

As Delhi struggles with deteriorating Air Quality, students pay the price

The Delhi government had announced the closure of primary schools last week, as recommended by the NCPCR, owing to the air pollution crisis in the city. While the concern about the health and well-being of children is certainly valid, the response to such a crisis needs to be more nuanced, taking into account other contributing factors such as the importance of the mid-day meal for children's daily nutrition, and the safety that the school space offers for children from under-privileged families. The government has now stated that schools will reopen due to improvement in air quality, however, proper deliberation regarding the consequences of such closures must be ensured in future as the absence of it can do more harm than good. **The National Coalition on the Education Emergency (NCEE) strongly discourages resorting to blanket school closures as an immediate response to such crises and urges due diligence.**

School closures due to rising air pollution levels have unfortunately become an annual occurrence in Delhi-NCR. This is in addition to several unchecked and unplanned periods of school closures in recent years due to the pandemic that have had a devastating impact on student-learning. While children of the elite could access online education and with home support, continue their learning, children from socio-economically marginalised groups suffered a devastating impact on their formal education, having no meaningful access to any online or digital education (mere files and assignments shared over WhatsApp or SMS, cannot seriously be considered as meaningful education).

The NCEE has time and again highlighted the academic, emotional, nutritional and social costs that students, especially younger children, have had to bear due to school closures. The absence of structured learning opportunities in these crucial years has already resulted in severe academic regression, affecting basic literacy and numeracy skills. The closure of all schools due to poor air quality will only aggravate this perilous situation.

How does the Delhi government envision students being safe and protected without taking measures to ensure that their learning needs are met, midday meals provided and that their parents can stay at home (with their pay protected) to take care of their children? The arbitrary closure of schools, without debate or discussion, even with the school principals and staff who have primary responsibility for not only children's academic learning but also their health and safety, is merely an abdication of responsibilities. Many school teachers and principals have shared their frustration on this closure.

Last year, in a plea to the Commission for Air Quality Management (CAQM), the DCPCR cited a report* which revealed that there is no marked difference between Delhi's indoor and outdoor pollution levels. This renders school closures irrelevant and misplaced. Further, the school closure policy seems to assume that all families own air-purifiers, which is clearly not the case. Therefore, shutting down schools not only has no benefit for the majority of the population, but also puts students at a greater risk of learning deprivation and dropping out of schools. We thus, fail to see how school closures are in any way in the best interest of children.

Schools should be permitted to take the decision on whether to stay open, partly open (for some grades, some days, some duration and combinations of these and related parameters), or closed in consultation with their parent bodies (School Management Committees). If the nomenclature 'school management committee' has to have any meaning, they should have a role to play in this decision. The decision needs to be taken considering the education needs of children, especially those from socio-economically marginalized groups.

Some guidelines should be provided to schools to help them take adequate precautions against air pollution. These can range from encouraging students, teachers and additional staff to wear masks at all times, limiting the amount of outdoor activity as per the air quality, to training the staff on identifying and treating initial symptoms of discomfort, if any, etc.

NCEE urges that governments pro-actively identify education emergency recovery measures and mechanisms that safeguard the the interests of children. School closure should not be a knee-jerk reaction to any sudden disaster or crisis. Disaster response and recovery needs to be much more nuanced, local and reflect deliberation, informed choice and participation of multiple stakeholders. We strongly urge the Delhi Government and the NCPCR for such consideration.

Let us not rely on unfounded policies that can result in irreversible damage to our children's futures.

- National Coalition on the Education Emergency (NCEE)

The NCEE is a group of individuals and organisations that have come together to work on issues relating to the impact on the pandemic on school education in India. The NCEE working groups produce research studies, curricular resources, guidelines for school opening to support governments, teachers, parents and communities to address the Education Emergency.

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* Greenstone, M., Lee, K. & Sahai, H. (2001). *Indoor Air Quality, Information, and Socio-Economic Status: Evidence from Delhi. AEA Papers and Proceedings session: Environmental and Energy Economics Around the World*, 111: 420-24.
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