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## **Tackling of COVID-19 in the Education Landscape: An Analysis of Policies Implemented by the USA and India**

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## **Abstract**

*The COVID-19 pandemic has made remote learning the new norm. Governments across the world have ordered schools to move to online classes. With school closures and the cancellation of examinations, there has been a severe impact on the social-emotional learning of children and other aspects. This paper tries to assess if the government's response tackles the education crisis posed by COVID-19 effectively. The analysis about the issue covers the various policies implemented by the United States and the Indian government based on the issues of Digital Divide, Loss of Nutrition, tackling Mental Health Issues, and Changes in assessment patterns. Through this analysis, we gauge that the key to effective governance is creating dynamic policies that build equity in society, which further translates to access and opportunity in education. The study showcases that the government has taken the fire-fighting approach in terms of response and policy in the education sector. Remote learning in both the USA and India will create a further divide in education and further in learning outcomes and their social-emotional development. Students from lower-income or minority communities are at a higher risk due to this widening gap in learning. Policy Makers around the world can undertake steps towards recovery at these three major levels: Urgent, Managing and Boosting*

**Keywords:** *education, policy, dynamic, inequity, digital divide, nutrition, mental wellbeing, learning outcomes, minority, low-income communities, girl child*

## **1.0 Introduction**

The COVID-19 pandemic, a disease caused by the virus SARS-CoV-2, was first reported to WHO on 31 December 2019 in Wuhan, the People's Republic of China has brought a prolonged wave of uncertainty affecting 17.8Cr people worldwide. Every few weeks the world makes progress and it seems like the wave of uncertainty will be gone, but all comes crashing down as and when a new wave of the covid-19 hits different parts of the world. This prolonged crisis has brought out the gaps in institutions and policies of the state and continues to highlight them. Due to the uncertainty of the pandemic, the education sector has taken a major hit and caused a negative ripple in the lives of young children, students, and youth. Education is moving

online across the world, and with student evaluations moving online, educators are using the trial and error method to find the best method. Multiple assessments have been cancelled or postponed, due to which the social life and quality of learning of students are facing a downfall. These disruptions will only cause short-term challenges but also create long-term adversities for high-risk groups, like increasing inequality in the times to come. (Burgess, Sievertsen, 2020). The pandemic has aggravated the pre-corona global education crisis and continues to do so in unprecedented ways (World Bank, 2020).

The impact of the closure of educational institutions is intended to have multiple consequences beyond learning outcomes, such as limited access to essential services to communities and children, decreased ability of parents to earn their livelihoods, and higher risk of violence against women and girls. (UNICEF, 2020) These disruptions caused in the access to essential services such as education, healthcare, nutrition, and child protection are already harming children and will cause major adversities for them in the long run. The UNICEF report terms them as the 'Lost Generation. (UNICEF, 2020) In April 2020, school closures disrupted learning for almost 90 per cent of students globally, that is, 1.5 billion school children. (UNICEF, 2020) Children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds were the worst hit, with 463 million students being unable to access any form of remote learning. School closures previously have exemplified that children who are out of school for a long duration, especially girls, are more likely to drop out of formal education (Casillas, 2021). As of November 2020, 33 per cent of total enrolled students have reported being affected because of 30 country-wide closures (UNICEF, 2020). If governments across the world don't take immediate steps to map out the road to recovery, 100 million more children will move below the minimum proficiency level in reading due to the pandemic. (UNESCO, 2020) This also indicates that 10 additional students will be added to learning poverty in the post covid world. (World Bank, 2020)

## **2.0 Outline of the Crisis from a Macro Perspective**

With this monumental health crisis at hand, the focus of governments across the world has moved to the health sector. Where health has taken priority, rightly so, resources and funding from education have been taken away. This contraction of government funding to education puts marginalized communities at risk, as now they see education as an added cost and not an investment. Thus, the uncertainty and the contraction of government expenditure on education have aggravated the already existing education crisis in the world. Individually, 97% of India's population has become poorer than it was last year. Consequently, where families struggle to put food on the table, expenditure on education is a forgone cost.

This is also proven in the UN Report, Policy Brief: Education during COVID-19 and Beyond, 2020, which says an expected increase in dropout is being anticipated all around the globe with the total number of children not returning to their education after school closures are likely to be even greater, due to the following reasons:

- As millions are driven into extreme poverty, empirical data reveals that children from the lowest quintiles are considerably less likely than those from the richest quintile to finish primary and lower secondary school. According to UNESCO, the pandemic's economic effect alone may cause 23.8 million additional children and teenagers to drop out or lose access to education next year. (*Policy Brief: Education during COVID-19 and Beyond, 2020*).
- School closures put young women and girls at a high risk of child marriages, early pregnancies, and gender-based violence, thus, reducing their chances to continue education. (*Policy Brief: Education during COVID-19 and Beyond, 2020*).

The learning outcomes of students are a major concern for educational institutions. A large number of students in developing countries, especially from minority groups, are not skilled with the language of instruction. Even when they could access the information, they could not understand it. Underprivileged living conditions, economic hardship, and poor parental education

levels, including digital abilities, meant that many children lacked the stability and learning support they required to adjust to these new modalities of instruction. (*Policy Brief: Education during COVID-19 and Beyond*, 2020).

The given problems have just been worse off as educational institutions remain closed for more than 52 weeks in major countries around the world and online mode education is failing to be effective and efficient, having a direct negative effect on the students. Moreover, the uncertainty and unclarity about the existing medium of education have also taken a huge toll on the students' mental health, which again is quite often overlooked by parents, guardians, and even teachers or mentors. Many students across the globe have also lost their parents or in some cases, the sole breadwinners of the house and are crippled with a new major debt issue. Therefore, the need of the hour is to identify loopholes in the existing policies with regards to tackling such major issues that could be checked and worked upon in the future.

A critical analysis of the two country's case studies will focus on the response of the government to three major components:

1. Virtual classrooms (Shutting down of schools)
2. Academic adjustments and modifications (Decision on assessments)
3. The mental well-being of students (Social-emotional learning)

To gauge the effectiveness of the response towards the three components mentioned above, the paper will discuss the :

1. Highlights
2. Challenges

The recommendations of the study are focused on whether the governments should create more dynamic policies or create leakage-free implementation plans. It would further discuss the potential opportunities and learnings that can be taken from the sudden changes due to the pandemic.

### **3.0 The Current Education Crisis due to the COVID-19 Pandemic**

The ed-sector has two primary stakeholders - learners and educators, wherein parents are key secondary stakeholders. The sudden outbreak of COVID-19 across the world witnessed closures of schools worldwide which led to a major disruption in the workings of these key stakeholders. The students had to adapt to online learning and teachers to online teaching. Parents, from being secondary stakeholders, now became the first-responders for students at home. Before the pandemic students spent their hours of learning under the constant supervision of the school, but now with the lockdown that effective time is spent at home and the level of supervision of parents is varied. The concept of parental investment looks different for different households. Motivated students are comparatively unaffected in their learning as they require less supervision. But the students that have a lower rigour, with learning disabilities, and underprivileged groups are unable to access and afford remote education. Thus, the entire system of imparting and receiving education was left to fend for itself and reinvent too quickly after the lockdown.

While the uncertainty of the pandemic surrounds students, the challenges faced by them due to the sudden changes in the methodology of teaching are at three levels. The first level includes the challenge of accessibility and affordability. The most basic need of the virtual learning format is access to devices and the internet. Students from economically backward communities in the developing world are unable to access or afford online learning devices. Moreover, many countries to date face issues with internet connectivity. (Pokhrel and Chhetri, 2021). Globally, two-thirds of school-going students do not have access to an internet connection at home (UNICEF, 2020). According to Henrietta Fore, UNICEF Executive Director, “This is a digital canyon”, this divide posed by the current state will translate into severe inequalities in the future. The contracting economies lead to a decrease in the disposable income of households and this decrease in income leads to an increased burden on households to spend on education. This burden can lead to outcomes such as an increase in dropout rates or a potential decrease in enrollment.

The second level of the challenge includes students who have access to devices and can thus make use of online learning, however, the environment for learning is not conducive. Students from low-income backgrounds may not have the luxury to access virtual learning through the comfort of proper study spaces which are separated or silent. Moreover, with the pandemic children are at a higher risk of violence. According to Pereda and Díaz-Faes (2020), the pandemic puts children and adolescents at a higher risk of victimization due to an increase in family violence. (Pereda, 2020) This poses a further question on the education for girls. In societies where girl child education is considered a burden, girls staying at home during the pandemic poses a risk of them spending their effective learning time on doing household chores and increases the threat of child marriage, teenage or early pregnancy, and gender-based violence. (Pfunye, Popoola, 2021)

The students with access, affordability medium-term, and a conducive environment fall at the third level. For these students, access to education is not a challenge, but the virtual world poses challenges of increased screen time, the obstacle of adapting to the evolving pedagogy of online learning, and mental well-being. Students are missing out not only on classroom instructional time but also on the other activities for their social-emotional learning. Students are said to be at risk of psychological distress in case of traumatic events, such as health emergencies. In a study conducted with Italian students with a sample size of 501, it was observed that 35.33% were classified as anxious and 72.93% as depressed. (Villani, L., Pastorino, R., Molinari, E. et al. 2021)

Remote learning became the only answer to the question of how to make learning possible for children. As the world moved to online learning, teachers had to significantly reinvent their approach to teaching. While reinventing the approach they also had to learn new skills for teaching that were relevant to the virtual classrooms. Where the digital world brought to online classrooms an array of resources and knowledge at their fingertips, the sudden shift caught the educators unprepared. Thus, the pandemic struck the world when the educational systems were not ready for the world of digital learning opportunities (OECD, 2020).

For educators, the major challenge has been on two fronts - Lack of resources for remote learning, inadequate professional training for teaching online, student engagement in online classrooms, and getting students to collaborate (Paepe, Zhu, & DePryck, 2018) (Leech, Gullett, Cummings, Haug, 2020). According to Shank and Cotten, 2013, barriers to online learning are called the 'digital divide', which is at two levels - access to technology and the ability to effectively navigate technology. Educators in most cases struggle from the latter, wherein they may be provided with the digital resources for online teaching but due to lack of evolving training structures for educators, they are unable to utilize these resources.

### **3.1 Impact of the Education Crisis on Various Factors**

The abrupt shutting down of schools triggered a series of educational catastrophes across the globe. Not only was the teaching-learning process hampered, but young children and adolescents also faced issues in terms of nutrition, mental well-being and were exposed to violence at homes as well. Various reports have been published which talk about these issues in more depth. Some of the major issues were:

#### **3.1.1 Digital Divide**

Emergency remote teaching has been a difficult challenge for schools that primarily cater to on-campus, contact instruction. (Mbodila 2020). Countries all around the globe employed a range of materials to help students' learning when they were not able to attend schools, such as instructional packages (textbooks, worksheets, and printouts), radio education, educational television, and internet instructional resources. Online platforms were the most often used tool during worldwide school closures. Online learning tools ranged from instructional information that students could explore at their leisure and formalised learning programmes that they could complete at their own pace to real-time classes led by their teachers via virtual meeting platforms. (*The impact of covid-19 on education insights from education at a glance 2020*, 2020) Access to alternative learning modes will depend not only on whether the household owns assets required to access relevant material but also on how their usage is divided within the household.



For example, on one hand, where students in lower socio-economic groups or remote areas might be unable to access the internet, students in middle socio-economic groups may need to share these resources with their siblings. (World Bank, 2020)

According to recent figures compiled by the Teacher Task Force, based on data from the UNESCO Institute for Statistics and the International Telecommunication Union, almost half of the world's students face significant barriers to online learning. Globally, some 826 million – 50 per cent – do not have access to a computer at home, while 43 per cent – about 706 million – do not have access to internet services at home. In low-income countries, the stats are even worse. In sub-Saharan Africa, 89 per cent of students lack access to household computers, and 82 per cent do not have access to Internet services. Furthermore, the enormous disruption created by the COVID-19 epidemic has impacted an estimated 63 million primary and secondary teachers globally. Even in nations with dependable information and communication technology (ICT) infrastructure and home connectivity, instructors have found the quick transition to online learning difficult. (*COVID-19 Highlights the Digital Divide in Distance Learning*, n.d.)

### **3.1.2 Poor Learning Outcomes**

Simulating The Potential Impacts Of Covid-19 School Closures On Schooling And Learning Outcomes: A Set Of Global Estimates, a report published by the World Bank Group found out, both the level of schooling will fall as will learning. COVID-19 may result in a loss of 0.3 to 0.9 years of schooling adjusted for quality, lowering the effective years of schooling that children acquire during their lives down from 7.9 to 7.0 to 7.6 years. In the intermediate scenario, the projected percentage of lower secondary pupils falling below the minimum proficiency level would increase by 25 per cent. Approximately, 7 million students from primary up to secondary education could drop out in the coming years due to the effect of the pandemic on their household income alone, further economic regression will only worsen the situation. (Azevedo et al.)

In the absence of remedial action, the world stands to lose earnings that are the equivalent to 16% of the investments that governments make in this cohort of students' basic education. Individually, students from the current school cohort would likely have to face, on average, a reduction of \$355 (optimistic scenario), \$872 (present value of foregone earnings), and \$1,408 (pessimistic scenario) in annual earnings depending on the scenario considered. In current value terms, this equates to \$6,472 to \$25,680 in lost wages throughout a typical student's career (World Bank, 2020). Since 2000, around 80 nations and economies have collaborated every three years to assess how well their educational systems prepare young people for life and work. This framework is known as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), which in simple terms is an international assessment of the knowledge and abilities of 15-year-old students. (OECD, 2016)

At present, 40% of learners fall below proficiency level 2 which means, their scores are lower than 407 PISA points out of 1000. The pandemic will bring a much larger effect in terms of the learning “gap” — the bare minimum of knowledge necessary to have a fundamental comprehension of the subject. A related measure — that of “severity” would further negatively impact those farther from the threshold. Before COVID-19, 31 percent of pupils in regions such as Europe and Central Asia (ECA) were below the level 2 criteria. The optimistic scenario predicts that this will grow to 39%, while the pessimistic scenario predicts that it would reach as high as 46%. In Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) and the Middle East and North Africa (MNA), the minimum levels were already high at 53% and 55% respectively. Under the optimistic scenario, the numbers might increase to 60% and 61% respectively, while in the pessimistic scenario the numbers in these regions may rise to as many as 68% of students who are unable to solve the basics. (World Bank, 2020)

### **3.1.3 Physical and Mental Well-Being Loss**

- **Nutrition loss:** In the first 8,000 days of a child's life, schools play an important role in directly providing health and nutrition services important for their development (Mason-Jones et al., 2012; Skar, Kirstein, and Kapur, 2015; Xu et al., 2020). Due to

school closures, the regular distribution mechanisms through which school meal programmes operate have been interrupted, and many children may lose this essential source of nourishment. School lunches are an important source of nourishment for millions of disadvantaged children globally. (Alderman and Bundy, 2012) Since the outbreak, UNESCO has estimated that 1.6 billion students in 199 countries have been affected by school closures, with over 370 million children in 150 countries not getting a school meal. (UNESCO, 2020a; WFP, 2020b). In 2020, globally, an estimated 39 billion in-school meals have been missed due to school closures. Globally, children are reported to have missed an average of four out of ten in-school meals, with children in some countries missing nine out of ten in-school meals. In the short and medium-term, children who rely on school-provided nutrition programmes may suffer from worsening health and nutritional status. In the first 1,000 days of the youngest children, nutritional shocks are likely to have a significant long-term influence on test scores, educational achievement, income, and absenteeism. (Almond and Currie, 2011; Sudfeld et al., 2015; Andrabi, Daniels and Das, 2020). Furthermore, lost schooling and learning in the next 7,000 days – particularly for girls, who are already at higher risk of dropping out of school early might also lead to poor nutrition and impoverished health for themselves and their children in the long run (World Bank, 2007, 2016; Sperandio and Priore, 2015). (Unicef, 2021)

As educational institutions also serve as platforms for prevention, diagnosis, and counselling, the disruption also affects health and psychological services provided by them. As a result, vulnerable populations are losing access to vital services while also lacking social safety measures. (*Policy Brief: Education during COVID-19 and Beyond*, 2020)

- **Deteriorating Mental Health:** There has been concerning data regarding mental health in everyone, particularly students. Active Minds, a nonprofit group promoting & encouraging mental health awareness among students has presented some rather alarming data this year. According to a recent study, it has been found out that 80% of students

have had a dangerous impact on mental wellness as an after effect of the pandemic. While 20% believe their mental health has been damaged to a considerable extent. (Ellis, 2020). As classroom teaching got suspended in many universities and online teaching was adopted, students' lives have changed drastically. The pressure to perform academically has led students to develop mental health problems. Students' social networks have been suggested to be an essential component in reducing stress and assisting them in being more productive. Reduced social contacts, a lack of social support, and newly emerging stresses linked with the COVID-19 issue might all have a severe impact on students' mental health (Elmer, 2020). Although studies suggest that children and adolescents are less prone to get infected with COVID-19 (Ghosh et al. 2020), the pandemic has severely impacted their psychosocial functioning. Some children and adolescents have experienced boredom, anguish, impatience, irritation, and neuropsychiatric issues as a result of quarantine periods, school closures, a lack of outside activities, erratic meals, altered sleeping patterns, domestic violence, and child abuse. (Ghosh et al. 2020). (Khan, 2020)

#### **3.1.4 Challenges faced by Minority Communities - Women, Specially Abled, Refugees**

The impact of COVID-19 is likely to be worse for vulnerable and marginalized populations such as differently-abled people, refugees and women.

- **Specially Abled:** COVID-19 has wreaked havoc on youngsters with special needs in particular. On the one hand, remote learning has harmed educational access, while on the other, it has lowered learning quality. Even before COVID-19, it was difficult for the specially-abled to get into school. As more states adopt remote learning techniques, these students confront difficulties due to a lack of necessary equipment, internet connectivity, accessible materials, and assistance that would enable them to engage in online programmes. Some countries are developing tools and services for students with special needs and their parents. Returning to school for these children is predicted to be more challenging than for their classmates, according to the preliminary study. Parents of

specially-abled children are concerned about their children's capacity to socially distance themselves (both on the way to and from school) and the availability of basic facilities that are accessible to them. They're also concerned about underlying health problems that could make their kids more susceptible to the virus. As a result, impaired children's parents may opt to keep their children at home. As a result, they eventually dropped out. (World Bank, 2020)

- **Refugees:** Those from more underprivileged backgrounds — indigenous peoples, refugees, displaced children, Afro-descendants, and children who identify as LGBTQIA+ frequently confront institutional and historical marginalisation, both in terms of access and the efficacy of the services they receive. For many of these groups, there is a significant pre-existing divide that is likely to increase by school closures, and they may thus face an even greater risk of being left out. Factors as diverse as the language of instruction, number of other children dependent on same means, access to resources, parental capability to assist in homework or home-learning — either due to their literacy and schooling levels or due to their availability will all play an important role in how effective government alleviation strategies end up being for these groups in the population. (World Bank, 2020)
- **Women:** School closures, according to historical statistics from throughout the world, will put some girls at a higher risk of falling behind. Girls may be particularly vulnerable due to the combination of being absent from school for an extended length of time and the loss of family income caused by the pandemic. Once schools reopen, there may also be an increase in early marriage as a result of the negative economic shock, as evidence suggests that shocks such as droughts might compel families to "marry off" their daughters earlier than prior patterns have shown. Furthermore, pregnant female children may be unable to continue their education due to early marriages or an increase in the occurrence of sexual abuse and exploitation. (World Bank, 2020)

#### **4.0 Action Steps of the Governments Across the World to Tackle the Education Crisis Posed due to the COVID-19 Pandemic**

Here's a list of responses of various countries, around the globe to tackle the issue of degrading students issues:

##### **1. The Steps are Taken to Tackle the Digital Divide:**

- Given the Digital Divide, Adopting Various Delivery Channels:

- Wherever possible, governments are taking steps to increase children's access to digital content. Negotiating with telecom service providers to subsidise connection (North Macedonia), providing free/low-cost SIM cards (Kyrgyzstan), or exempting data rates for educational content are some of the approaches (Rwanda, South Africa, Jordan, Paraguay). (Unicef, 2020)
- In certain countries, governments or other education players provide gadgets to families in remote locations, such as radios (Somaliland, Burkina Faso) and secure digital (SD) cards for mobile phones which are previously loaded with audio lessons (Burundi). (Unicef, 2020)
- To reach a wider population, 68 percent of the 127 nations for which data is available use a mix of digital and non-digital distant teaching methods. (TV, radio, and take-home packages) (Unicef, 2020).
- TV is used in 75% of countries, with some also providing programming for pre-primary school children and their families (Mexico, Montenegro). Radio is also widely utilised: It has been stated that 58% of countries use it to provide audio information (Lao PDR and Madagascar)(Unicef, 2020)
- Approximately half of the countries globally are also providing take-home packages for students. (Unicef, 2020).

According to *Promising practices for equitable remote learning Emerging lessons from COVID-19 education responses in 127 countries* report (Unicef, 2020),

<b>S.No</b>	<b>The major method used to provide more equitable Remote Learning</b>	<b>No. of countries</b>
1.	Govt supported digital website/apps with content	86
2.	Other self-learning based digital learning apps/websites	38
3.	Take-home packages for learners	61
4.	Radio transmitted lessons	74
5.	Televised lessons	93

- Support for Parents, Caregivers, and Teachers Implementing Remote Learning

- Some nations are partnering with caregivers to help them support children's learning as well as provide psychosocial assistance. Bhutan, Cameroon, Ecuador, Eswatini, Guatemala, and Oman are among the countries represented.(Unicef, 2020)
- Others are providing tutoring materials, webinars, and helplines to carers who are responsible for teaching at home (North Macedonia, Uruguay). (Unicef, 2020)
- Some countries are also investing in the development of the capabilities needed to deliver remote learning. Azerbaijan, Jordan, Peru, and the Maldives are among the countries that have invested in teacher and counsellor education. The Malaysian Ministry of Education developed a massive open online course (MOOC) to teach instructors about digital platforms. (2020, UNICEF)

- Teachers in several nations are being encouraged to communicate with kids and their parents via messaging app groups and phone calls (Croatia, Tunisia) (Unicef, 2020).
- Collate Feedback and Monitor the Reach and Quality of Remote Learning
  - To enhance remote education, some nations are adopting simple technologies to get input from parents (Unicef, 2020).
  - Students in Egypt, for example, can use their national ID to enrol on the Egyptian Knowledge Bank (EKB) portal. Vulnerable populations who do not have access to legal identification or birth certificates can nevertheless utilise the open site, which does not require any login credentials. (Unicef, 2020)
  - Assessment tools have also been added to the digital learning platforms of Serbia, South Africa, Kazakhstan, and Azerbaijan. (Unicef, 2020)

## **2. The Steps are Taken to Handle the Issue of Physical and Mental Well-Being Loss**

### **Nutrition Loss: (Unicef, 2021)**

- Take-Home Rations
  - Take-Home Rations (THR) have been established in several nations as a result of the current crisis. In Liberia, for example, around 100,000 children benefit from THR intended for the entire family (based on a five-person household) (UNICEF and WFP, 2020). The initiative began in March 2020, when the first instances of COVID-19 were discovered in the country. (WFP, 2020g).
- Cash Transfers
  - During the pandemic, providing cash as a substitute for school food programmes was a commonly adopted strategy. In Uruguay, for example, non-beneficiaries of current targeted cash transfer programmes were given food vouchers while beneficiaries of existing targeted cash transfer programmes were given a top-up amount for school meals. (Hebbar and Phelps, 2020).
  - In Bihar, one of the poorest states of India, a state-wide cash transfer system was



set up, wherein households were provided cash via bank transfers, instead of the mid-day meals. These cash transfers were worth Rs. 114.21 for classes 1–5 and Rs 171.17 for classes 6–8. (Bihar Policy Centre, 2020)

- Multimodal Approaches

- At various decentralised levels, certain countries have had a variety of reactions. Brazil, for example, where almost 40 million children receive school meals (WFP, 2020b), responded at both the national and state levels. Money intended for school meals under the Programa Nacional de Alimentação Escolar (PNAE) was used at the federal level to purchase basic food baskets for low-income households (Borkowski, Artur, et al, 2021). At the state level, at least three states (Sao Paolo, Para, and Bahia) have chosen cash transfer programmes using rechargeable debit cards, with monthly amounts ranging from R\$55 to R\$101 per student, depending on the state and level of schooling. (Luna, 2011; Araújo, 2020; Governo do Estado Bahia, 2020). (Unicef, 2021)
- In India, in response to the Supreme Court order, states have undertaken different approaches using a combination of home delivery of meals, Take Home Rations, or cash transfers (Unicef, 2021).

Mental Health Loss:

- As previously available in-person social and medical services came to halt, the American School Counsellor Association advised schools to shift to a new online form of online counselling and other similar services. (*The Impact of COVID-19 on Student Equity and Inclusion: Supporting Vulnerable Students during School Closures and School Re-Openings*, 2020)
- Digital mental health services were offered to Kids Help Phone in Canada. To help children and youth with their struggles with mental health, the Government of Canada deported a CAD 7.5 million initiative by funding Kids Help Phone on 29 March 2020. (*The Impact of COVID-19 on Student Equity and Inclusion: Supporting Vulnerable Students during School Closures and School Re-Openings*,

2020)

- The Spanish Ministry of Education and Professional Training has deployed a web portal containing information about the crisis-response techniques, with a section dedicated to students' and guardians' wellness. Further, the Ministry distributed preventive videos, advice, and contact information for obtaining socio-emotional help. (*The Impact of COVID-19 on Student Equity and Inclusion: Supporting Vulnerable Students during School Closures and School Re-Openings*, 2020)
- In Portugal, guidelines were made and declared for psychologists at schools, and online brochures forgiven to guardians and students, including (i) Suggestions for self-care for teachers; (ii) Assisting youngsters in coping with stress; (iii) Dealing with concerns of isolation; (iii) suggestions for explaining social distance and isolation to children; etc. (*The Impact of COVID-19 on Student Equity and Inclusion: Supporting Vulnerable Students during School Closures and School Re-Openings*, 2020)

### **3. The Steps Taken to Handle the Issue of Challenges Faced by Minority Communities - Women, Specially Abled, Refugees**

- Accessible TV lessons using sign language for students with hearing impairment are being provided by countries like Morocco and Uzbekistan. (*The Impact of COVID-19 on Student Equity and Inclusion: Supporting Vulnerable Students during School Closures and School Re-Openings*, 2020)
- In Jordan, refugee children are receiving learning packets. A system has been set up for students in refugee camps in Greece so that they receive weekly homework packages if they are unable to connect to online learning platforms. (*The Impact of COVID-19 on Student Equity and Inclusion: Supporting Vulnerable Students during School Closures and School Re-Openings*, 2020)
- Being in quarantine can increase the feeling of loneliness, so creating chances for social interactions for immigrant and refugee students becomes very important. Consequently,

in Sweden, an online initiative has been launched to establish virtual meetings between foreigners and Swedes. (*The Impact of COVID-19 on Student Equity and Inclusion: Supporting Vulnerable Students during School Closures and School Re-openings*, 2020)

## **5.0 Analysis of Government Response to the Education Crisis Posed by the Pandemic: The United States of America and India**

The purpose of government policy-making is to guide decisions to produce positive outcomes and in turn, enhance communities. The education systems that combine equity and excellence in their education policies and practices are the most successful. An equitable education system means that different learning levels are not because of the background a person comes from (Sahlberg, 2020). According to UNESCO (2018), education equity is a means of achieving equality by ensuring that all students have the best possible chances to reach their full potential.

In the pre-covid world inequality based on income levels has been constantly on the rise across the globe, that is, the rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer (Wilkinson and Pickett 2018). As education is a function of the income of a household, education inequality has been a problem in the pre-covid world as well. During the pandemic with the closure of schools and shift to virtual learning, this gap has further been widened. Where providing every child with equal opportunities is becoming increasingly difficult due to remote learning, growing evidence shows that equity and quality of student outcomes are directly proportional to each other (Parker et al. 2018) India and the USA represent two different parts of the world, developing and developed, respectively. Where India has been constantly fighting the battle of enrolling students in school, the US education system struggles with problems of 'if students are prepared for what comes after they complete school' (Lynch, 2020). This section of the paper analyses the policy response of the governments of the two nations during the pandemic and how these policies contribute towards reducing education inequity.

## **United States of America**

### ***Assessments***

- Conducting assessments has been a major challenge during the pandemic. Wherein instruction is extremely important, assessments provide the teachers with an overview of the learning levels of the class. However, virtual classrooms have posed a major challenge in administering assessments. Standardized tests such as GMAT and GRE altered their testing regulations in which students could give these exams from the comfort of their homes. (M, 2021) Even though the logistics of such examinations were eased off, there were reported cases of mass cheating which reduced the credibility of the exam (Guha, 2021).
- Former President Donald Trump and the US Department of Education stated on March 20 that schools can seek to waive assessments for the remainder of the 2020 school year. All 50 states, Puerto Rico, and the District of Columbia have received waivers. (Education Commission of the States, 2020)
- Waving off the examination seems to be the apt solution to the crisis, but no reinforcement on students to continuously keep learning would put students at risk of lower learning outcomes in the future. This risk would be higher for students who belonged to lower-income communities, low-rigour students, especially-abled students, and homeschoolers.

### ***Access to Virtual Learning***

- To contain the spread of the virus schools were shut down and classroom instruction went virtual in the US. A study of 477 district schools by the Center for Reinventing Public Education about remote learning strategies, showed that only a third of school districts had set clear standards for teachers to deliver remote classes, track student participation, or keep a check on the academic results. (United States of America (Education Commission of the States, 2020)
- Though virtual learning is a way to tackle the spread of the virus, it creates a divide and acts as a challenge for children who might not be privileged to access the digital mode of

education. (United States of America (Education Commission of the States, 2020) This access is higher for kids who are living in poverty and survival is more important than receiving education. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the proportion of children living in poverty is over 20 per cent in the USA (Sahlberg, 2020).

- With students having access to learning, the other key aspect of the virtual classrooms is teacher training. Are our teachers ready to implement virtual learning effectively? In the study of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) data in 2017, teachers are well equipped to adapt to the new method of online teaching. About 1/3rd of eighth-grade (32.5%) teachers consider themselves to be skilled enough to run software programmes, and only about 1/5th (19.3%) have teachers who consider themselves savvy enough to incorporate computers in the virtual mode of education (Garcia, Weiss, 2020).
- The ‘Keep Americans Connected Initiative’ has been extended till June 30 by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). The FCC has invited internet and telephone service providers to sign the Keep Americans Connected Pledge. More than 750 businesses and organisations have signed the commitment thus far which includes a promise not to cancel any person or small business's service (*Keep Americans Connected*, 2020).
- Quite a few internet service providers have resorted to changing their existing policies, increasing the speed of the internet connection they are providing, and eliminating data limits to have an increased dependence for many students participating on the internet with the purpose of online learning. (Education Commission of the States, 2020)

#### ***Nutrition and Mental Help:***

- The uncertainty posed by the pandemic has impacted the lives of numerous students in primary, secondary, and tertiary education. To assist the learners, CARES Act Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund was announced to provide emergency financial aid to students who have faced severe setbacks due to the pandemic. (US Department of Education, 2020). To support the schools affected due to school closures during

COVID-19, the CARES Act Elementary and Secondary Emergency Relief has been put in place (New Jersey Department of Education, 2020). The decision of the government showcases their firefighting response when such a crisis was at hand. The relief fund will support several students to continue learning even with the shut down of face-to-face instruction.

- A lot of students are dependent on schools for meals and it was key for the government to take action to support students with this dependency. The US Department of Agriculture's Food and Nutrition Service announced nationwide exemptions to the mealtime necessities, non-congregate meal necessities, and activity requirements in after-school programmes on March 20. In the autumn, the US Department of Agriculture granted extra flexibility to guarantee that kids had access to free and reduced-price meals. (US Department of Education, 2020).
- Students were provided with lots of post-secondary institutions providing telephonic health options for students and staff which enabled consultations and counselling services for mental and emotional health. (US Department of Education, 2020)
- Furthermore, during school closures, the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) has social and emotional learning (SEL) services on hand to assist school communities. CASEL also issued recommendations for restarting schools in a manner that promotes good social and emotional development (*Covid- 19 SEL Resources*, n.d.).

### **Highlights and Challenges of USA's response**

<b>Highlights</b>	<b>Challenges</b>
→ The mental well being of the students was addressed in a decentralised manner, wherein institutions in different states took it upon themselves	→ The move to online classes was necessary but it created a major digital divide, adversely impacting students from lower-income communities, and

- to make access to counselling easier
- There was some explicit and a larger implicit focus on mental well being
  - The approach was a good mix of central and state-specific responses. Wherein the centre sets the base for the response to education. This approach sets a strong base and gives the states the freedom to solve state-specific issues
  - The governments' response was quick in terms of moving to remote learning and shutting down of schools, waiving away assessments
    - Where teachers were caught unprepared, surveys showcase that teachers adapted quickly and effectively to online instruction. By May 2020, 95 to 99 per cent were facilitating online classes (*VOICES FROM THE VIRTUAL CLASSROOM*, 2020)
  - Access to devices and the internet was a challenge for lower-income communities but eventually, it improved. About 50% of low-income families reported that by early June

- Blacks and Hispanic communities (García, Weiss, and Engdahl 2020). In high poverty schools, 51% were engaging daily with online learning, wherein for affluent schools this number was 84%
- Access to devices and the internet was a challenge for lower-income communities but eventually, it improved. About 50% of low-income families reported that by early June they had access to a device with the support of the district schools (DiPerna, 2020).
  - Data showcases the unpreparedness of teachers to move to online learning.
  - In various surveys, teachers stated that the learning outcomes of students will be lowered if the access and engagement challenges continue to exist. Teachers stated that online learning would exacerbate inequities (*Teaching and Leading Through a Pandemic*, 2020)
  - The engagement came across as a major issue in digital learning. Specifically for students from a younger age group
    - Effective methods to conduct assessments remains a challenge for

they had access to a device with the support of the district schools (Barnum & Bryan, 2020).

→ The ecosystem around education did try its best to address the challenge faced in the sector due to the lockdown. In a May poll, 72 per cent of parents felt their child's school did a good or excellent job of assisting with distance learning, while only 2% said schools did a bad job (DiPerna, 2020b).

schools

→ Not all students who were specially-abled received the required special education. 20% of parents of children with disabilities reported this statement in May (Barnum & Bryan, 2020).

## **India**

### ***Assessments***

- Although schools across India offered online lessons to make up for the lost learning time, many students were unable to access them, which led the Union Ministry of Human Resource Development to intervene and opt for syllabus cuts instead. (India Education Diary Bureau Admin, 2020).
- Also, entrance exams being conducted for admissions in major higher education were postponed while the cases in the country were rising. Even students in different states up to secondary schools were promoted to higher grades without giving exams, according to the various notices released by states.
- Recently, examinations of the 12th grade in the session 2020-2021 were also waived to ensure the safety of the students.
- Online assessment modes (live proctored) were adopted by various Higher Education institutions all over the country.



### ***Access to Virtual Learning***

When the Indian government declared a countrywide lockdown on March 23, 2020, to halt the spread of COVID19, swift action was made to boost digital learning and ensure that students across the country could continue their education despite the prevailing situation. A wide range of online materials has been produced by the Ministry of Education that are available on various platforms to make digital education more equitable. (*Indian National Commission For Cooperation With Unesco Response To Covid 19, 2020*)

- A total of 32 DTH TV stations provide educational programming 24/7 days, under the Swayam Prabha Scheme. These channels may be viewed with a DD-free Dish set everywhere in the nation. Further, the lessons are being broadcast by private DTH providers and other channels. The channels provide a range of disciplines in school education (classes IX to XII) and higher education, spanning from courses related to engineering, vocational subjects, training lessons for educators, performing arts, social studies and humanities subjects, law, medical, agriculture, and many more. (*Indian National Commission For Cooperation With Unesco Response To Covid 19, 2020*)
- For children in remote areas, where being able to attend online classes seems exceptionally out of the box gave their limited resources, extensive utilization of radio channels is being done to broadcast lessons (especially for classes 1 to 5). Radio channels are keen on providing activity-based lessons. 289 Community Radio Stations are to be used for the same. (*Indian National Commission For Cooperation With Unesco Response To Covid 19, 2020*)
- Online learning platforms like e-Pathshala (2015), which primarily is a website and a mobile app that was present during the pre-pandemic era, were designed and launched by the National Council for Educational Research and Training. It provides a variety of resources like 1886 audios, 2000 videos, 696 e- ebooks (e-Pubs), and 504 Flip Books for classes 1st to 12th in different languages. Diksha (2017), another online platform for school education offers teachers, guardians, and students from Grades 1-12, engaging learning material relevant to the prescribed school curriculum in over 80,000 e-content

items in multiple Indian languages. National Repository Of Open Educational Resources (Nroer) (2013) and National Digital Library (2006) are also being widely popularized. (*Indian National Commission For Cooperation With Unesco Response To Covid 19*, 2020)

### ***Nutrition and Mental help***

- The Ministry of Human Resource Development launched the initiative, ‘Manodarpan’ which encompasses a wide range of programmes to give psychological as well as social assistance to students, teachers, and the families involved for their mental and emotional wellbeing, both during the COVID outbreak and after. (India Education Diary Bureau Admin, 2020)
- States throughout the country have used a variety of measures in response to the Supreme Court ruling and the lack of government action, including delivery of meals at home, Take Home Rations, and cash transfers, as shown in the table below. (Unicef, 2021):

#### **State-Level School Feeding Alternative Responses in India During COVID-19:**

SN	The method used to provide meals	States
1	Home delivery	<b>Kerala, Karnataka</b> (food grains for 21 days), <b>Haryana</b> (teachers were asked to distribute mid-day meal rations and cooking costs to students in 17 districts) (Bihar Policy Centre, 2020), <b>Assam</b> (Medak, 2020; The Guwahati Times, 2020), <b>Uttar Pradesh</b> (Katiyar, 2020)
2	Take-Home Rations	<b>Chhattisgarh</b> (Mishra, 2020), <b>Jammu and Kashmir</b> (India Education Diary, 2020), <b>Andhra Pradesh</b> (The Hindu, 2020), <b>Odisha</b> (Swain, 2020)

3	Cash Transfers	<b>Bihar, Uttarakhand</b> (Bihar Policy Centre, 2020; Ghose, 2020; The Pioneer, 2020)
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(Unicef, 2021)

### Highlights and Challenges of India's Response

#### Highlights

- More personalised lectures were prepared and circulated by various institutions which were not available before.
- Students were able to get access to a variety of better-quality learning resources.
- Through the various meal distribution systems, state governments were able to reduce the chances of food insecurity.
- The Government of India introduced its first Student Mental Health website to tackle mental health issues.
- Reducing the syllabi and cancellation of exams were a relief for the students who were otherwise stressed.

#### Challenges

- Not many steps have been taken for the Mental and Emotional Well being of the students.
- Many of the measures taken in terms of introducing digital learning don't concentrate on the vulnerable and marginal sectors of society, who lack access to devices like smartphones and televisions.
- No policy was formulated at a national level by the Central government in terms of providing nutritional meals to the children.
- No relief was given to teachers who lack access to technology.
- No relief measure was made for students who missed their entrance exams due to Covid-19 complications.
- Lack of modules for parents/ lack of help from parents who themselves are.

not literate caused a lot of stress to students who wanted help while studying.

→ A lot of young children were exposed to long hours of screen time, which drastically affected their health.

→ Personal information has been compromised and major sexual harassment complaints have been received due to the online proctored system

## **6.0 Recommendations**

As the catastrophic effects of the pandemic are still prevalent throughout the world, the only certainty is the uncertainty that creeps in. Most countries around the globe have started opening up their public places and easing other restrictions. But the havoc created by this pandemic and its aftermath that the students, in specific, would face is going to be challenging at best and painful at worst.

The need of the hour for various international organisations and governments across the globe is to make education and child welfare their prime concern. Damage has already happened but now the focus should be on how to alleviate the misery that these unprecedented times brought on toddlers, students, and youth. Here we present some of our recommendations, which have been divided according to the priority basis into three categories:

### **1. Urgent:**

- Distributing resources like devices, reading material, and providing better telecommunication services that could help bridge the digital divide.

- Nationwide government-sponsored nutritional food distribution schemes should be launched which could help reduce food insecurity.
- Given the increased incidence of Socio-emotional issues, more platforms should be set up for students and youth to talk and get solutions about their mental health.
- Institutions can also adopt partial reopening systems (with proper care of sanitation facilities like mandatory masking, installing sanitisers or hand soap dispensers, periodic temperature checks, and proper physical distancing).

## **2. Managing/Ameliorating:**

- As this pandemic has caused major financial problems among the marginalised sections of the society, those who have lost their families' breadwinners and those whose guardians have lost their jobs, providing financial aid to such students would encourage them to continue their education.
- Reaching out and protecting students who faced violence and harassment during the lockdown would help them physically, mentally, and emotionally.
- Special emphasis should be made on the education of girls, specially-abled and refugees. Governments can waive their fees, continue providing meals and make provisions for the needs of the specially-abled.
- Teachers and other stakeholders at education institutions should be vaccinated on a priority basis so that safe reopening could be a reality in near future (Teachers Should Be Prioritized for Vaccination against COVID-19, 2020).
- Teachers should be assisted to frame the curriculum in a manner that could minimise the digital burnout caused otherwise.

## **3. Boosting:**

- Considering the high amount of dropout rates that are going to be witnessed, governments can come up with schemes that provide incentives other than midday meals to encourage re-admissions.

- A proper assessment of the enrolled students should be done to track the education lost and a relevantly planned curriculum should be introduced in the upcoming session.
- Provision for remedial education should also be introduced so that students' education loss could be further minimized.
- Once schools and other higher educational institutes reopen and adopt all these steps, both teachers and students will have to deal with a new type of physical and mental exhaustion and burnout. Thus, teachers can be prepared beforehand about measures they can adopt to look after their and the students' well-being.
- Institutions with the government's help can provide well-sanitized transport alternatives to their students that can reduce their exposure to the virus from public transport.
- More subject-oriented assessments could be prepared for students, which could limit their assessment to the interest of their field and substantially narrow down the incidences of crowded examination centres.

## **7.0 Conclusion**

Throughout the pandemic, the governments have spent their time firefighting and not focusing on the long-term impacts of the short-term interventions. Effective government policy aims to reduce inequalities within society. With the current government response of the US and Indian governments, it is observed that the divide is widening both in income and learning outcomes. This widening gap will further lead to gaps in opportunities and standards of living for individuals who belong to lower-income communities.

The paper hypothesised that the current education crisis posed because of COVID-19 could have been better handled had the education policy been more dynamic in nature. The hypothesis holds true, as through the analysis it is observed that the government had to majorly adapt their policies to the current realities. They did not have any specific guidelines to fall back on to address the disaster at hand in the education sector created by COVID-19. Students abruptly shifted to online learning and teachers to online instruction. Both the stakeholders were caught unprepared and as the focus of the state was to address the health crisis, the state did not

do much or think about the long-term implications of remote learning.

Primarily, remote learning created a digital divide where the initial step of access became a challenge. Students from low-income communities and minorities found it difficult to even access devices and the internet. For students who could access the infrastructure for remote learning, the challenges included engagement in class and other activities and the unavailability of a conducive learning environment. Moreover, remote learning also disrupted the daily routine of students going to school, which harmed their socio-emotional development. Another important aspect of remote learning was conducting assessments. The authorities in both countries were unable to present a constructive plan of action to conduct fair assessments. Therefore, under the three components of technological access, assessments, and mental and physical wellbeing, it was observed that the policy response of the government was not dynamic, rather was shortsighted. This divide created between students will hurt the long-term learning outcomes of this entire generation of students. Going forward the government needs to take corrective measures to reduce the gaps created in terms of learning outcomes and overall social-emotional needs of children.

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