitive impact on children](#), thereby reducing their ability to learn. It thus becomes crucial to integrate a readiness program to strengthen socio-emotional skills for all children, irrespective of age and grade, while re-inducting them into formal schooling. This will help children understand and manage emotions, empathize with themselves and others, establish positive relationships, and make responsible decisions. Research suggests that Socio-Emotional Learning (SEL) implementation can [increase academic performance](#), the positive impacts of which last long after the program is implemented.

THE CURRICULUM

4. FOCUS ON FOUNDATIONAL LITERACY AND NUMERACY (FLN)

Emphasis must be placed on achieving foundational reading, writing, and mathematical skills for ALL children



Focus on FLN before focusing on teaching other subjects for all children

Even before the pandemic, [50 million primary grade](#) children in India lacked FLN skills. It is estimated that for every half-a-year of learning loss in Grade 3, children will roughly [lose 1.5 years of learning](#) by the time they reach Grade 10. In the first few months after returning to school, emphasis must be placed on achieving foundational reading, writing, and mathematical skills for ALL children, at least till Grade 6, before studying other subjects. Additionally, with the launch of the NIPUN Bharat mission, a razor-sharp focus on foundational learning is essential to ensure all children in Grade 3 can read and perform basic Math by 2026-27.

5. RESTRUCTURE WHAT AND HOW CHILDREN ARE LEARNING

In-person and at-home modes of learning should continue in parallel to enable learning continuity



Redesign the curriculum and spread it over multiple years

Given prolonged school closures, children cannot be expected to learn at the same pace as they did before the pandemic, and catch up on learning missed over two academic years (20-21 and 21-22), in just one year. The next two to three years must be devoted to recovering forgotten and missed learning, necessitating a practical redesign of curricula to prioritize critical competencies. A three to six months remediation program alone will not mitigate this learning loss. Along with adapting the curriculum, the strategy for delivery and outreach should be flexible enough to accommodate repeated school closures,

as foreseen. In-person and at-home modes of learning should continue in parallel and in sync so as to enable continuity despite the inevitably differential interruptions to learning that the pandemic will cause in different parts of the country.

6. IDENTIFY WHERE CHILDREN ARE AND MEET THEM AT THEIR LEVEL

Assess and identify their learning level and meet their requirements

Consistently assess and remediate learning gaps

Measure progress on FLN goals in line with NIPUN Bharat guidelines



Constantly assess children and inform instructions accordingly

According to a UNESCO study, children have incurred [2X learning loss](#) for every month of school closure during the current pandemic. It is important to start by assessing and identifying their learning level and meeting their requirements instead of starting with what is expected of them at their age. Phone, WhatsApp, and worksheet-based assessments at home and at community-levels, coupled with classroom-based assessments once schools resume, are some strategies to consistently assess and remediate learning gaps. Regular diagnostic assessments (baseline, midline, and end line) should be conducted to measure progress on FLN goals in line with the NIPUN Bharat guidelines.

THE STAKEHOLDERS

7. REDEFINE THE ROLES OF TEACHERS AND TEACHER MENTORS

Upskill teachers to ensure that children learn effectively and equally in school and at home

Redefine roles of teachers to address learning loss, while taking care of children's socio-emotional needs

Reduce teachers' burdens with resources, such as teacher guides, assessment banks, and lesson plans



Enhance teacher/ mentor capacity for facilitating learning in school and at home, as well as for providing psycho-social support to children

The role of teachers has expanded from being just facilitators of learning in the classroom to also enabling learning at home and in the community. Teachers must be upskilled to ensure that children learn effectively and equally in school and at home, to increase effective instructional time and address learning loss, while also taking care of children's socio-emotional needs. Additionally, teachers need to be equipped with resources such as teacher guides, assessment banks, and lesson plans to reduce their burden of designing and pre-emptive decision-making. Ongoing support must be provided by a cadre of teacher mentors who are well equipped to support teachers in facilitating learning in school and at home, while also promoting children's psycho-social well-being.

8. PARTNER WITH PARENTS AS ENABLERS OF LEARNING AT HOME

Support parents with clear guidelines on enabling effective learning at home

Teachers and parents must have a strong partnership, and teachers should consistently motivate parents

Guide parents on managing their children's behavior and adopting positive parenting practices



Partner with parents as enablers of learning at home by equipping them with resources and giving them step-by-step guidance

With children spending an excessive amount of time at home, parents have become partners in their children's learning process. It is, thus, important to support them with clear guidelines on enabling effective learning at home. Teachers and parents must collaborate to set learning goals for their children, and teachers should consistently motivate parents to support progress toward these goals. Parents must also be guided on managing children's behavior and adopting positive parenting practices. It is vital that the parent-teacher partnership remains strong even after schools reopen, to ensure learning continues despite any future disruptions.

9. IDENTIFY & MOBILIZE COMMUNITY VOLUNTEERS

Identify motivated and capable community volunteers to support learning in smaller groups in case of future interruptions

Carry out systematic capacity building, management, and incentivization to ensure sustainability

Digital certificates, vocational skill building, and other non-monetary incentives could be effective ways to sustain volunteer motivation



Identify, train, and equip capable volunteers with tools to facilitate learning in the community

Facilitating a holistic home-based learning experience for children requires not only the collaboration of teachers and parents but also decentralized and individualized support through community volunteers to reach every single child. Motivated and capable community volunteers must be identified to support learning in smaller groups in the event of future interruptions in physical schooling. Existing volunteers in the system such as NGO staff and volunteers, Nehru Yuva Kendra Sangathan (NYKS) workers, NSS and NCC members, B.Ed and D.Ed students, etc., can all be leveraged to play this role. Systematic capacity-building and management of these volunteers must be undertaken and their roles should be incentivized to ensure sustainability. Digital certificates, vocational skill building, and other such non-monetary incentives could be effective ways to sustain volunteer motivation.

10. DECENTRALIZE DECISION MAKING

Decision making to plan regional school openings and closures, manage school instructional days, adapt instruction design and assessment cycles

Designate an IAS or state services official as a nodal officer



Appoint senior officials as district nodal officers to expedite decision making based on local contexts and prevailing conditions

As evidenced in the last year, Covid-19 lockdowns have impacted different regions of the country at different times and with varying intensities. This calls for decentralizing decision making and empowering district- and block-level officials to plan regional school openings and closures, manage school instructional days, adapt instruction design and assessment cycles. It is recommended that an IAS or state services official be designated as a nodal officer for each district to reduce lag in decision making and encourage responsive, bottom-up innovations.

As we work towards rebuilding our education system, it is imperative to revisit how we educate our children and work towards developing systemic resilience to **withstand future shocks** caused by the pandemic and any other localized or large-scale calamities. Adopting 'Phygital learning', which includes the effective use of technology to deliver education along with coordinated teacher-parent interventions at home and in-person classroom instruction whenever possible, together with flexibility in approach, will be key to (re)building back better.

Note: As the second wave of the Covid-19 pandemic hit us early this year and we knew it would mean loss of another academic year for our students, we at Central Square Foundation (CSF) realized the need for a holistic solution to the education challenges that were getting exacerbated by the pandemic. We knew merely reopening schools, which continued to be uncertain and unpredictable, would no longer be the adequate solution for years of forgotten and missed learning. Our teams spent time studying educational responses to Covid across the globe, engaging in discussions with partner organizations in the ecosystem as well as conducting telephonic surveys with teachers and academic mentors in different states to deepen our understanding of the challenges and take suggestions for potential solutions. This report is a result of all these initiatives that culminated in two partner forums organized by CSF with 15 leading organizations working in education across the country. The forum was a platform for partners to share their learnings from last year and align on a way forward as a collective. We are very grateful to all of the following partners for their contribution to this report: Akshara Foundation, Boston Consulting Group, Educate Girls, Leadership for Equity, Language and Learning Foundation, Madhi Foundation, Pratham, Peepul, Room to Read, Rocket Learning, Saarthi, Samagra, Sampark Foundation, The Education Alliance and Vikramshila.