

For immediate release

Schools must be the last to be closed and the first to open

August 13, 2021

We welcome the decision of the Karnataka Government to open schools for grades 9 through 12 from August 23, 2021.

However, primary schools have remained closed since March 2020, with devastating consequences for the nutrition, health and education of hundreds of thousands of children. Child labour, early marriages have increased. The absence of structured learning opportunities is causing severe academic regression, young children are forgetting to read, and we will see huge dropout as a result. Online education is not possible or pedagogically meaningful for primary school going children.

The evidence from Karnataka and elsewhere across the world is that young children are least vulnerable to the Covid virus; they are more commonly asymptomatic or have mild non-specific symptoms, and fatalities are negligible. In-school transmission of the virus by children or teachers can be lowered by taking normal public health precautions, including reasonable distancing, wearing masks, regular testing and sanitizing and isolating/ treating cases of infection amongst students and teachers .

When we compare the enormous harm arising from keeping primary schools closed with the much lesser harm from opening schools, it seems clear that schools must open. Across the world, primary schools have been kept open, in some countries even throughout the pandemic. The head of Indian Council of Medical Research has confirmed that there is no indication that a third wave will target children, and he has recommended that primary schools must open. This is also the view of the parliamentary committee, and the Karnataka government appointed expert committee, on this issue.

A large number of lower primary schools in rural areas have a strength of less than 50. Children who come to these schools are in the same bubble in the community and already playing with one another outside their homes. These should be the first to be opened. Gradually other schools should be opened, with staggered resumption, for different classes, shift system, as required, for larger schools. In-person attendance should be encouraged but not made compulsory, and children who are attending remotely will need to be provided meaningful learning opportunities.

Schools must take adequate precautions, providing water and soap to ensure hygiene, with masks and physical distancing. Mid day meals, Ksheera Bhagya must immediately resume to reduce the malnutrition caused by school closure. Classes should be conducted in the open wherever possible, or in well ventilated rooms.

Decisions on opening and phasing must be made by the district and taluka administration, and under guidelines issued by the state and central governments, for greater flexibility. When cases are detected, immediate steps must be taken locally for containment and medical attention.

Complete lock down severely affected our economy and jobs. Complete school lock down is similarly seriously harming our children. Opening schools is necessary to reduce this serious harm and begin the processes of learning again.

When schools open, teachers must be given the autonomy and the resources to provide empathetic learning opportunities to their students, without being pressurized to begin grade level instruction, or completing the syllabi, or conducting summative assessments.

- National Coalition on the Education Emergency

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