

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

The fifteenth Annual Status of Education Report (ASER 2020 Wave 1) was released online on 28 October 2020

ASER 2020-Wave 1 was released today at an online event attended by people from around the world. This is the fifteenth annual report.

Every year from 2005 to 2014, ASER has reported on the schooling status and the ability to do basic reading and arithmetic tasks for children in the 5-16 age group in rural India. After ten years of producing an annual report, in 2016, ASER switched to an alternate-year cycle where this “basic” ASER is conducted every other year (2016, 2018); and in alternate years ASER focuses on a different aspect of children’s schooling and learning. In 2017, ASER ‘Beyond Basics’ focused on the abilities, experiences, and aspirations of youth in the 14-18 age group. In 2019, ASER ‘Early Years’ examined key early language, early numeracy, cognitive, and socioemotional indicators for children age 4-8 years.

In 2020, the COVID-19 crisis interrupted this 15-year trajectory. But the urgent need to systematically examine the effects of the pandemic on schooling and learning opportunities of children across the country was apparent. Although a lot of digital content has been generated and transmitted to help children continue to learn, there is limited evidence on the extent to which this content is reaching children; whether they are engaging with it; and the impact it is having on their participation and learning.

ASER 2020 is the first ever phone-based ASER survey. Conducted in September 2020, the sixth month of national school closures, the survey explores provision of and access to distance education mechanisms, materials and activities for children in rural India, and the ways in which children and families are engaging with these remote learning alternatives from their homes.

ASER 2020 was conducted in 26 states and 4 Union Territories. It reached a total of 52,227 households and 59,251 children in the age group of 5-16 years, as well as teachers or head teachers from 8,963 government schools offering primary grades.

ASER 2020 FINDINGS:

SCHOOL ENROLLMENT PATTERNS

Changes in school enrollment can only be accurately measured once schools reopen and children are able to return to their classrooms. As compared to 2018, this interim measurement in ASER 2020 shows that:

- **At the all India level, there is a small shift towards government schools.** As compared to data from ASER 2018, data from ASER 2020 (September 2020) show a small shift in enrollment from private to government schools, across all grades and among both girls and boys. The proportion of boys enrolled in government schools rose from 62.8% in 2018 to 66.4% in 2020. Similarly, the

proportion of girls enrolled in government schools rose from 70% to 73% during the same period.

- **Many young children yet to get admission in school.** ASER 2020 shows that while the proportion of children not currently enrolled for the 2020-21 school year is higher than the equivalent figures for 2018, for most age groups these differences are small. Higher proportions of children not enrolled are visible mostly among the youngest children (age 6 and 7), possibly because they have not yet secured admission to school. This proportion is particularly large in Karnataka (11.3% 6- and 7-year-olds not enrolled in 2020), Telangana (14%), and Rajasthan (14.9%).

HOUSEHOLD RESOURCES

While schools are closed, children rely mainly on the resources available at home to help them learn. These resources can consist of people who can help them to study (for example, educated parents); technology (TV, radio or smartphone); or materials (such as textbooks for the current grade).

- A relatively small proportion of students in school today are first generation school-goers. More than three out of four children have at least one parent who has completed primary school (Std V). More than a quarter have both parents who have studied beyond Std IX.
- Among enrolled children, more than 60% live in families with at least one smartphone. This proportion has increased enormously in the last two years, from 36.5% to 61.8% among enrolled children. The percentage point increase is similar in households of children enrolled in government and private schools. States that show an increase of more than 30 percentage points in the proportion of children whose families own a smartphone include Maharashtra, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh, and Tripura.
- Whether acquired before or after school closures in March 2020, more than 80% children have textbooks for their current grade. This proportion is higher among students enrolled in government schools (84.1%) than in private schools (72.2%). Across states, the proportion of children with textbooks at home falls below 70% in only three states: Rajasthan (60.4%), Telangana (68.1%), and Andhra Pradesh (34.6%).

HOME SUPPORT FOR LEARNING

ASER 2020 data shows that regardless of parents' education level, families invest significant effort in supporting children's learning.

- While schools are closed, almost three quarters of all children receive some form of learning support from family members. Notably, even among children whose neither parent has studied beyond primary school, family members do provide support. Older siblings play an important role in providing learning support to children in these households.
- Children in lower grades get more family support than in higher ones. Similarly, children with more educated parents receive more family support than those with less educated parents. For

example, 54.8% of children whose parents had completed Std V or less received some form of family support, as compared to 89.4% of children whose parents had studied beyond Std IX.

- As children progress to higher grades, parents are able to provide less help. For example, 33% of mothers of young children in Std I-II were able to help their children, as opposed to 15% of mothers of children in Std IX and above. But for children in higher grades, support from elder siblings becomes steadily more important.

ACCESS TO LEARNING MATERIALS AND ACTIVITIES

Governments and others have used a variety of mechanisms to share diverse learning materials with students during school closures. These include activities using traditional materials like textbooks or worksheets; online or recorded classes; and videos or other materials shared via phone or in person, among others. ASER 2020 asked whether households had accessed or received any such materials from children's schools in the week prior to the survey in September 2020.

- Overall, about one third of enrolled children had received some form of learning materials or activities from their teachers during the week preceding the survey. This proportion was higher in higher grades than in lower ones; and higher among students in private schools than in government schools.
- However, there are significant variations by state in children's receipt of learning materials or activities during the reference week. States where less than a quarter of all children had received any materials include Rajasthan (21.5%), Uttar Pradesh (21%), and Bihar (7.7%).
- Regardless of school type, WhatsApp was the most common medium through which activities and materials were received. However, this proportion was much higher among children in private schools (87.2%) than those in government schools (67.3%).
- On the other hand, of children who had received some materials, those in government schools were much more likely to have received materials via personal contact with a teacher (31.8%) than those in private schools (11.5%), either when the teacher visited the household or else when a household member visited the school.
- Among the roughly two-thirds of all households that reported not having received learning materials during the reference week, the majority said that the school had not sent any materials.

CHILDREN'S ENGAGEMENT WITH LEARNING MATERIALS AND ACTIVITIES

Regular engagement with learning materials and activities is key to avoiding 'learning loss' due to prolonged absences from school. ASER 2020 asked whether children had done any type of learning activity during the previous week, regardless of whether or not the school had shared learning materials during that week.

- Although only a third of children had received materials from their teachers during the week preceding the survey, most children (70.2%) did do some sort of learning activity during that

week. These activities were shared by diverse sources such as private tutors and family members themselves, in addition to or instead of what was received from schools.

- The major types of activities done involved textbooks (59.7%) and worksheets (35.3%). The proportion of children in government schools and private schools doing these activities was similar.
- However, one major difference visible by school type is that children in private schools were much more likely to have accessed online resources than those in government schools. For example, 28.7% of children enrolled in private schools had watched videos or other pre-recorded content online, as compared to 18.3% of government school students.
- For about a third of all students, teachers had some form of personal contact with households during the reference week.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

While some information is available about the measures that governments and others have put in place to ensure minimum disruptions to children’s education, no systematic, large scale information has been available about whether children are able to access and use these mechanisms. ASER 2020 provides data on these issues at both state and national levels. A set of learnings from these findings suggest the following overarching policy implications for the country:

Fluid situation: When schools re-open, it will be important to continue to monitor who goes back to school; as well as to understand whether there is learning loss as compared to previous years.

Building on and strengthening family support: Parents’ increasing levels of education can be integrated into planning for learning improvement, as advocated by NEP. “Reaching parents at the right level” is essential to understand how they can help their children. Older siblings also play an important role.

“Hybrid” learning: Children are doing a variety of different activities at home. Effective ways of “hybrid” learning need to be developed, that combine traditional teaching-learning with newer ways of “reaching-learning”.

Impact of digital modes and content: Many modes of providing digital content have been tried. In order to improve digital content and delivery for the future, an in-depth assessment of what works, how well it works, who it reaches, and who it excludes is needed.

Mediating the “digital divide”: Expectedly, children from families who had low education and also did not have resources like smartphones had less access to learning opportunities. But even among such households, there is evidence of effort: family members who try to help and schools who try to reach them. These children will need even more help than others when schools reopen.

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