As students head back to their old classrooms, schools stare at a new learning curve

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A security staff checks the temperature of a student as schools in Maharashtra reopen after being shut for over a year on October 4, 2021, in Mumbai, India.

Synopsis

For many students, the pandemic brought learning to a standstill. With schools now starting to open again, what will be next chapter in schooling and learning? Will they retain the measures adopted during the past year or so? What will be the emerging trends to watch from here on?

Confined to home because of the lockdown, a child has to attend **online classes**. But what if the family doesn't have a computer or an extra smartphone? Even if they have a device, is the connectivity strong enough to sustain online classes? Moreover, they would need constant supervision and at least a quiet corner in the house to study.

These were some of the common problems several students and families had to grapple with when the pandemic forced students to stay at home, away from their physical classrooms. Pushed towards online lessons, learning came to a standstill

for many because of such problems. Although others managed to carry on through a semblance of online classes, there was something lost in the process.

In the meantime, a big paradox was taking shape. While enormous sums of money — were being poured into a handful of ed-tech companies, creating five unicorns, the state of institutional learning, especially in schools, made for a stark contrast. According to a report by PGA Labs and IVCA, over USD2.2 billion was invested in 2020, and USD3.2 billion in Q3 FY21, according to data tracked by HolonIQ.
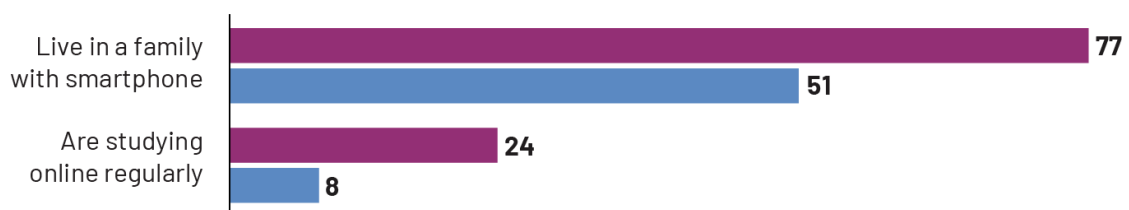
After the initial few weeks of chaos and uncertainty that followed the first lockdown, schools recovered, responding with various solutions: shifting classes online; going for mergers and acquisitions to build an uberisation model; and creating hybrid models of learning. As schools are now starting to open again, what will be next chapter in schooling and learning? Will they retain the measures they adopted during the past year or so? What will be the emerging trends to watch from here on?
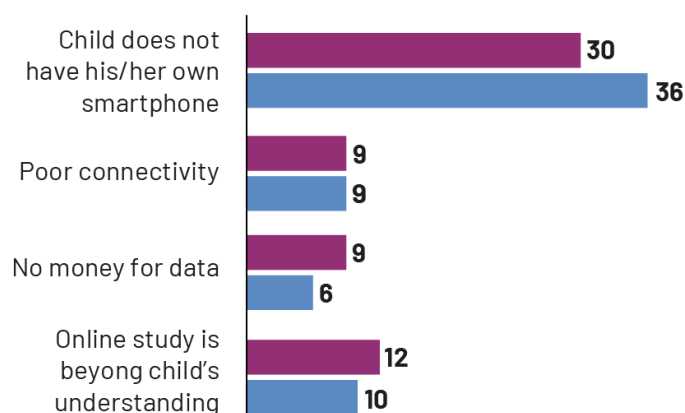
Filling learning gaps

While the overall picture of the pandemic's impact on education is yet to emerge, one bit is clear: There has been widespread variance in learning. An August 2021 report titled *Locked out: Emergency Report on School Education,* which collates findings from a survey of about 1,400 students, showed that in rural areas only 8% of the children were able to study online regularly. The figure for urban areas was 24%. Clearly, a majority of children surveyed did not get regular learning access. The reasons were varied.
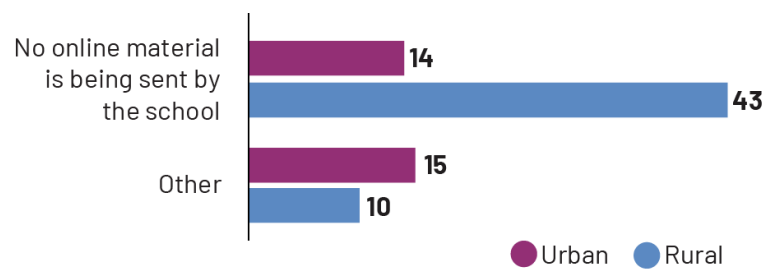
Multiple hurdles of online study

Proportion (%) of schoolchildren who:

Live in a family with smartphone	77 / 51
Are studying online regularly	24 / 8

Main reasons why children are not studying online regularly, in households that have a smartphone* (%)

Child does not have his/her own smartphone	30 / 36
Poor connectivity	9 / 9
No money for data	9 / 6
Online study is beyong child's understanding	12 / 10

Sandeep Bapna, managing director, **Khan Academy** India, says that over the last few months the online learning portal has discovered that one of the key challenges was that the same phone had to be used by many siblings in low-income families. To make things easy, while working with states such as Punjab, Delhi, Chandigarh, and public schools such as the Jawahar Navodaya Vidyalayas, Khan Academy would send out nudges via SMS or WhatsApp messages two to

three times a week, with links to the lessons for the day.

From a feature point of view, the portal found that optimising bulk download of lessons which allow a student to use that content offline and on the go was helpful for households where access to the Internet was limited or scarce. There was also a strong demand for regional educational content in India. In a post-pandemic world, Khan Academy anticipates that 50% of content consumption will be in regional languages.

The lockdowns dealt a big blow to schools, too. Central Square Foundation, which works on improving learning outcomes, especially in low-income communities, shared that during the first lockdown the National Independent Schools Alliance of budget private schools conducted a survey across 3,690 schools addressing 1.6 million students. About 38% students paid fees and new admissions were at 7% of the overall student strength.

Anecdotally, several instances of parents shifting their children from private schools to government schools have come to light, as they were unable to afford tuition fees following job losses during the pandemic. The full data on current school enrolment distribution is yet to emerge.

As a result, schools had to find ways to manage both learning and finances. Now, as children start returning, what needs to be addressed is that they will be at varying levels of learning, which means getting back to school isn't going to be as simple as just resuming classes.

Back to school will mean rebuilding

Bapna says that when schools reopen, they will face the following challenges:

- **Personalised learning:** There is a big challenge ahead for teachers as they have to find ways to personalise education to bring all the students in a class on an even level.

- **Mastery-based teaching:** There has to be a shift from a fixed lockstep model to mastery-based instruction and practice.

- **Revising curriculum:** The curriculum has to be simplified, with emphasis on basics and making sure that students have a strong foundational understanding rather than overburdening them with information.

- **Beyond education:** There will likely be less motivation for coming back to school for many students and households. In such circumstances, it is important to prioritise the well-being of students.

'(Re) build Back Better', a policy note with recommendations by multiple education thought leadership partners, shares practical ways to make the transition back to school easier, including spreading the curriculum over a longer time frame, creating space for home and community-based teaching, building more capacity for teachers, and modularising learning.

"Since the lockdown, our foundation courses have been the top-performers. They focus on skills and fundamentals from previous grades that have to be mastered so as to do well in the next one. For example, the Grade 9 foundations course would cover 70% concepts from Grade 8 and 30% from Grade 7," says Bapna on the need for refocusing on fundamentals.

The delicate balance of offline, ed-tech, and hybrid learning

Jairaj Bhattacharya, managing director and co-founder, ConveGenius, which works on bridging learning gaps, feels that ed-tech will play a crucial role in blended learning after the reopening of schools. He foresees the emergence of a hybrid model in which physical and remote delivery of education will coexist.

In India, where most learning happens through communication in local languages, a hybrid approach is far more likely to be applied than a purely online or offline approach. For scale, consistency, and predictability around a brand, it needs to be more online, but emotional and social learning offline will stay strong, especially in the early stages. From here on, the ed-tech industry will need better Internet infrastructure and robust data-protection systems to make further inroads, says Bhattacharya. _ConveGenius_ has collaborated with more than nine state governments and has 10 million weekly active students on its platform.

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— *Aarushi Jain, Nishith Desai Associates*

"Various states have different device-equity percentages. For example, a state such as Uttar Pradesh, which is at 10% online, will move towards hybrid whereas Madhya Pradesh or Himachal Pradesh, with 65%-70% online penetration, will continue to provide assessment and assessment-based remediation online and teaching via schools," adds Bhattacharya.

Another issue is that there are parents who are hesitant to send their children back to school. While for some of them, the reason is the safety of their children, for others there are economical factors at play.

At the other end of the spectrum, the pandemic has ushered in a new kind of school — one that is completely online. How does it work?

According to 21K School, an online-only institution, the reason parents are choosing online schools is because there's a distinct need for accessible, flexible, and transparent schooling that cannot be met by traditional means alone. 21K School started with 267 students last year and announced a milestone of 3,000 admissions in their second academic year.

"We will continue to operate as an online-only school irrespective of the status of reopening of physical schools. Online schools like us provide greater flexibility in curriculum selection and scheduling and 100% transparency at an affordable fee without transportation or uniform costs," says Yashwant Raj, co-founder and director, 21K School. "Today, on-ground schools are not the only option for parents. Our curriculum is offered through recognised boards in collaboration with partners."

Moreover, Raj adds, online schools are convenient for students who are either high performers, homeschooled, or specially abled or have restrictive medical conditions. "We have a diverse student community representing 23 nationalities. Forty percent of our students are from tier-II and tier-III cities in India, while the rest are from tier-I cities in India and around 30 foreign countries. From my interactions with parents, I can tell you that students find it very convenient, stress-free, and engaging to study from home, saving over five hours a day."

Bhattacharya highlights an important issue. "When it comes to in-depth learning where we have to assimilate and apply concepts, we need external support. It's

when the courses are hard that people drop out, and it is in cases like this that learning support and mentorship help. Hence, hybrid learning that offers a mix of online learning and offline sessions is the preferred solution since it is easier to scale up."

The NEP booster
While the difficult task of reimagining learning starts, the recommendations by the New Education Policy (NEP) aim to bring flexibility and changes in some of the structural issues.

According to the NEP, the exams will test the core competencies rather than learning that needs months of coaching and memorisation. To further eliminate the 'high stakes' aspect of board exams, there are plans to modularise board examinations.

Aarushi Jain of law firm Nishith Desai Associates also says that the NEP's reimagination of K-12 will focus more on fundamental learning and reduce the need for coaching and rote learning, if properly implemented. "These are now needed more than ever. In the short term, the changes in the pattern of the board examination will cause anxiety, but these changes were already planned in the NEP. The broader plans around learning and assessment are much-needed and will have a ripple effect on ed-tech companies as well."

There's hope and hesitation as children start returning back to school. It will probably be months before the temporary measures seen during the pandemic are retired and the permanent shifts in K-12 education fall in place, with more foundational learning, better hybrid education models, and a reduced focus on rote learning.

(*Graphic by Manali Ghosh*)

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