

Sri Lanka: Covid education crisis

Thursday 15 July 2021, by [Collective / Multiple signers](#) (Date first published: 2 July 2021).

Open letter to President Gotabaya Rajapaksa

We write to draw your attention to the serious situation faced by the 4.3 million student population in this country since March 2020 when the pandemic first appeared. There has not been any education for them in the last 15 months except for a few weeks when schools opened briefly, and a façade of online education received by a few at other times.

We have listed below some of the grave consequences of long-term school closures:

Due to an undue reliance on online education, more than half the children are left out of contact with their schools.

Left without guidance, teachers have adopted social media such as WhatsApp to send out notes and assignments connecting with whoever they could, even though the Census Department reported in 2019 that only 29% of the population accessed the Internet. Further, a survey of teachers representing large and small schools across all 25 districts carried out by the Education Forum Sri Lanka in November 2020 revealed that on average teachers were able to give a real-time classroom experience using software such as Zoom to only 5% of their students and another 40% were contacted via social media, leaving 55% without any contact. Some schools used ad hoc methods to share printed material with their students.

Even those receiving an 'online' classroom experience are subjected to 'chalk and talk' style of teaching made worse by the mediation of a digital screen.

With no instructions to manage a heavy curriculum under these extraordinary conditions, teachers are rushing to cover the syllabus in the accustomed chalk and talk style. Zoom fatigue is causing even the small percent of children who are online to switch off from any learning, making online education a mere facade.

All children face loss of learning, and mental, physical, and emotional issues after being isolated for 15 months and more.

Students who have been stuck at home for long without physical interaction with friends and the simplest of activities at school face emotional problems, mental health issues, and even depression. These anxieties are compounded by the fear of facing national examinations, which are competitive and highly stressful. Also, not all home environments are safe for children. For some children, school is often the place where they find a respite. Isolated due to Covid-19, children have no escape from family conflicts and even violence, and some cases they themselves suffer physical, emotional, and sexual abuse.

We urge the authorities to reflect on the above with the seriousness it deserves, and to implement the following measures with urgency:

*Develop and execute a plan for opening schools at the earliest possible.

*Vaccinate all teachers identifying them as frontline workers; Order low-cost test kits focusing on testing high-risk areas first; Decentralize decision making to allow each school to open to the maximum extent possible as per each local situation.

*Support schools and teachers to reach out to ALL home-bound children.

*Instruct schools to prioritize the education of the most vulnerable children and conduct distance education using offline methods as the base. Offline modalities can be discussed as needed; Support the teachers with funds for devices and other tools they need to adapt to the individual situation of each child; Instruct Grama Niladari level committees to work with schools to follow-up on social, emotional, nutritional, and other needs of each child in their jurisdictions.

*Reduce curricular and examination burden on home-bound students.

*Direct the National Institute of Education to identify essential learning competencies for those in Grades 1-11, noting that collegiate level grades 12-13 require different solutions; Postpone all national examinations and other competitive assessments to the end of 2022, noting that Advanced Level examination requires special consideration; Develop benchmark diagnostic tests for teachers to assess student learning; Trust the teachers to do the right thing.

*Continue with reduced curricular and examination burden as students get back to schools.

*Do not overload children with academic content. Focus only on getting them up to speed on essential competencies; Do not wait till 2023 to introduce proposed education reforms. Proposed reforms aim to reduce the examination-based content of the curriculum to 30% and enable activity-based learning for the other 70%. This is the moment to pilot the reforms. Trust our provincial, zonal, and divisional education experts and principals and teachers to experiment with minimum guidelines from the center. Circumstances have forced them to experiment without guidance from the center, anyway.

It would be a very grave mistake to trivialize or ignore this situation. The education crisis would be the one that would remain even after the pandemic settles. It could turn into a catastrophe with many children leaving school permanently, setting back past gains on school attendance. We are yet to find the effects of hours spent on the Internet without adequate preparation or supervision, or the Covid learning losses. Future youth will be entering a harsher & poorer post Covid19 world ill-equipped.

Civic groups across the country have been convening dialogues on all aspects of distance education during the pandemic. Resources are available on offline distance education, social-emotional learning, emergency preparedness of schools and other topics related to proposed solutions. We urge the government to seek help from all quarters including the cross section of signatory educationists, civil society organizations and other professionals here to prevent the covid education crisis from becoming a catastrophe.

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