What must schools do before reopening?

Context

àSchools in India have been shut since the first 21-day national lockdown from March 25, some from a week or two earlier, due to the novel coronavirus pandemic.

àWith the number of COVID-19 cases spiking this week, there is a growing clamour to protect children from going to examination centres and keep them away from school for some time longer. Many schools are offering online classes, but that has its own perils.

What are India’s schoolchildren doing now?

àThere are an estimated 25 crore schoolchildren in 15 lakh Indian schools (from the Unified District Information System for Education, or UDISE, 2018-19), who have all been at home since classes stopped across the country from March 16.

àTheir current educational situation varies wildly, depending on age, location and socio-economic status.

àThe Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) has largely left the decision on how to proceed to its affiliate schools, but has promised a syllabus reduction.

àFor the 33% of students in private schools, classes have gone online with teachers attempting to maintain a regular schedule.

àFor others, the Centre has brought out an educational calendar with lesson plans and learning activities, and is also beaming classes through dedicated television channels in multiple languages, especially for older children.

àTeachers in government schools in Delhi are giving out assignments via WhatsApp, while class 10 students in corporation schools in Chennai were to have got an Android phone so that classes can continue.

àHowever, given that this kind of distance education requires digital access and/or self-motivation and parental involvement, the vast majority of children in government schools have spent the last three months on an extended summer holiday.

When will schools reopen?

àNo one knows when schools can reopen. Human Resource Development (HRD) Minister Ramesh Pokhriyal ‘Nishank’ has said that physical reopening of schools will not take place till August 15, although some States such as Haryana have suggested a July reopening date.

àThe Centre will announce the earliest possible date for reopening after consultation between the HRD, Health and Home Ministries, but the final call will be left to State governments.

àFor those in containment zones, the wait may be longer, leading to worries about unequal educational opportunities among the same age cohort.
A growing number of parents, Right to Education activists and the Delhi government teachers’ association are calling for 2020-21 to be treated as a “zero academic year”, with no pressure to set a reopening date at all.

“Zero year” means teaching and learning will happen to the extent possible, but there will not be grading or exams or promotion to the next class.

An online poll by Local Circles found that 37% of parents want to send their child to school only 21 days after there are no new cases in their districts, while another 36% say it should be three weeks after no new cases in the State or country. In fact, 13% do not want schools to restart until a vaccine is developed.

It was the Tamil Nadu High and Higher Secondary School Graduate Teachers Association that successfully filed a court case against holding Class 10 board examinations in the State.

Its president S. Bakthavatchalam pointed out that apart from the impossibility of teaching classes online in government schools, older teachers, especially those with comorbidities are also at risk from young students who cannot be expected to follow social distancing norms.

Experts point out that countries such as France and Israel saw cases shooting up when they tried to reopen schools.

What is the health protocol that needs to be in place before schools reopen?

The Centre is expected to release guidelines on this issue next week.

HRD officials say some likely steps include temperature screening at the entrance to schools and classrooms, monitoring to ensure mask or shield-wearing and social distancing, sanitisation routines to clean all furniture and facilities, isolation and hospitalisation protocols for infected students and staff, as well as plans for staggered attendance and blended learning to limit the number of students on the premises on any given day.

Public Health Foundation of India president K. Srinath Reddy says that children are at more risk for clinical symptoms than earlier understood, and have been seen to develop a paediatric multi-system inflammatory condition associated with COVID-19, although they usually recover.

The bigger danger is that because social distancing may be difficult for children, they will act as transmission agents to staff and older adults back home.

Dr. Reddy has also raised the issue of mental health risks from COVID-19 stress, due to economic or medical crises at home, or the psychological impact of increased isolation and treating everyone as a potential threat.
Is online education a viable alternative?

à The Centre is preparing guidelines on digital education, including cybersafety.

à It is likely to include limiting the number of hours a child is online, with a one to three hour cap on synchronous interaction.

à Currently, some schools are trying to maintain a seven-hour teaching schedule, which creates stress and distraction.

à Educational apps are largely in English, although multi-lingual apps are being developed.

à Equity and access are the bigger problems with online education in India.

à Only 11% of Indian households have a computer.

à Although smartphone penetration is higher, only 24% have Internet facilities, which drops to 15% in rural areas, according to the latest National Sample Survey.

à A single device in a household cannot help multiple children, while poor students in an economically weaker section (EWS) quota in a privileged school may be the worst hit.

à If a government or school wants to run an online education programme, it must ensure equal access to all participant.

How can evaluation be done?

à This is the immediate battle, given that several boards, including the CBSE are yet to conclude examinations from the previous 2019-20 academic year.

à The Board has exponentially increased the number of examination centres to 13,000 and is developing screening protocols, but the question of whether Class 12 examinations can be safely conducted in the first two weeks of July is currently in the Supreme Court.

à Children’s health is more important than any academic advancement.

à Schools are experimenting with multiple choice tests and uploaded answers for at-home evaluation options.

Way ahead

à If a zero academic year is considered, conceptual teaching and learning may continue through varied modes through the year, but without the pressure of evaluation and grading.