

CRIES OF ANGUISH

"Forgot rhymes. Forgot reading.
School must open."

—Parents speak out as schools re-open

**NATIONAL COALITION ON THE
EDUCATION EMERGENCY**



March 2022

Cries of Anguish

A report on the Rapid Parents' Survey Conducted in Three States

October 2021 – January 2022

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Contents

Summary 4

Introduction..... 5

1. The profile of the households..... 6

2.“All her knowledge has declined” 7

3. Alarming effects on children’s socio-emotional development and behavior..... 11

4. Re-engaging with school 13

Tamil Nadu’s Community Based Program - *Illam Thedi Kalvi*
 (School Comes Home)..... 17

5.Availability of Textbooks..... 19

6.Extra Support for Students’ Learning..... 20

7. Keep Schools Open: “Online classes are not working for our kids” 21

8.Financial Burdens 22

9. Wide Gap in Lived Experiences: Education Inequality in the Pandemic..... 24

Conclusion: School Re-Opening Cannot Mean 'Business as Usual' 27

Annex 1: Methodology and Sample Details..... 28

Summary

The main finding of this study of households in Karnataka, Telangana and Tamil Nadu is the following: Poor parents are desperate about the education future of their children and fully conscious of the devastating toll that prolonged school closure has taken on the learning, socio-emotional development and behavior of their children. This is the first study, to our knowledge, of parents' experiences and perceptions, after the opening of schools. It is our hope that policy makers and administrators will also reflect this level of deep understanding about the critical situation on the ground while developing their policies and programs.

We urge readers to go through the individual testimonies of parents, apart from the quantitative data.

Together they represent the "cries of anguish", the motivation for the title of this report. Often these feelings are not fully captured by statistics and summary call outs. It is important to recall that these testimonies are from parents in states that are relatively advanced. Multiply them by the number of parents of the 200 million or so school-aged children who have had virtually no meaningful education for close to two years.

Between 70 and 80 percent of households felt that their children's ability to read and write had declined or stayed the same (or they were unable to assess). Parents highlight the changed behavior, lack of focus and attention and the addiction to mobile phones amongst the children. They recognize that these changes in the socio-emotional development of children will impact their learning. The opinions about online education are unequivocal: that children learnt virtually nothing. Parents are overwhelmingly in favor of keeping schools open for in-person learning, while health and safety are important. In addition, online education posed additional burdens on parents to pay for devices and internet. The study also highlights that the period of school closures deepened inequality in the system: those parents who could support their children's online education felt that their children had made academic progress, even during the pandemic.

In this sample of households in these three states, which have historically had high levels of enrolment, formal enrolment of children in school is relatively high. However, attendance data from Telangana show that only two thirds of the students attended on all days in the previous week. These three states have also ensured provision of mid-day meals and textbooks. Our survey highlights the high levels of awareness and participation in Tamil Nadu's innovative community based program of re-engaging with children, called *Illam Thedi Kalvi*.

However, many schools are not engaging in regular communication with parents. Very few are providing extra learning support (through after school or weekend classes) to children. The use of television and radio, which had been used to broadcast lessons during the pandemic, and which could be used creatively to support children's learning, has been all but abandoned.

The surveys were done under the auspices of the National Coalition on the Education Emergency. The questionnaire design was based on the framework for a meaningful school re-opening, encapsulated in the publication '[A Future at Stake - Guidelines for School Opening](#)'. Its analysis and recommendations are substantiated by this study, and are referenced in appropriate places.

Introduction

This report highlights the key findings of a rapid pilot survey of poor parents in Karnataka, Telangana and Tamil Nadu to document their experiences during the initial months of schools re-opening, after 18 months of uninterrupted school closures. The survey was conducted under the auspices of the National Coalition on the Education Emergency (NCEE). To our knowledge, this is the first set of surveys after schools started re-opening in India from September/October 2021. The surveys in Karnataka and Telangana were conducted between October and December 2021. The survey in Tamil Nadu, conducted in January 2022, took place when schools had closed again due to the surge in the Omicron variant of COVID and provides additional perspectives on how parents were coping with this disruption in their children's schooling.

Over 500 households were surveyed through face-to-face interviews in villages and urban settlements in selected districts of each state. Together, these households had about 900 children aged 6-18 years. Interviewers collected information about the social and economic background of the household, and about each of these children at the time of the survey and in the previous year (2020-21), including whether they were enrolled, going to school, the type of school they attended and whether fees were paid. More information was collected about the youngest child in the age group in each household (who was currently enrolled) covering the school re-opening experience, including attendance in the previous week, mid-day meals, textbooks, communication and extra support from schools. Parents' perceptions about the learning levels and deprivation were also collected. The questionnaire was designed by the NCEE research team, using the categories of the good principles of education recovery outlined in the NCEE's "[A Future at Stake - Guidelines for School Opening](#)".¹

The overall focus of the rapid surveys was on under privileged families, with some variation across states, as this was a pilot study (see Annex 1). In Telangana, there was a greater range of castes and occupations in the sample. This allows us to look at the inequality across households in this sample (see section 9 of this report). Due to differences in timing of the surveys and sampling of settlements and villages, we do not merge the data for the three states. All data presented are unweighted figures. Qualitative comments of the parents and of the investigators, provided a rich source of additional information. Details of the methodology are given in the annex.

Table 1: Sample households and children

	Karnataka	Telangana	Tamil Nadu
Period of survey	Oct-Nov 2021	Dec 2021	Jan 2022
Number of districts	2	3	4
Number of households surveyed	100	212	200
Rural	51	122	130
Urban	51	90	70
Children aged 6-18 years	176	432	371
Of which enrolled:	150	432	367
In govt. schools (%)	56	46	88
In private schools (%)	41	54	12

Note: In Karnataka, a small percentage of children were enrolled in madrasas.

¹See also NCEE, [Guidelines on Foundational Learning](#)

Key Findings

1. The profile of the households

The households in this pilot study are drawn predominantly from the underprivileged sections of the society, though there are some differences across states. The principal occupation of most of the households was casual labor, farming, or non-farming agriculture (such as animal husbandry). The Telangana sample also included a broader mix of occupational groups.

Table 2: Occupational profile of households

	Karnataka	Telangana	Tamil Nadu
	Percent of total households in each state		
Casual labor	67 %	15 %	84 %
Agricultural (farming and non-farming)	14 %	27 %	5 %
Self-employed	7 %	20 %	2 %
Contract labor	1 %	8 %	5 %
Organized sector	4 %	24 %	4 %
Other	8 %	6 %	1 %

Note: Households were asked to indicate the two most important sources of income. These have been re-coded to arrive at the above groups.

The proportion of Dalits (Scheduled Castes) in the sample ranged from 27 percent in Karnataka, 25 percent in Telangana and 50 percent in Tamil Nadu. The proportion of tribals in the three states was 7 percent, 17 percent and 7 percent, respectively. These differences are partly due to the choice of districts within each state (for instance, Warangal was chosen as a district in Telangana and it has a relatively high tribal population).

Other inter-state differences in the sample are worth highlighting because they reveal the complexities that must be addressed, and the contextualization of state level programs, if equitable learning opportunities are to be provided to the children of the underprivileged. In Karnataka, for example, about 16 percent of urban households (Bangalore) are from other states (inter-state migrants). Equally importantly, another 6 percent did not want to declare their state of origin, while 33 percent of the rural households did not want to do so. In Telangana and Tamil Nadu, the majority of the sample were from the state.

Another important feature is the mix of languages spoken in households, with a significant share of students being from households where the first language is not the language used in schools. This has implications for language learning, a crucial part of the education recovery process, and is discussed in the next section.

2. “All her knowledge has declined”

Overwhelming proportions of parents in all three states said that their child’s ability to read and write had declined, stayed the same or could not be determined, compared to before the pandemic. The proportions ranged from between 69 percent to 79 percent, for all children across the three states (Table 2). The question posed was about the ability to “read and write” as a generic concept for competences that are primarily acquired through formal education, focusing on language competences, which are easier for parents to assess than other competences (such as mathematics).

The survey asked parents about “the ability to read and write”, because this is a competence that parents can assess more easily than other competences (such as mathematics).

The differences between children in government and private schools are also striking. Between 75 percent and 90 percent of children in government schools had suffered or stagnated in their learning. The proportions for private schools were significantly lower compared to government schools in Karnataka and Telangana, and somewhat lower in Tamil Nadu. Equally, significantly, the proportions of parents reporting a decline and stagnation in the child’s ability was high across education levels

Overall, therefore, fewer than 25 percent of parents in each of the states felt that the ability to read and write of their youngest child had improved.

Table 2: Child’s ability to read and write, current level relative to before the pandemic

	Karnataka	Telangana	Tamil Nadu
	<i>Percentage of parents saying child’s ability to read and write had declined/ stayed the same or could not assess the level</i>		
All children	69 %	79 %	74 %
Govt. schools	80 %	90 %	75 %
Private schools	59 %	70 %	67 %
Primary level	80 %	88 %	71 %
Upper primary	86 %	73 %	83 %
High School		63 %	79 %

Note: The question was asked about the youngest child who is currently enrolled. The options given were “Improved”, “Stayed the same”, “Declined” or “Cannot assess”. The percentages above indicate all the options excluding “improved”. There were a small number of children in the Karnataka sample who were in high school, hence they are not reported here.

Qualitative comments of parents and investigators show the extent of learning deprivation suffered by children.² Many parents expressed fears about the future of their children. They noted that children have forgotten letters of the alphabet. The concerns were about the lack of practical, experiential learning, the fact that children will not be prepared for exams and that the extent of the gap is so high that children may not be able to catch up. Investigator comments from Tamil Nadu also highlight the complete neglect of disabled children (the situation is likely to be the same in other states).

These findings highlight that parents, even from poor backgrounds with relatively low levels of education, are able to gauge the extent of learning deprivation in a broad sense. The Telangana sample, which comprised a

²The comments quoted here and subsequently reflect the predominant ones. There were some comments reflecting “positive” experiences, primarily from the higher socio-economic group in the Telangana sample. See section 9.

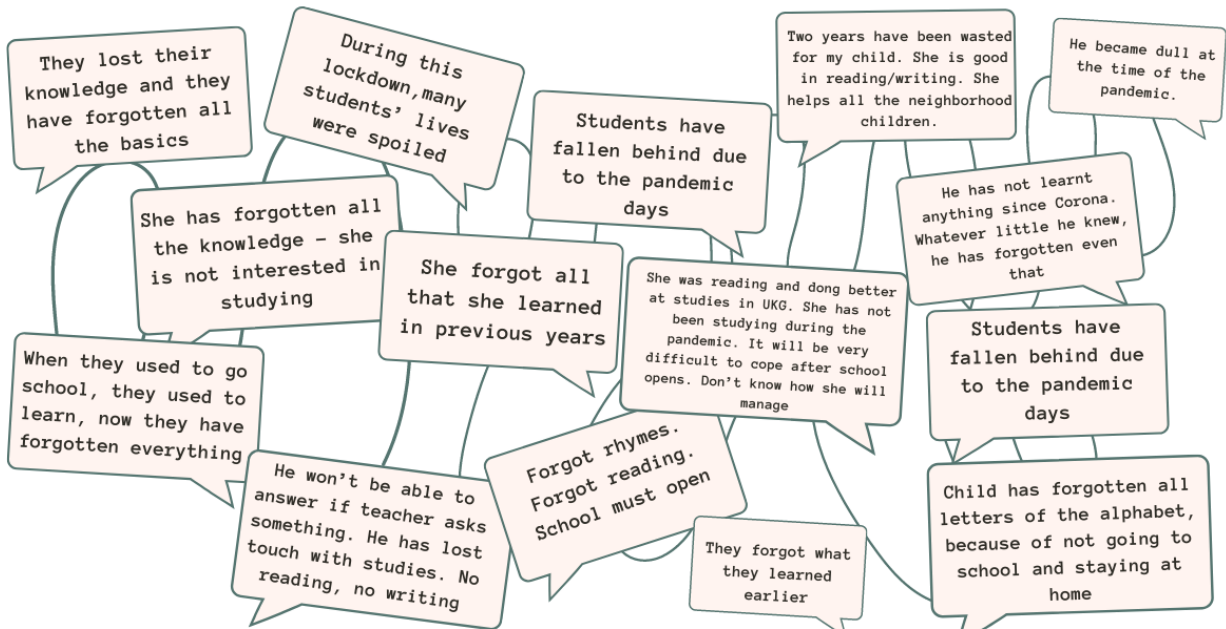
broader mix of socio-economic groups, also shows a differentiation in the responses of parents (see section 9).

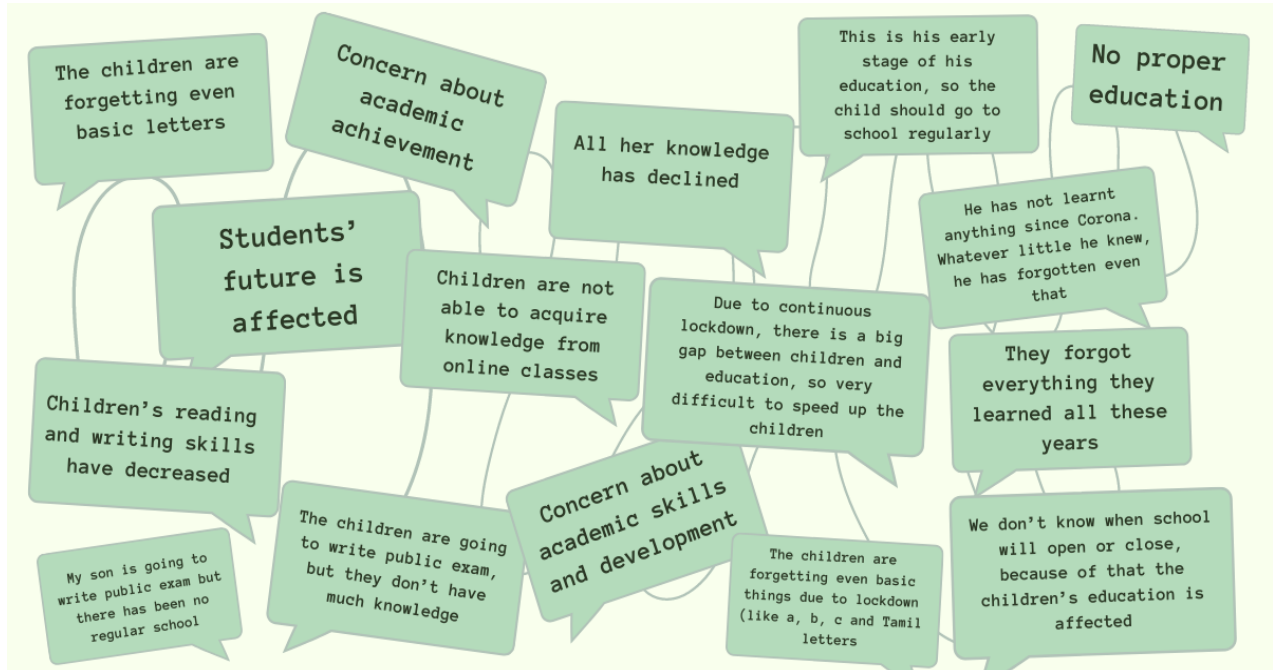
Parents speak about the decline in LEARNING LEVELS

Karnataka:



Telengana

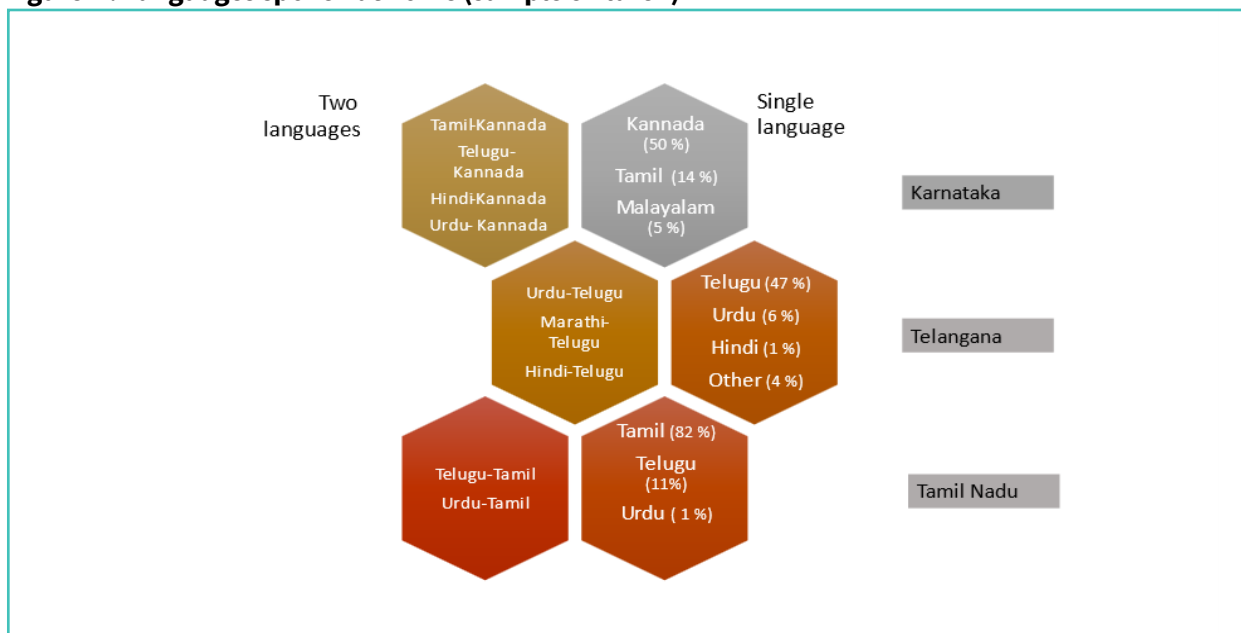


Tamil Nadu:**Varied linguistic backgrounds**

Language is fundamental to all learning. As “A Future at Stake” says :

The importance of literacy and language learning can hardly be over-emphasized. Without competences in all aspects of language development (speaking, listening, reading and writing) as well as understanding of academic language, children cannot progress further in any academic subject. For children in early grades, who have had no experience of school, even foundational skills will be lacking (at least up to grade 3). Even if parents or siblings in literate families have managed to teach them some letters or words, these children will not have adequate language competences. Many in the higher grades, who will not have mastered language competences before the pandemic struck, will be unable to read the language of textbooks in their current grade. Further, children in middle and high school need to acquire the academic language of different disciplines.(p 21).

In planning the “language learning” recovery process, due care is required to address the linguistic background of children in different areas, but also within a locality, especially in urban areas. Figure 1 shows the proportion of children/households who reported a single main language that was spoken at home, as well as the combinations of two languages spoken at home in each state. While the predominant single language is expectedly the official state language in all three states, in both Karnataka and Telangana, such households are just 50 percent of the total; 19 percent and 11 percent, respectively, spoke another language exclusively at home. Further, the remaining households (ie about 40-50 percent), although they reported speaking the state language also, this probably represents a second language which they have acquired. There is much greater linguistic homogeneity in the Tamil Nadu sample, reflecting the characteristics of the state in general.

Figure 1 : Languages spoken at home (sample children)

Note: Based on survey data

Such issues are important especially at the foundational stage, where young children may have been speaking in different languages at home, without the benefit of formal instruction in the language of instruction. After the pandemic, they have been promoted two grades and are coping with language materials that are likely much too advanced for them. Assisting teachers to identify and help students who are struggling with language is essential if they are not to be left behind.

Literacy and Language Learning: Recommendations from NCEE

While conditions will vary from state to state, and from school to school, in all likelihood, almost all children will benefit from extended instruction in language, especially reading.

- For all grades, designate specific, extended time for literacy instruction over the school day. Uninterrupted time for making progress in reading is especially important as students return to structured learning.
- What happens during literacy instruction is of importance. Teachers and schools should be provided with more detailed guidance on how the time should be used during this block.
- Writing should be embedded within literacy instruction
- Encourage children to share their own experiences during COVID and write and peer review their writing. This will also support their socio-emotional development

Grades 1-3

- 120 minutes devoted to literacy, plus additional time for children who need targeted instruction in specific skills
- Time to be divided into blocks on foundational skills
- Additional reading materials to be provided at different levels to enable students to read on their own

<p>Grades 4-5</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 120 minutes for literacy, plus additional time for children who may need targeted instruction in specific skills • The literacy time should be divided into blocks and focus on reading to learn. • Because many children who were in grade 2 at the time of the school closures, instruction in foundational skills may also be required.
<p>Grades 6-9/10</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide direct instruction in foundational literacy skills, as many students will lack them. • Provide targeted instruction and support in academic vocabulary and language that is needed across multiple domains (such as mathematics, science and social studies) • Explicitly teach academic language in other subjects as well, supporting academic language and conversations to express themselves and demonstrate conceptual understanding. This will require coordination between the language and subject teachers to assess each student's progress.
<p>NCEE, <i>A Future at Stake</i>, pp 22-23.</p>

3. Alarming effects on children's socio-emotional development and behavior

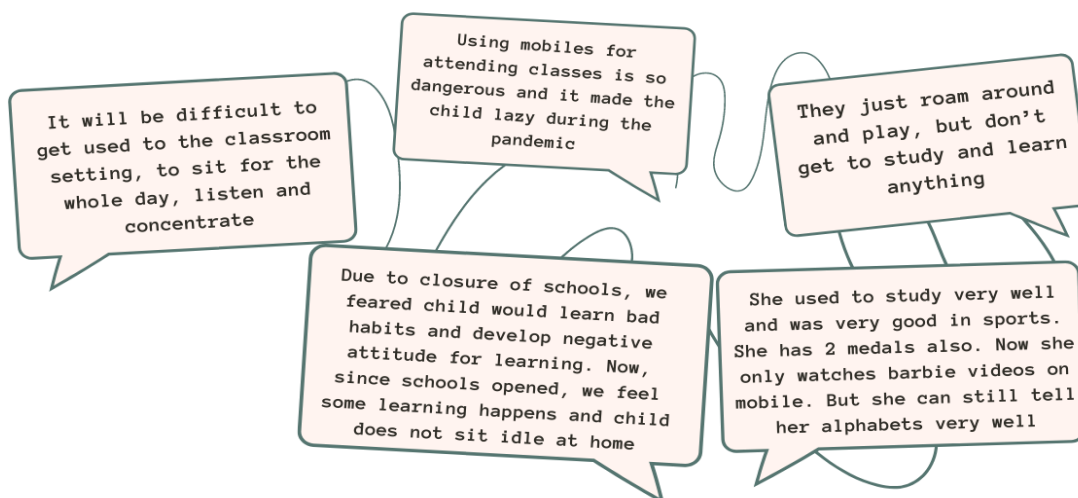
Socio-emotional development is crucial to the cognitive development and academic progress of children. Whether state governments and schools are re-organizing the curricula to support socio-emotional development will determine the success of the education recovery programs.

The noticeable changes in children's behavior were highlighted by parents in their qualitative comments, regarding their principal concerns about the prolonged school closures. The survey did not pose a direct question about this aspect, so these were spontaneous responses, which indicate the extent of alarm amongst parents.

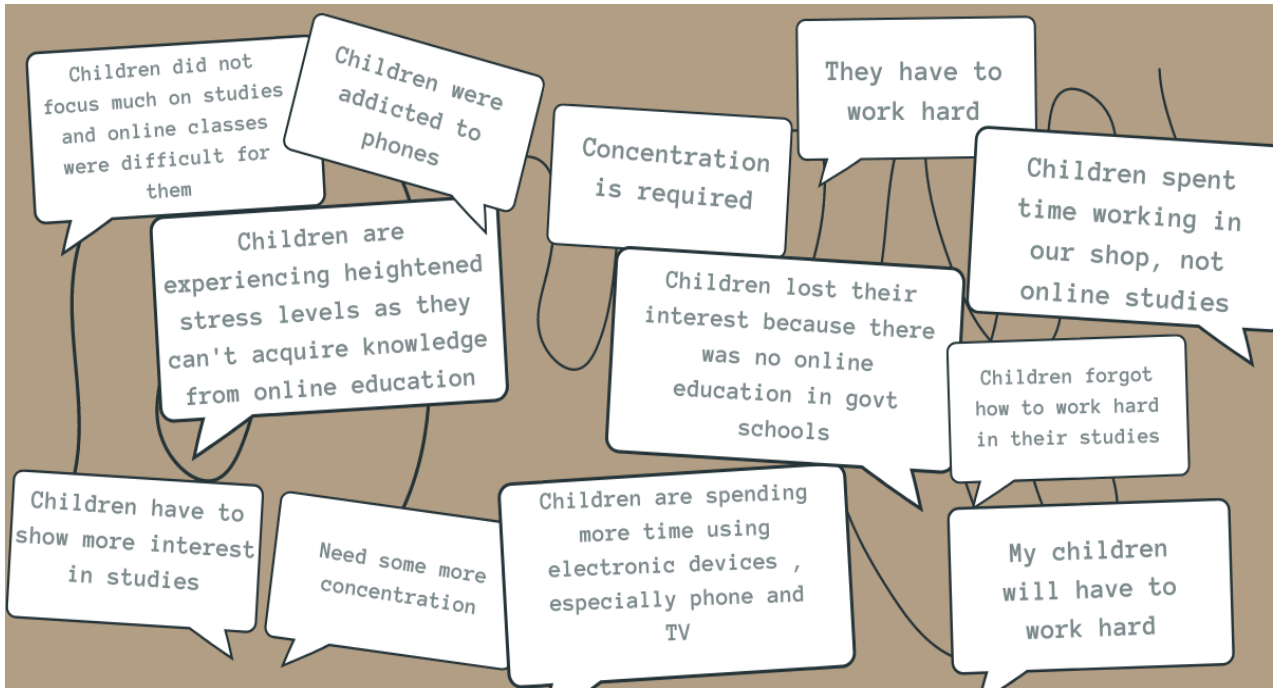
Parents noted the following types of changes: lack of routine and discipline; inability to focus; lack of motivation and interest in education; addiction to mobile phone, games and TV; changes in eating habits; mental stress and loneliness. Several parents noted that young children, in particular, had lost even the daily routines of eating and hygiene. Many of these parents are working outside the home and have nobody to supervise the children at home.

Parents speak about SOCIO-EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND BEHAVIOR

Karnataka:



Telengana:



Tamil Nadu:



The issues identified by parents are very real and they are detrimental to children's development. They cannot be sidestepped in the name of "catching up with syllabus" and "returning to business as usual". As discussed in "A Future at Stake":

“Remote learning, even where it occurred, could not foster the social development that comes with being part of the school community. ...Adversities ... and the loss of positive relationships impact child development and the ability to learn. Socio-emotional development is required to enable academic learning, through cooperative learning, self-regulation, focus and attention. Teachers have to invest deliberately on getting students used to routine, concentration and interacting with others. Children’s socio-emotional needs will vary according to their age and their prior experiences, as well as the level of support they have at home.” (p.19).

Socio-emotional development: Recommendations from NCEE

An enabling learning environment is required to nurture socio-emotional development, to help children develop their identities, regulate their emotions, relate to and show feelings for others, set and achieve goals, and take decisions for their own and others’ well-being. These needs to be nurtured through interactions with teachers and other children, the processes adopted in the classroom, teacher behavior and attitudes. It has to be integral to the school’s culture of caring.

- Identify the expectations regarding students socio-emotional development and competences by the end of primary, upper primary and secondary stages or different age groups etc)
- Ideally, social-emotional learning should be integrated across all subject areas. Teachers can be provided guidance on how to do this, including in mathematics. For instance, in mathematics, students can interact with others to listen to different approaches to solving a problem; enable students to recognize frustration with a problem, manage the frustration and persist in solving the problem, and empower students to self-monitor and reflect on understanding of concepts. These strategies should be deliberately used as part of the instruction process.
- Provide enough time in lessons for children to express their emotions about themselves and others, to engage in conversations and team work

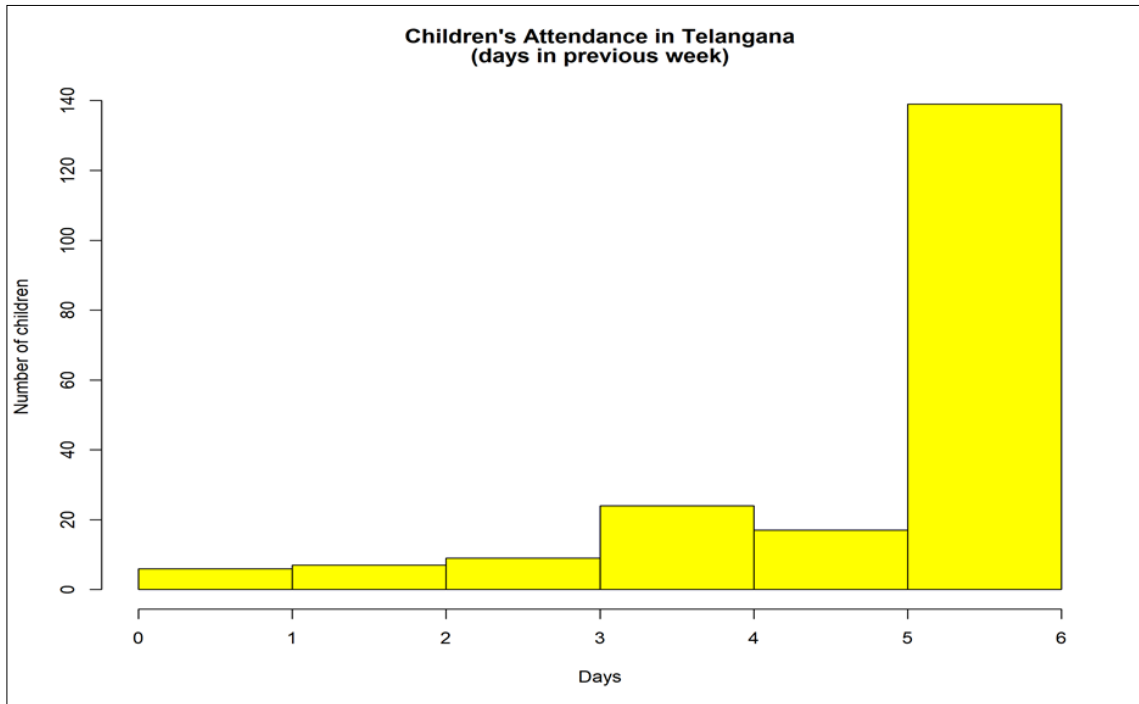
NCEE, *A Future at Stake*, p. 20.

4. Re-engaging with school

In this pilot survey, the majority of children in the sample households were enrolled and reportedly going to school. In Karnataka, about 15 percent of children were not enrolled at the time of the survey, as the survey was done just after schools had re-opened, of which over half were in the age group 6-10 years. In Tamil Nadu, schools had just closed in January the week before the survey, and while 97 percent of children were enrolled, they were not going to school. There are likely to be more unenrolled children in remote districts, particularly in Telangana and Karnataka.

However, during the previous academic year (2020-21), many parents reported that they had not enrolled children in school. In Karnataka, 24 percent of children were not enrolled in the last year, while in Telangana, 11 percent were not enrolled. The proportion in Tamil Nadu was just 3 percent.

Attendance data are available only in Telangana; in Karnataka, schools were just re-opening when the survey was conducted and attendance was irregular, while in Tamil Nadu, the schools had closed again due to the Omicron wave, just before the survey. It is striking that, in Telangana, even two months after the opening of schools, only two-thirds of the children attended school on all days in the previous week (Figure 1). The question was asked for the youngest child. The main reasons for the child not attending were health or family reasons.

Figure 2: “How many days did the child attend school in the last week?” (Telangana)

Note: Data are for youngest child who is currently enrolled

The survey did not explicitly ask about whether children are going to work, as it was intended to be a short survey. Investigator comments indicate that older children (especially boys) often take up work on days when schools are closed, on weekends and school holidays.

Mid-day meals are available to most children

An important reason for the high levels of enrolment may also be the availability of mid-day meals in government schools in these three states. At the time of the survey, 96 percent of children in government schools in Telangana got mid-day meals. Similarly, about 91 percent were getting either cooked meals or dry rations in Karnataka. In Tamil Nadu, the proportion was reported to be about 80 percent; the lower proportion may be due to the fact that schools were closed at the time of the survey. Still, the majority of children in government schools were getting either cooked meals or dry rations.

Bring Every Child Back to School: Recommendations from NCEE

- Conduct a household census at the village/block level and identify every child of school-going age, and where they are currently enrolled and the reasons for not enrolling.
- Organizations working with migrant labor can identify migrant worker households whose children should be enrolled. This needs to be done sensitively and keeping in mind the safety of children.
- Contact all private schools in the village/block level and identify which children have dropped out. Contact the families of those children to find out whether they are enrolled.
- Organize back to school campaigns involving local governments, teachers and principals.
- At the school level, ask teachers to locate absent or disengaged students, follow up and communicate individually with them.
- Inform private schools to issue transfer certificates or instruct government schools to accept students from private schools without transfer certificates. Focus on children most affected by absence of meaningful remote learning – SC/ST/ minorities/ migrant children; children in Standards 1-3, who have had no or limited experience of being in school; children who are transitioning between primary and upper primary, or upper primary and high school, and likely to drop out.
- Provide socio-emotional support within schools. Link families with child health services, including mental health services.
- For working children (paid/unpaid), help families to see that they are getting all due social assistance benefits. Increase in social assistance benefits should be considered for families that are relying on children's work because of loss of livelihood or death of an adult earner.
- Strengthen the state's child protection services/ help lines to prevent child trafficking, early marriages and other such abuses.
- Do periodic checks with community surveys to cross-check reliability of school level administrative data.

NCEE, *A Future at Stake*, p.8

Communication from schools

After such a long interruption of schooling, consistent communication from schools to parents, regarding the school opening process and the academic level and progress of their child, is an essential part of the education recovery. In this respect, there is still a long way to go (Table 3).

Between two-thirds and three-quarters of parents in the three states report that they received some communication from the school/district/block or other education authorities (about school re-opening/health protocols/ etc). While this is encouraging, it is most likely that these were general mass communications. In Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, more parents received such communication in government schools compared to private schools.

The situation was worse regarding communication about the academic performance of the child. In this case, 50 percent or fewer parents in Karnataka and Tamil Nadu reported getting any such communication from the school or the teacher. Again, the situation was worse in private schools than in government schools. In Telangana, the proportion of parents who reported this type of communication was about 75 percent: close to 60 percent for government schools and close to 90 percent for private schools.

Table 3: Schools communication with parents – General communication and on child’s academic performance (percent of parents saying 'Yes')

	Karnataka	Telangana	Tamil Nadu
	<i>Received any communication from the school regarding school functioning (percent of parents)</i>		
All children	66 %	75 %	74 %
Govt. schools	82 %	52 %	76 %
Private schools	64 %	95 %	54 %
	<i>Received any communication regarding child’s academic level (percent of parents)</i>		
Primary level	41%	75 %	50 %
Upper primary	54%	59 %	52 %
High School	26%	88 %	42 %

Note: The two questions were asked separately about the youngest child who is currently enrolled.

Communication with parents is often overlooked as “a luxury”, in the rush to “catch up” with the syllabus. Communication is required to increase enrolment and attendance, enable parents to support socio-emotional development and understand how they can support their child in learning. NCEE guidelines, [A Future at Stake](#), emphasize the importance of communication:

“Regularity and simplicity of communication is essential . Government orders in print, should be supplemented with public broadcasting (Radio and TV) messages. Further, a variety of methods have to be tried because many families may not have access or cannot read. Finally, there should be the possibility of listening directly to parents and teachers. . . . Coordinated actions are required at school, block, district and state level.” (p.11).

Communication: Recommendations from NCEE

- Regular communication is best done at the school level, but helplines for two way communication can be at different administrative levels.
- Simple communication messages covering the topics of most interest to parents such as the schedule, the structure of school classes, what students are learning can be conveyed at regular intervals (for example, every month). Messages should be in multiple languages if required.
- Additional messages, if possible, could indicate how parents can support their children’s sense of emotional well-being, which is at risk, as well as learning at home, including templates for weekly homework schedule.
- Educational authorities can assist teachers/ principals with templates for such communication.
- Audio as well as written communication should be used. Simple voice broadcasting software can be used.
- Involve local volunteers to communicate messages.
- Organize a helpline at locality/block/district level to answer parents’ questions about their child’s problems and to find out how to access the right authorities.
- Create a grievance redressal mechanism for parents, especially to deal with issues of exclusion and discrimination.

NCEE, [A Future at Stake](#), pp 12-13.

Tamil Nadu's Community Based Program – *Illam Thedi Kalvi* (School Comes Home)

The Government of Tamil Nadu has initiated a community based program to bring children in elementary education (grades 1-8) back to school, and to re-engage with learning (see Box 1).

The rapid survey of parents in Tamil Nadu included questions about the awareness and availability of the program, as well as children's participation in it, in the week preceding the survey (in January 2022) and in December 2021. The survey was therefore able to track the expansion of and attendance in the program over a short period of a month. The survey did not assess the quality of the program.

The most important findings are as follows (see Table 4)

- High level of awareness: about 95 percent of the parents were aware of the program, in December and in January. This shows the success of the communication efforts at the state and local levels.
- Significant increase in program availability between December and January (in or close to the households' neighborhood): Forty four percent of parents reported that the program was not available in December. This had reduced to 25 percent in January, reflecting a rapid expansion of the program. Availability increased more rapidly in rural areas in this sample, compared to urban areas (not shown in table)
- Increase in children's participation between December and January: Of the children whose parents were aware of the program, who were eligible, and who had access to the program, 36 percent attended on all or most days in December. This proportion rose to 45 percent in January. In the both months, the proportion of children attending on some days was about the same- 24 percent. The proportion that did not attend on any day went down from 40 percent to 30 percent in January. The increase in participation may be due to increased availability and also the fact that schools had closed in January.

Although the program is primarily intended for children in elementary classes, some children in the sample who were reported to be in high school also attended the program.

The program also appears to have a strong equity focus. In the sample, almost 85 percent of SC children (who were eligible, aware and had access) were reported to attend on all or some days in January (not reported in the table). Amongst the OBC children, this proportion was 35 percent, which had more than tripled from a level of 11 percent in December. Investigator comments, however, suggest that in some localities, caste conflicts prevent dalit children from attending a center, if that center is located in another settlement.

While the speed of the roll out has been substantial, there are obviously still many gaps. The program is still not available in all localities. Even where it is available, about 30 percent of eligible children were not attending. Other comments also indicate that children are not yet grouped into different age groups (for instance, primary and upper primary age groups). This may be due to the fact the initial focus has been on primary age children. All these point to the need for regular monitoring and feedback from the ground.



Illam Thedi Kalvi program in Ramnad District, Tamil Nadu

Table 4: Illam Thedi Kalvi : Awareness, Availability, Eligibility and Participation (December 2021 and January 2022)

	December 2021	January 2022 (1 st week)
Awareness/availability/ eligibility	<i>Percentage of all parents</i>	
Parent was NOT AWARE about the program	5 %	6 %
Program was NOT AVAILABLE in the settlement or nearby	44 %	26 %
Child was NOT ELIGIBLE	10 %	10 %
Total of above	59 %	42 %
Of those who were aware, could access program and child was eligible:	<i>Percentage of subset of parents</i>	
Child attended ALL/MOST days	36 %	45 %
Child attended SOME days	24 %	24 %
Child attended NO days	40 %	30 %

Box 1: Illam Thedi Kalvi – A Promising Initiative for Children to Re-engage with Learn

Designed for a duration of 6 months, the program is intended to be an after-school learning support center to allow children to (re)develop their relationship with learning, skills of learning, coming back to school etc. Another objective is also to simply ensure that children were brought back to school (the dropouts). These centers are intended to be working closely with schools, which are expected to coordinate the learning resources for the program.

The program design was developed in a consultative manner with civil society organizations (CSO) across the state participating in the community mobilization, creation of resources, selection and training of volunteers. Many of the organizations involved in these efforts at the community level are those with a long history of working with peoples' movement for literacy, education in the state. The program had three strands primarily – community mobilization, selection and training of volunteers and development of learning resources (both for the training of volunteers and for the teaching-learning in the centers).

Close to 100,000 volunteers were selected through a process that involved registration through an online portal, a psychometric testing (that was designed to flag biases/ prejudices/ problematic beliefs that volunteers may have about children, education and so on) and a group discussion. CSO and education administration machinery was involved in this selection and training of volunteers. The Tamil Nadu State Council for Education Research and Training (SCERT) developed the learning resources. Another key feature of the program is the role that the School Management Committees are expected to play in the running of the centers.

There are several online communities created for sharing and learning about the program – a “state advisory” group; groups of resource persons working on the training and social media groups for the volunteers. Weekly/ scheduled synchronous meetings for volunteers enable them to interact with resource persons to learn, share and seek support, etc. Resource persons and teachers, who are closely involved in the program, travel regularly to the centers and meet the teachers/ volunteers/ children.

The program is being rolled out in different communities and the centers were kept open even as schools were closed in the state in January 2022

5. Availability of Textbooks

In government schools, in Karnataka and Telangana, less than two thirds of students in government schools had all textbooks. In Tamil Nadu, the proportion was over 80 percent. Most of the remainder had at least some books. Almost all students in private schools in Telangana and Tamil Nadu had all textbooks, while about 72 percent of private students had this in Karnataka.

Taking into account those who said that the child had some books, the proportion of children in government schools who had no textbooks was negligible. The pattern was similar across different levels of education.

Table 5: Availability of textbooks (percent of parents reporting all or some textbooks)

	Karnataka		Telangana		Tamil Nadu	
	All books	Some books	All books	Some books	All books	Some books
Govt. schools	64 %	27 %	58 %	34 %	83 %	17 %
Private schools	72 %	18 %	97 %	3 %	100 %	-
Primary level	64 %	26 %	77 %	19 %	84 %	16 %
Upper primary	72 %	18 %	84 %	13 %	77 %	20 %
High School	-	-	69 %	28 %	90 %	10 %

Note: The question was asked about the youngest child who is currently enrolled. There were a small number of children in the Karnataka sample who were in high school, hence they are not reported here.

However, the relevance of textbook availability may not be significant, in the context of the learning crisis, with children having fallen behind by almost two years, and especially many younger children having forgotten even the alphabet. A single textbook for each class, where children are at very different levels, and most of whom would not be able to read the textbook, is clearly insufficient.

Many more reading materials, graded for different reading levels, are required in each grade, to address the language gaps. Children will also be unable to cope with the textbooks of the current grade in mathematics and other subjects. One option is to use language and other textbooks from earlier/ previous grades in the class, so that a child who is in class 5 should have access to textbooks of previous years. A small library of textbooks of all previous grades can be made available for student use. In all cases, teachers need to be trained and regularly supported to use these materials to address the different learning levels of children.

Instructional Materials (Language): Recommendations from NCEE

For Grades 1-3

- Additional reading materials to be provided at different levels to enable students to read on their own

For Grades 4-5

- A variety of reading texts that are at different levels of complexity but appropriate for older children should be available.

Grades 6-9/10

- Provide direct instruction in foundational literacy skills, as many students will lack them.
- Provide targeted instruction and support in academic vocabulary and language that is needed across multiple domains (such as mathematics, science and social studies)
- Explicitly teach academic language in other subjects as well, supporting academic language and conversations to express themselves and demonstrate conceptual understanding. This will require coordination between the language and subject teachers to assess each student's progress.

NCEE, *A Future at Stake*, pp 22-23

6.Extra Support for Students' Learning

School re-opening should not mean “business as usual”. Apart from focusing on a few areas, (such as language development, mathematical competences and socio-emotional development) modification of the syllabus, change in teaching strategies and additional instructional materials, additional instructional time and support to home based learning would be required.

As most poor people have limited knowledge of what goes on in schools, the parents were asked about whether the school has been providing additional after school classes, or classes on weekends and vacations (provided free of charge). They were also asked whether their child, in addition to attending school, also watches educational programs on television or on the phone (if these are provided), or listens to them on the radio. In addition, parents were asked if they provided private tuition to their child. The results are presented in Table 6.

Very few government or private schools provide extra classes after school hours. Similarly, very few children watch educational programs on TV or via the radio. Relatively more in each state are reported to follow classes on the phone – in general, a highly ineffective method for student learning. We treat these responses as indicative, as parents may not have a precise idea of what the child is doing (for instance, the child may be purportedly watching TV or following classes on the phone, but may not be engaged in learning).

Private tuition was not widespread among the sample children in Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, reflecting the fact that the sample was focused more on the disadvantaged sections. Forty percent of children in Telangana were reported to be taking private tuition (see section 9 for further details).

Table 6: Extra support for students' learning

	Karnataka	Telangana	Tamil Nadu
Some extra classes organized by school (after hours):	<i>Percentage of parents</i>		
Govt. schools	23 %	38 %	13 %
Private schools	5 %	39 %	42 %
Watches educational programs on TV	15 %	35 %	15 %
Follows classes on phone	38 %	60 %	24 %
Listens to educational programs on radio	12 %	18 %	11 %
Private tuition	12 %	40 %	8 %

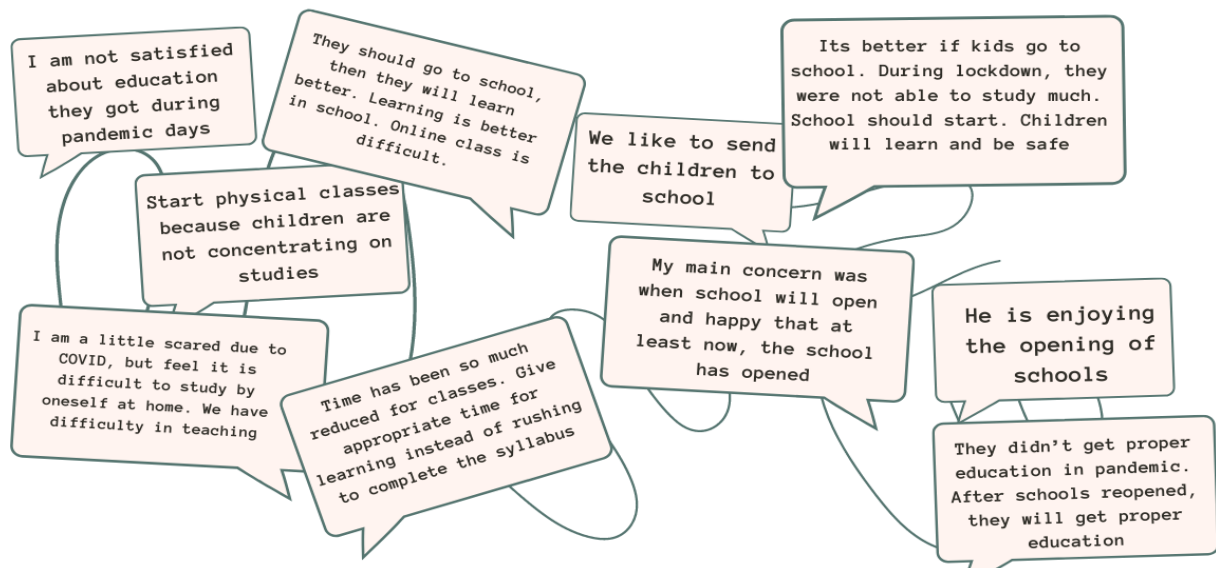
Note: The questions were asked about the youngest child who is currently enrolled.

7. Keep Schools Open: “Online classes are not working for our kids”

The overwhelming message from parents' comments was the desire to open schools or keep them open. The effects on learning and behaviour, due to the long absence from school, as discussed earlier, were another important reason. Another significant reason was the unavailability or inadequacy of online classes. In particular, parents highlighted the fact that children could not follow lessons, could not comprehend, and did not enjoy online classes (usually taken via phone, if at all), leading to loss of interest and motivation. The lack of devices and stable internet connectivity, the need to supervise children closely to keep them engaged, and the need to support them academically, were other reasons cited by parents. Given the concerns raised in the media about COVID transmission, there were also some concerns expressed about whether sanitary precautions are being followed and the risks to children.

Parents speak about WHY SCHOOLS SHOULD OPEN AND PROBLEMS WITH ONLINE EDUCATION

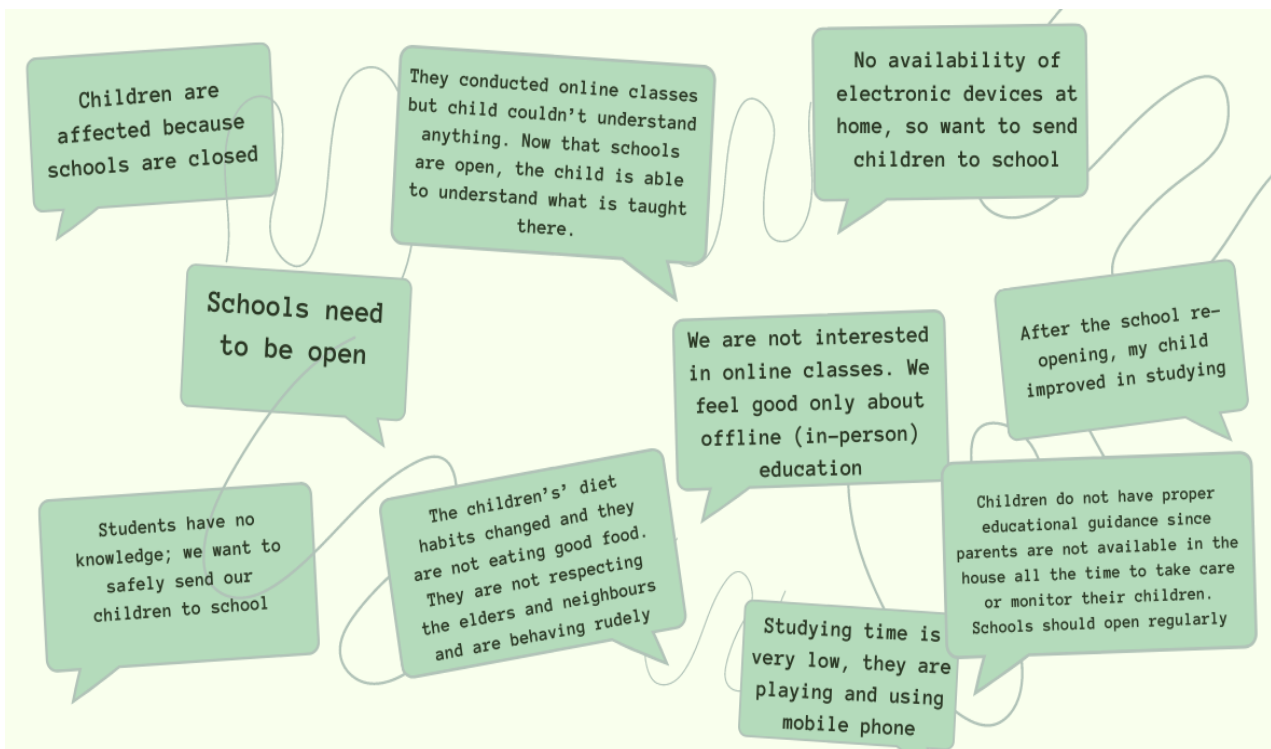
Karnataka:



Telengana:



Tamil Nadu:



8. Financial Burdens

Two main concerns were noted: the inability to pay fees in private schools and the extra financial cost of online classes (paying for devices and data), whether in government or private schools. In addition, many daily wage earners suffered losses in their earnings, while they faced higher burdens on education. In Tamil Nadu, about 15 percent of parents who had children in private schools said they did not pay the fees. During the last year, the proportion was 6 percent. During the last year, the proportion was 6 percent. In the Telangana sample, while this year, only 4 percent of parents said they had not paid fees in private schools, about 20 percent did not pay them last year.³

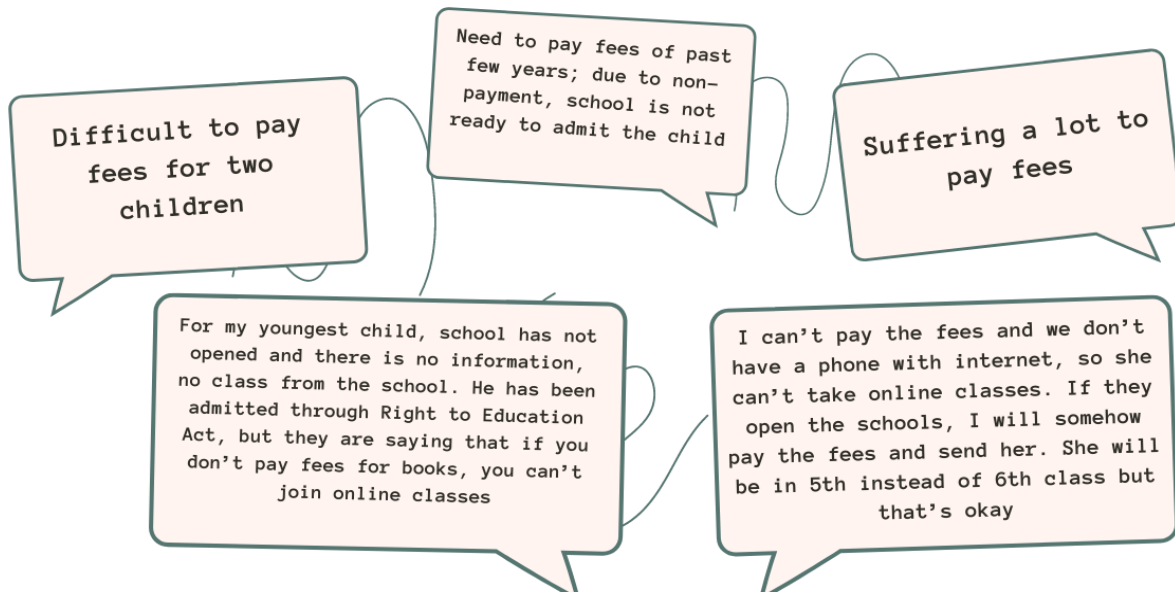
In several states, anecdotal information suggests large shifts from private schools to government schools. In this sample of households, we do not see a marked shift from enrollment in private schools last year to government schools this year, even in Karnataka and Telangana where about half the children were enrolled in private schools. There could be several reasons for this. Many private schools, either due to government guidance/ instructions or of their own volition, tried to retain students by reducing fees or providing some other exemptions. Parents would also try to avoid disrupting a child's education, particularly if it involved new teachers, new friends and possibly a change in the syllabus and language of instruction. Further, the perception that the quality of online learning in private schools was better than in government schools affects parents' decisions.

The additional financial burdens imposed on parents due to online education is not often highlighted. In fact, paradoxically, in the two years when poverty increased and in the name of providing "continuity of education", poor parents had to pay more to access online education of low quality or else forego education for their children.

³The question was not asked in the Karnataka survey; it was added for Telangana and Tamil Nadu, based on feedback.

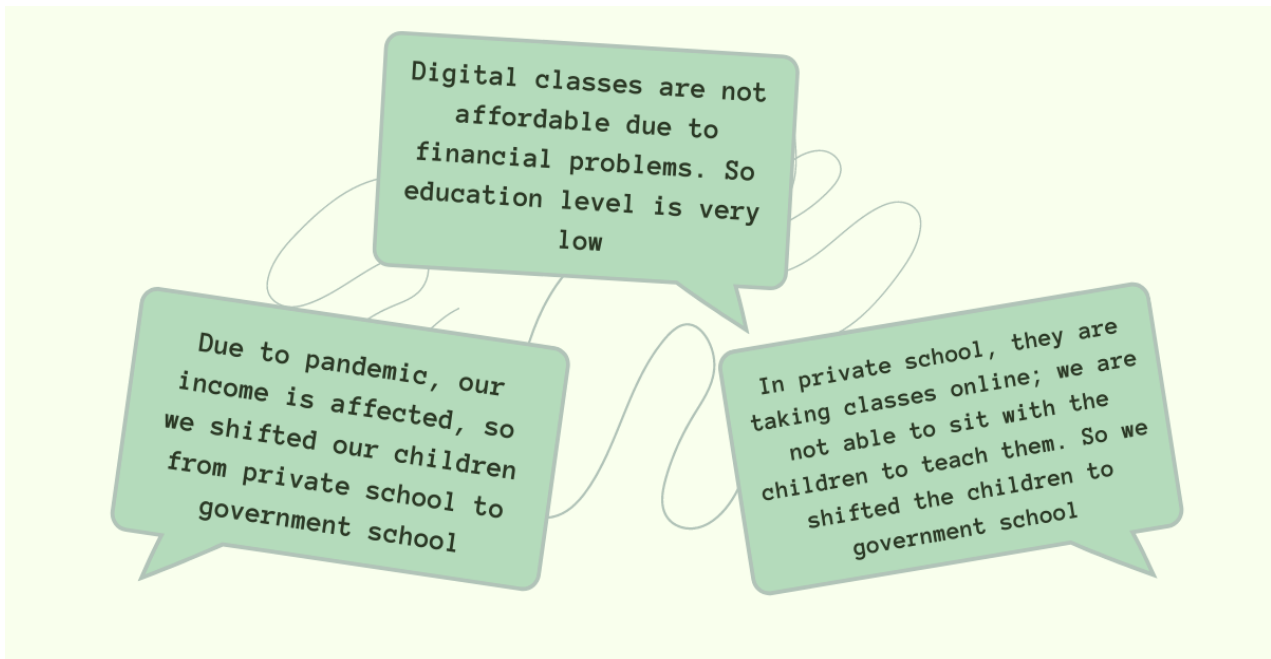
Parents' worries about increased financial burdens

Karnataka:



Telengana:



Tamil Nadu:

9. Wide Gap in Lived Experiences: Education Inequality in the Pandemic

The characteristics of the sample in Telangana, with a broader dispersion of caste and occupation groups than in Tamil Nadu and Karnataka, allows us to see the differences in parental responses. These differences are suggestive of the inequality in education experiences of children, which will only widen the already existing gaps in education achievement between different groups of children.

We group the sample households into two broad socio-economic groups, based on three indicators: occupational category, caste category, and language spoken at home (See Box 2). The figure in the box shows how these three indicators are used to arrive at two socio-economic groups.

Higher socio-economic status: Household has at least two of the three indicators indicating higher status, ie is employed in “formal sector”, belongs to “other castes”, speaks English at home.

Lower socio-economic status: Household has the following characteristics : is employed in “informal sector”, belongs to SC/ST/ OBC, does not speak English at home. Importantly, it also includes one group of those who belong to SC/ST/OBC, and do not speak English at home, but who are employed in the “formal sector”. The reason for including them in the lower SES group is that many people belonging to these disadvantaged groups may have formal sector jobs in government due to reservations, but may themselves be first generation educated people, have lower education profile etc. The fact that they do not speak English at home possibly reflects this.

How do these two broad socio-economic groups of parents differ in terms of the education experiences of their children? These are shown in Figure 2 for a selected set of important variables. The differences are striking. Over 80 percent of higher SES parents send their children to private schools. Two thirds of these

schools offer extra support in the form of after school classes. Close to 90 percent of high SES children are reported to also follow online classes on the phone (when they are provided). Over 70 percent get private tuition. Strikingly, 50 percent of these parents provided a positive comment about their children's online education experience or current academic level, while they mentioned difficulties.

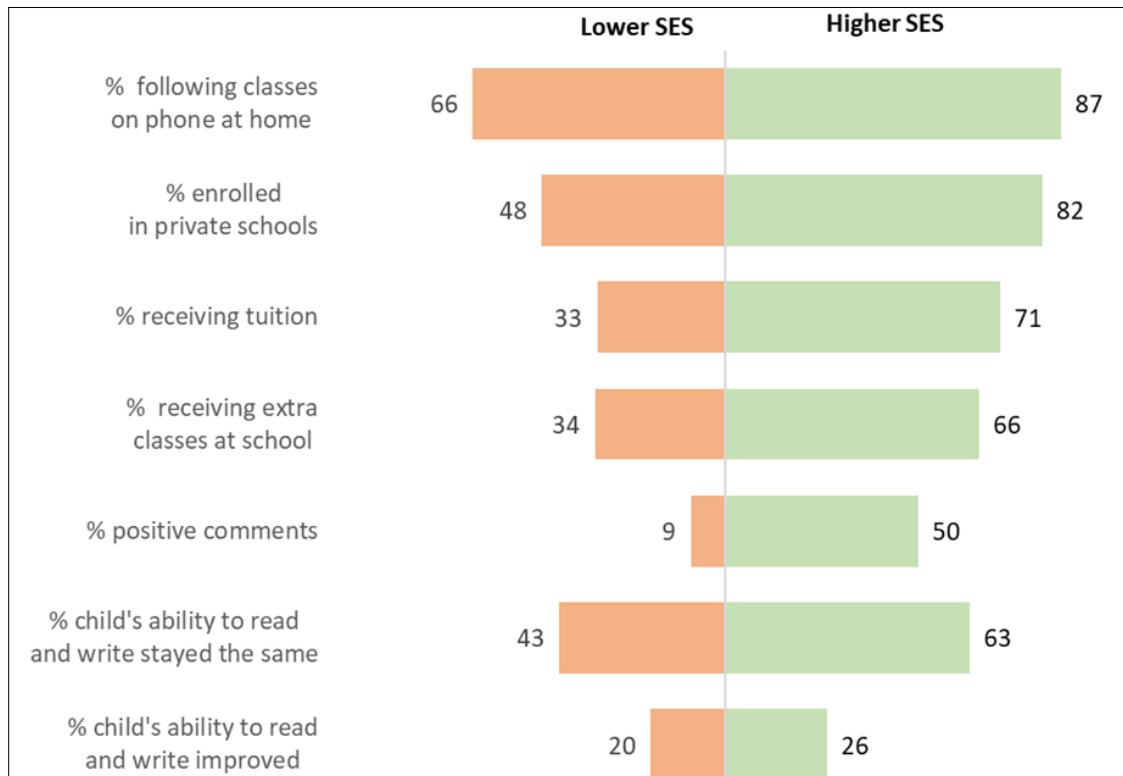
Examples of positive comments included the fact that their children are comfortable with online education, that parents or grandparents could support their children, and that children are "keeping up" or "studying hard". While the proportions of parents who say that their child's "ability to read and write" improved as compared to before the pandemic are similar between the high SES and low SES groups, the proportions who say that it remained the same are significantly higher in the former.

It should be remembered that the "higher SES" group is "higher" only in a relative sense. They do not belong to the urban upper middle class households whose children may also have suffered in online education, but would have made significant progress notwithstanding, because of parental support, guidance and supervision, as well as higher quality online teaching, devices and reliable internet. The sharp differences between the higher SES group and lower SES group in this sample therefore only reinforce the fact that there is a wide gulf between the educational experiences of the elite sections of society and of the disadvantaged groups, which will further deepen inequality in education outcomes.



Family earnings have been affected during the pandemic

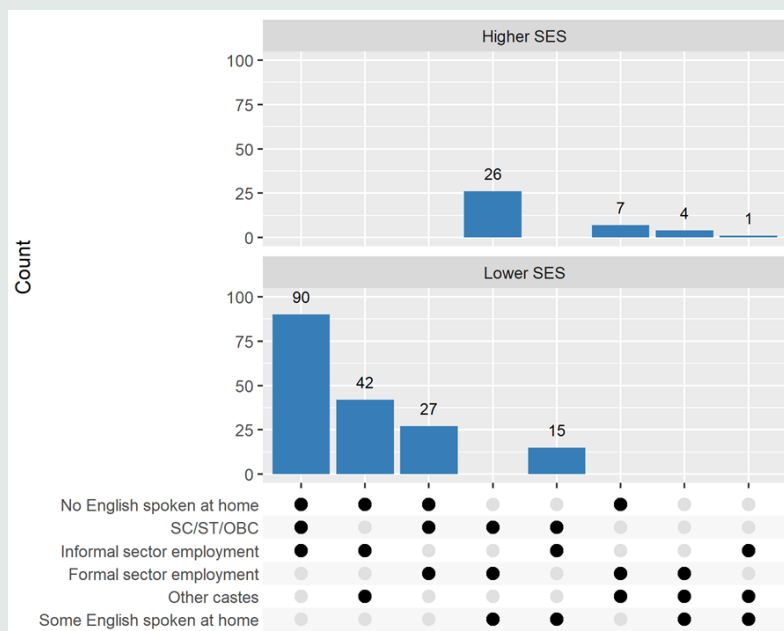
Figure 2: Differences in parents' responses across socio-economic groups (Telangana)



Note: Calculated based on survey data for Telangana.

Box 2 : Telangana – Construction of socio-economic groups

The occupational groups identified by parents (in response to the question of two most important sources of income for the household) were divided into two groups : (i) informal sector employment comprising casual labor, agricultural (farming and non-farming) and self-employed and (ii) formal sector employment, comprising contract work and organized sector jobs. The caste category was also divided into two groups : (i) SC/ST/OBC and (ii) other castes. Finally, the survey asked questions about languages spoken at home. In the Telangana sample, a significant number of households mentioned English in addition to other languages. Speaking English at home (at least sometimes) signifies both a higher level of education, most likely in English medium, of at least one parent; it is also an indicator of parental aspirations, since English is a marker for accessing the formal sector job market. Hence, speaking some English at home is treated as an indicator of higher socio-economic status (SES).



Conclusion: School Re-Opening Can't be 'Business as Usual'

The findings of this rapid survey of parents in three states have implications for how the re-opening of schools should be re-organized. There is a need to not only resume but also renew education. Conducted in the immediate aftermath of the opening of schools, and in the midst of another lockdown in one state in January 2022, the findings highlight not only the regression in learning, but also the deep impacts on the socio-emotional development and behavior of children.

Many parents in this survey have expressed the hope that with the return to school, their children can improve in learning. But the reality is that, as these children return to school, teachers face incredible challenges in the classroom. Returning to “business as usual” in school functioning – such as resuming the normal academic curriculum, after short bridge courses, or offering some cursory “remedial classes” to enable “lagging children to catch up” will simply not do in the face of the catastrophic situation outlined by parents.

Many state governments and the Union Government are pushing for digital solutions as means of “leapfrogging”. But the overwhelming response of parents from disadvantaged groups is clear: keep schools open; online learning is not working for children; many children are excluded; and there are unforeseen impacts on behavior. Without parents who are able to guide and support children at home, the broad-brush use of technology can only lead to greater inequality. Any technological components should be simple, those which can be handled by teachers, and mainly for teacher support (such as sharing of resources, accessing open education resources, teacher webinars). The danger of reinforcing passive approaches – for example, watching videos during the class instead of facilitating children’s learning – must not be underestimated.

The community-based program launched by Tamil Nadu government holds promise. Along with a massive communication and mobilization effort, it attempts to re-engage children with learning over a period of time. Moreover, it is expected to be complementary to the changes introduced in the school curriculum, especially at the foundational level.

Fundamental changes are required at the school level. That requires a differentiated approach between schools and across schools and regular support to teachers. Decentralized teacher interactions at cluster and block levels, with facilitation, to discuss challenges, identify local solution and share successes, as well as support for children’s learning and development outside schools through community learning centers and parents are essential. Every child is important and every child should be supported.

Annex 1: Methodology and Sample Details

The surveys conducted in the three states were intended as a pilot to test a rapid survey approach for collecting information from parents.

Questionnaire development: The questionnaire was designed by the research group of the NCEE and piloted with a few households in Bangalore. Incremental improvements to some wording of the questions (and options) were made for the Telangana and Tamil Nadu surveys, as well as an additional question for Tamil Nadu on the *Illam Thedi Kalvi* program.

Sampling: In Karnataka, the survey was conducted in two districts, with a focus on underprivileged urban settlements (in Bangalore) and villages. Households were selected at regular intervals within each chosen habitation. Being the first survey, which was conducted immediately after schools opened, the total sample size was 102, with an equal division between urban and rural households. In Telangana, three districts were chosen (Warangal, Mahbubnagar and Hyderabad). In each district, 2 medium size villages in relatively backward areas were selected, and 20 households were sampled in each village, with households being drawn from the SC colony, ST habitation (if it existed) and other sections of the village with OBCs, Muslims and other castes. Within each urban mandal, 2 wards were selected and about 15 households were selected in each ward. While the settlement patterns are not as segregated as in rural locations, investigators were asked to get a range of households from SC, OBC, Muslim and other castes. In Tamil Nadu, it was decided to sample from 4 districts to get a greater geographical range (Ramnad, Pudukottai, Karur and Tiruvallur). Within each district, three blocks were selected (covering a geographical range within the district) and one village was chosen from each block, in a relatively backward area. 15 households were selected from each village, again with instructions to choose them from the SC colony, ST habitation (if it existed), OBC and OC sections of the village. Within each district, 1-2 urban areas were selected, and 20 households selected within each. The differences in sampling were useful for the pilot study. In particular, the Telangana sample was more differentiated in terms of socio-economic groups, while the Tamil Nadu sample was more concentrated on the disadvantaged groups.

Only households with children within the age group of 6-18 years old were selected. If a household that was selected at a regular interval did not have such a child, the next one was selected.

Administration of survey: Questionnaires were translated, reviewed and entered in ODK software. Field investigators were trained on the questionnaire and sampling of households within the selected urban and rural settlements. All interviews were conducted face to face and investigators were supported to clarify any doubts, while the survey was ongoing. Data was entered directly into the software; however, investigators also carried hard copies of the questionnaire in case of any issues and subsequently entered it into the software if required. A debriefing was held with the team of investigators to capture additional comments and insights.

The following table provides the characteristics of the children in the sample.

Distribution of children in sample households

		Karnataka		Telangana		Tamil Nadu	
		All	Youngest	All	Youngest	All	Youngest
Number of children							
By Caste							
	SC	52	28	109	54	196	102
	ST	10	7	71	35	19	14
	OBC	74	45	141	69	122	69
	Other	15	9	111	54	30	13
	Did not want to say	25	13	-	-	4	2
	Total children	176	102	432	212	371	200
	o/w: Not enrolled	26	15	0	0	10	3
Number of ENROLLED children							
By level of education							
	Pre-primary	0	0	12	12	1	1
	Primary	70	52	134	96	163	118
	UP	38	14	158	75	104	40
	High School	23	9	92	29	50	19
	Higher secondary	19	12	36	0	43	19
	Total enrolled	150	87	432	212	361	197
Number of ENROLLED children							
By type of school							
	Government	84	44	198	97	325	173
	Private	61	39	233	115	36	24
	Other	4	2				
	Total	149	85	431	212	361	197
	Missing	1	2	1	0	0	0
	Total enrolled	150	87	432	212	361	197

