

The experience of school classes shifting away from the physical classroom to the virtual world during the lockdown has offered us important learnings on what worked and what did not.

## Through a phone screen brightly: Covid-19 lessons of another kind

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Smartphone-enabled students adjusted rather well to online learning during the lockdown but need better adapted teachers

Interaction online may well remain the new normal of everyday life even after the pandemic. But what about [education](#)? Schools too have been closed during the pandemic. Home learning has replaced classroom teaching. What are the lessons of that experience about the benefits and challenges of remote schooling? The Annual Status of Education Report (Rural), or ASER 2000, is addressing that question through a country-wide telephone survey conducted in multiple waves. The results of the first wave offer important lessons that will help shape the future of [remote schooling](#) in India.

One major takeaway is about enrolment. It is surprising how little impact the lockdown has had on school enrolment. The proportion of children not enrolled in school has increased only marginally, from 4% to 5.5% between 2018 and 2020. In other words, the switch from physical school attendance to remote learning has almost completely offset the potential adverse impact of the lockdown on school enrolment. Interestingly, the enrolment share of children going to government schools as opposed to private schools has gone up compared to 2018. This reverses the earlier observed trend of a rising enrolment share of private schools. Clearly, parental preference for private schools has moderated.

Another major takeaway is about children's access to devices like smartphones or computers, a key condition for enabling remote schooling. The survey indicates that as many as 62% of the children now have smartphones at home, a sharp increase

from 37% just two years ago in 2018, and another 10% have access to smartphones outside home, e.g., from neighbours. But while two-thirds of our children now have access to smartphones, a welcome development, the poorer one-third do not. Thus, smartphone-enabled remote schooling is further tilting the balance of life chances against them, another illustration of how the digital divide can reinforce inequality. Interestingly, while over 80% of children now have the textbooks required for their grade, still the basic learning material, the proportion of children with textbooks is higher in government schools as compared to children in private schools. This is presumably because of the free distribution of textbooks in government schools.

Another pillar of success for remote schooling is the support that students get at home from parents, siblings or others. An important finding of the survey is the very active engagement of families in helping children learn at home. As many as 75% of the surveyed children were helped to learn at home, mostly by fathers and mothers. Of course, the extent of such help is constrained by the level of education of the parents. It declines as children move to higher classes.

The preparedness of teachers for taking virtual classes, the third pillar of successful remote learning, is unfortunately still quite weak. The survey indicates that only half the teachers had any training to conduct virtual classes remotely, mostly no more than brief introductions to the exotic new tools and pedagogic techniques. Only 20% of them attended regular classes or full courses on remote teaching.

A fourth pillar of remote schooling, also quite weak, is the provision of learning materials for home learning. Only a little over a third of the students received learning materials during India's lockdown. Three-quarters of such materials were delivered through WhatsApp, and the fourth quarter through personal visits. The proportions were somewhat higher for private schools in the case of WhatsApp delivery, and higher for government schools in the case of personal delivery. Phone calls were also used to some extent. The large bulk of students didn't receive any materials at all, mainly because their school did not send any materials. Other reasons included lack of access to smartphones or internet or connectivity problems. Students mainly continued to work with textbooks and worksheets, since most of

them did not have any other materials. Only about a third, mainly in private schools, used video recorded classes or online classes.

A fifth pillar of successful remote schooling is direct interaction between students' homes and schools, which has worked quite well. About a third of the households had teachers visiting or calling them, and another one-third themselves visited or called their teachers during the reference week. Another 20% had directly interacted with teachers at some point during the lockdown period.

Thus, the lessons of remote schooling during the pandemic are mixed. Students switched remarkably smoothly from physical to remote schooling during the lockdown, with little visible impact on enrolment. The switch was possible since over two-thirds of the children have access to smartphones. It was also facilitated by the active engagement of family, especially parents, most of whom now have some education, in helping them learn at home. On the other hand, teachers largely lack the skills to conduct virtual classes remotely. Nor are schools providing much learning material through devices like smartphones. Students mostly rely on traditional learning materials like textbooks and worksheets. Moreover, smartphone based learning reinforces inequality.

Post the pandemic, schools will revert to classroom-based schooling. The needle should then be moved very gently towards remote schooling, with proper preparation of teachers and remote learning materials. Children without smartphones can be provided these devices by the school, like free or subsidized textbooks.

*These are the author's personal views*

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