

The COVID effect: Changing patterns in public and private inputs into schooling in rural India

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Schools shut down in India in March of 2020, and have begun to reopen only in the last few months. India is one of the countries that has had among the longest school closures in the world. According to the most recent data available from UNESCO, 18 months into the pandemic, the global average for school closures (full and partial) is just under 9 months (35 weeks), with schools being closed for over a year in countries like the US (62 weeks) and India (73 weeks) (data as of Sep 30, 2021).³ There was no doubt that the pandemic was going to impact learning adversely – children’s learning levels suffer even after regular, scheduled summer vacations. However, with the pandemic affecting livelihoods, especially of low-income, casual and migrant workers, there was an additional fear that family budgets getting squeezed would also lead to an increase in drop-outs, especially among older children and girls.

ASER 2020 was conducted in September 2020, six months into the pandemic, when schools were closed across the country. ASER 2021 was done a year later in September-October 2021 when schools were starting to reopen. According to ASER 2020, the proportion of children in the age group of 6-14 years not currently enrolled in school went up from 2.5% to 4.6% between 2018 and 2020. The largest drop in enrollment was for the youngest age group, with the proportion of 6-10-year-olds not currently enrolled rising from 1.8% in 2018 to 5.3% in 2020. In contrast, the proportion of currently not enrolled children in the age group of 11-14 increased only slightly, from 3.2% in 2018 to 3.9% in 2020. The increase for the younger age group could have been simply due to the fact that many young children (6-7-year-olds) were waiting to seek admission when schools reopened. At the time, six months into the pandemic, the situation was fairly fluid and it was difficult to assess whether the observed changes would hold.

A year later, the out of school numbers seem to have stabilised. According to ASER 2021 the proportion of children aged 6-14 who are currently not enrolled remained the same at 4.6%. However, things are still far from normal and we may continue to see churn in enrollment numbers for a few years to come.

On the other hand, we see a secular decline in the proportion of children not currently enrolled in the 15-16 age group – the age group considered most at risk for dropping out. In 2010, the proportion of 15-16-year-olds who were out of school was 16.1%. Driven by the government’s push to universalise secondary education, this number has been steadily declining and stood at 12.1% in 2018. The decline continued in 2020 to 9.9% and to 6.6% in 2021.

Therefore, while the pandemic has resulted in some increase in the proportion of children who are not currently enrolled, this is mostly for the youngest age groups. It is possible that many of these children are still waiting to get admission and may get re-enrolled when the schools fully reopen and the situation gets a little more normalised. Also, younger children are easier to enroll and states can organise enrollment drives as they have in the past to get children back to school.

The major change in enrollment that is evident in ASER 2021 is a big jump in government school enrollment accompanied by a fall in private school enrollment. The increase in government school enrollment is across the board – all age-groups, grades and for both boys and girls.

A decline in private school enrollment was first seen in 2020, when it dropped from 32.5% in 2018 to 28.8% for 6-14-year-olds. But government school enrollment remained steady at about 65% – the drop in private school enrollment was accompanied by more children not being enrolled in school rather than a shift to government schools.

Between 2020 and 2021, in contrast, out of school numbers have held steady, private school enrollment has continued to drop and we see a big jump in government school enrollment across all age groups. The government-private split in enrollment in 2021 is close to the 2010 figures. Private school enrollment increased steadily from 2006 to 2014 and remained steady at about 30% till 2018. The decline observed in 2020 and 2021 has brought it back to the 2010 level of about 25%. Government school enrollment, in contrast, has been declining since 2006 till it stabilised at around 65% in 2018, jumping only in the last year to reach 70.3% in 2021.

ASER 2021 was conducted in September 2021, about 18 months into the pandemic, at a time when schools were starting to reopen. At the time the survey was done, about two thirds of enrolled children were in schools that had already reopened and about 96% of these were physically attending school. For these children, it is safe to assume that enrollment patterns are less fluid as compared to 2020. With out of school numbers stabilising or falling between 2020 and 2021, private school

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³ <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse>

enrollment continuing to decline, and a majority of children being back in school, government school enrollment has jumped significantly in 2021. Many affordable smaller private schools have shut down during the pandemic (UNICEF 2021)⁴ – this could also be driving the shift to government schools. Finally, with many migrants moving back to their villages with their families, the demand for public education is likely to have gone up during this period.

Data from the ASER 2021 school survey seems to confirm this. Among the surveyed teachers and headmasters of government schools that had reopened, about 70% said that enrollment in their schools had increased. As the reasons for this increase, 40% said that no studies were going on in private schools; 15% mentioned migration; 62% cited a shift from private schools because of financial distress; and about 50% ascribed it to the free facilities in government schools. Of course, it is entirely possible that this increase in government school enrollment may get reversed in the future as incomes recover and private schooling becomes profitable again.

While the aggregate enrollment picture is quite clear, there is a fair amount of variation at the state level. The national increase in government school enrollment is driven by large northern states like UP, Rajasthan, Punjab and Haryana and southern states like Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Andhra Pradesh. All of these states had high private school enrollment (in excess of 40%) to start with. If the shift away from private schools is due to financial distress, then it is not surprising that it will be most evident in states where private school enrollment was high to begin with. In contrast, in many north-eastern states, government school enrollment has fallen during this period. For instance, in Nagaland and Manipur government school enrollment fell by more than 11 percentage points. Interestingly, the shift has not been to private schools but rather is reflected in much larger numbers of currently not enrolled children in these states. A decline in government school enrollment, though of a smaller magnitude, is also seen in Odisha, Chhattisgarh and Uttarakhand. Unlike the north-eastern states, here the decline is reflected in rising private school enrollments. Odisha and Chhattisgarh are low private school states but private school enrollment has been steadily rising since 2010.

The shift to government schools is not limited to particular grades or groups of children (Table 1). For instance, it has always been the case that more girls are enrolled in government schools as compared to boys. While this continues to be true in 2021, the proportion of boys enrolled in government schools has also increased from 63% in 2018 to 72% in 2021, narrowing the gender gap.

Table 1: % Children enrolled in government schools by sex & grade

Std	ASER 2018		ASER 2020		ASER 2021	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
Std I-II	57.9	65.1	61.1	66.7	72.0	74.1
Std III-V	62.7	71.2	65.6	73.3	70.9	77.1
Std VI-VIII	65.8	73.3	68.3	77.0	73.4	79.2
Std IX & above	64.6	68.9	69.7	72.7	71.2	74.3
All	62.8	70.0	66.4	73.0	71.9	76.5

There is a third piece to the enrollment picture – paid “tuition” classes. This is a gray area. Data on tuition classes is not easy to find. The ASER survey routinely collects data on tuition, and the trends over time show distinct patterns across India. In the northern and northwestern states like Punjab, Haryana, Rajasthan, Himachal Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh, private school incidence is relatively high and tuition-taking is low. In contrast, in the eastern states like West Bengal, Bihar and Odisha, private schooling is low. But even for young children, going to “tuition” is a major feature of the educational landscape. In 2018, well over 50% of children of school going age in Odisha, Bihar and West Bengal were taking some form of tuition classes. In 2021, this figure has crossed 60% in Odisha and well over 70% in Bihar and West Bengal. In fact, the incidence of tuition has increased across almost all states – perhaps a natural response to prolonged school closure. It is curious that while economic disruptions may have moved children out of private schools (in fact, in many cases the pandemic destroyed the economy of low cost private schools), parents were still able to access tuition classes where they had to pay fees. This may be due to the fact that tuition classes are a local phenomenon where payment may adjust flexibly and quickly based on demand and supply negotiated between the tutor and the family. It is clear that the large and growing “tuition” sector needs to be better understood in terms of its role in education provision and learning support in rural India. The decisions to open or shut government schools are taken by authorities at district or state level with school teachers having no say in

⁴ <https://www.unicef.org/globalinsight/reports/implications-covid-19-low-cost-private-schools>

when or how school reopening can happen. But for the tuition sector, all decisions are local, flexible and can be immediate; these classes open or shut easily in responding instantly to local conditions with different waves of the pandemic.

This increased demand for public education in rural India, while it may be temporary, driven by financial distress and migration, does throw up several important questions.

First, we know that enrollment does not always translate to attendance. Even before the pandemic struck, we had wide variations in daily attendance across states. In states like UP and Bihar, on an average day, children's attendance was only 60% or sometimes even below. In reopened schools, staggered attendance patterns are being planned. Some schools are establishing new norms that only 50% children will come on any given day. Private schools are giving options of online or in-person instruction. This fluid situation is going to make it difficult to track attendance closely even after schools have reopened. Without regular attendance, effective instruction is difficult. School entitlements like mid-day meal, uniform and scholarships may have greater value in times of economic hardship and disruption. It is possible that while enrollment of older children, especially girls, has not dipped significantly, their daily attendance may be affected.

Second, are government schools and teachers equipped to deal with this influx of students, especially after a period of prolonged school closures with children coming back to school with large learning deficits? School teachers in reopened schools surveyed in ASER 2021 were asked about the activities they were doing in their classrooms and the challenges they faced in their teaching. Close to 75% said that they were following the curriculum of the current class, though 50% also said that they were revising material from last year's curriculum. A child who was in Std I in March 2020, would be in Std III when schools reopened in 2021. During this period when schools were closed, they have had limited access to learning materials other than textbooks – only about 27.9% children, in government school grades I-II, in 2020, said that they had received any additional learning material from their schools and in 2021 this figure was marginally higher at 31.5%. Can we expect such children to suddenly cope with Std III curriculum when they come back to school? Not surprisingly, a majority of the teachers facing challenges in teaching said that children were unable to catch up with the curriculum (65.4%).

Then there is the question of resourcing. Take the case of Uttar Pradesh, for example, where the increase in government school enrollment was the largest at 13.2 percentage points. According to ASER 2018, in over 60% Uttar Pradesh government primary school children were sitting in multi-grade classrooms. This could be due to a lack of space and/or teachers. In addition, only 12% children in Std III could read at Std II level and 11% could do a simple Std II level subtraction problem. When children come back to school after one and a half years of no formal instruction, these learning deficits are going to be much deeper and teachers will be dealing with more children than they were when schools shut down. How are we going to equip them to deal with a huge learning crisis accompanied by an influx of students? The usual brief of "follow the curriculum" will only exacerbate the problem and even more children will fall behind.

Whether at a micro level, school by school or at a macro level, state by state, for the remainder of the school year, it will be critical to track enrollment, attendance and learning. The fluidity of the current situation (when schools are open and when they are closed, when who is supposed to come to school and when they are not) will make this task very challenging. But it will only be by closely watching the situation day by day, with eyes close to the ground, that effective forward planning for the next school year can be done.

