

An Appeal to Hon'ble Members of Parliament

Urgently Address the Education Emergency in India

Education Emergency

India's children are living through the twin catastrophes created by the pandemic: the loss of lives and livelihoods of parents and relatives. The third catastrophe, the potential loss of their future due to the lack of education, is still invisible. Their future, and that of the country, is at stake, due to 20 months of school closure, one of the longest and harshest in the world. Tens of millions of children of Dalits, adivasis, the poor and marginalized sections of society have suffered devastating learning losses and are disengaged from school. The youngest children have not seen a school or have no concept of school. This is the biggest blow to social equality since independence.

We recall that the right to education is a fundamental right of children, that must be upheld at all times. The pandemic cannot and should not be an excuse to deny the majority of poor children their rights, while a minority are able to continue with their education.

Schools are now re-opening, but the measures being undertaken are wholly insufficient. Though a huge number of students are not attending school, there is no sustained effort to bring every child back to school. The learning losses are not being redressed in a systematic way, for example, by re-organizing the curriculum, providing additional learning resources, and by adding more teachers and instructional time.

The focus has been on resuming the textbook focused syllabus in each grade as quickly as possible. Priority has been given to opening the higher secondary schools and to ensuring that the public examinations are organized. Some state governments are spending scarce resources on purchase of digital devices, even though digital technology programs were not effective during the pandemic. These approaches will leave tens of millions of children behind. They are not in line with sound educational practices being adopted in other parts of the world.

Parliament and the state legislatures must discuss the various aspects of the education emergency in detail and regularly. They must take concrete policy and budgetary actions to enable children to learn, particularly those belonging to the disadvantaged groups that have been excluded. **These actions must include financial, academic, nutritional and social measures, through a multi-year program.** And Parliament and the state legislatures must receive and review reports on the progress made.

Both the Central government and the majority of state governments have REDUCED their public funding for school education in 2020-21, in spite of this devastating crisis. The public expenditure levels, as percentage of GDP, were already low before the pandemic, comparable to levels in sub-Saharan Africa. **This trend must not only be reversed, but public funding on school education must be substantially raised in the 2022-23 budget and subsequently.**

Evidence from the ground

We highlight the main problems that have been identified by numerous research studies, surveys, ground reports conferences of educators :

1. The vast majority of the 250 million children in grades 1-12, i.e. the disadvantage children in rural areas and urban areas had NO meaningful structured learning or even contact with their teachers for over 20 months. This was to be expected: less than 5 % of rural households have a computer, and only 15 % had meaningful access to internet for digital education. The proportions amongst Dalits, adivasis and other groups is even lower.
2. Children entering in grades 1-2 *have not seen any school in their lifetime and do not even have the concept of school* as they have not seen anyone go to school. Children entering grades 3-5

would have had just one or two years of exposure to formal school. Unless they were privileged enough to have educated parents or siblings, and attended elite schools with stable connectivity, most children in this age group do not have basic literacy or numeracy skills. The foundations for future learning are completely compromised.

3. Older children, especially young adolescents in upper primary and high school, *have disengaged from education* due to lack of income and support from the school. Child labour and child marriage has increased to alleviate the poverty of parents. Many are victims of domestic abuse and violence.
4. Children are suffering from high levels of malnutrition and even hunger, as mid-day meals are not yet available in many schools, and poverty has risen. This affects their physical and mental development and their ability to learn.
5. Teachers are also suffering from stress as they cope with personal losses as well as trying to adopt new approaches to teaching with totally inadequate tools and training.
6. Even when schools have re-opened, student attendance is as low as 25-35 percent in many schools, according to reports from the grassroots. There is no official, up to date and reliable data on enrollment and attendance.

What we need to do

Urgent measures must be taken by the Central government and all state governments to address this emergency, as outlined in [A Future at Stake](#) . Specific actions are highlighted below:

1. **Substantially increase the public spending on school education** in the Central government's budget and also advocate for such increased in all state governments. Target the spending specially to improving the education for disadvantaged groups/ rural areas.
2. **Ensure that cooked mid day meals are given to all children** in government funded schools, even during periods when schools are closed. Different delivery mechanisms can be used for this. The mid-day meals should be enhanced with high quality protein food, including eggs.
3. **Re-organize the curriculum for elementary education** to focus on foundational learning and priority content. Do not use summative tests, assessments and examinations. Provide additional learning materials, teacher training and additional instructional time to help the children in need.
4. **Monitor the progress of enrollment, attendance, and implementation of measures** through reliable data and report it publicly.

The country must also avoid the strategies that effectively locked out the majority of poor children from education for so long, through the fiction of online learning, especially if a new wave occurs. As most other countries have done, the priority should be to keep schools open and support children and teachers, through effective public health and safety measures. Even if school closures are required, resorting to the fictitious "online learning" models of the last 20 months is not an answer and other strategies must be found.

Members of Parliament, please do the right thing by India's children and for India's future! Our society will be judged by the actions it takes to open equal opportunities to education for the poor and downtrodden.

This appeal has been prepared by the [National Coalition on the Education Emergency](#) and signed by eminent advocates for educationists and child rights.

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Documents

1. A Future at Stake - <https://educationemergency.net/2021/11/a-future-at-stake>
2. Research Brief in English and in Hindi - <https://educationemergency.net/2021/09/coalition-releases-research-brief>

