POLICY BRIEF

MEASURES TO ADDRESS THE IMPACT OF COVID ON ACCESS TO EDUCATION IN GOVERNMENT PRIMARY SCHOOLS OF DELHI

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About the Organisation:

LexQuest Foundation (LQF) is an independent, non-profit, research and action organisation, established in 2014, in New Delhi. We are striving to create, advocate and implement effective solutions for a diverse range of development issues.

To endorse participative governance, we engage with a broad spectrum of stakeholders, from various sections of the society, to ensure that policy-making remains a democratic process. We utilize pragmatic and futuristic research to disseminate actionable knowledge to decision-makers, experts and the general public.

Our key activities include capacity and skill-building workshops, policy advisory programs, public outreach, and stakeholder consultations. We collaborate with the government, other organizations and individuals for impactful policy formulation and execution.

By employing sustainable and equitable solutions through our multidisciplinary, intersectional initiatives and programs, we are constantly working towards creating empowered communities.

Background

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected people across borders, sectors, and communities in complex and disproportionate ways. The virus has been a detriment to health across societies due to the vulnerable and imbalanced health-care policies. It has also made a profound, and probably, long-lasting impact on all spaces through interlinked processes. The UNDP report _COVID and Human Development: Assessing the Crisis, Envisioning the Recovery_ states that the **pandemic has emerged as a "human development crisis" with indicators of certain dimensions expected to sink as low as mid-1980 levels**. Education is one such dimension. With schools being closed and large proportions of the population without internet access, "effective out-of-school rate" suggests that **60% of the children across the globe do not have access to education**.

United Nations Sustainable Development **Goal 4** advocates quality education by ensuring inclusive and equitable means of education alongside lifelong learning opportunities for all. In India, Article 21A lays down the fundamental right to children between the ages of six and fourteen to free and compulsory education. **"The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Children Education (RTE) Act, 2009"** was enacted to give the fundamental right a legislative backing. **School education in India** is spread across 1.5 million schools, with around 260 million students enrolled in public schools and more than 8.7 million primary and secondary teachers. **Data** from the Ministry of Human Resource Development suggests that even before the pandemic had unleashed its impact, the Indian education system had pre-existing cleavages. A large number of children were already out of school and the majority of them belonged to multiple disadvantaged groups and communities. The pandemic made it essential for schools to be closed down to prevent the spread of the virus. This meant that **large proportions of children were pushed out of school and subsequently virtually eliminated from access to education**. Although disproportionate engagements with online learning have taken shape in the country, the **digital divide** has become even more prominent than before. **Urban-rural divide**, **lack**

of access to electricity and internet connectivity has affected a significant majority of India's population, with children belonging to marginalised groups/communities at the risk of being further pushed out to a greater extent. For instance, **data** indicates a major **gender gap in terms of access to the internet**. **This puts the girl child at a significant disadvantage concerning online learning.** It is in this context that our research explores the access to primary education across government schools in Delhi.

Structure of Public Education and Existing Schemes

The Municipal Corporations, Central Government, and the State Government administer the schools in Delhi-NCR. The State government is responsible for running the **maximum number of public schools** that provide education to children between classes one to twelve, with the highest student enrollment rate. The **2015 and Beyond: Delhi Education Revolution** document provides an overall analysis of school education in Delhi and elaborates on multiple government interventions and schemes.

Improving Quality of Education: Through **Mission Buniyaad**, the Delhi Government attempted to universalize the ability to read, write and solve basic mathematical equations among pupils of classes 3 to 9 enrolled in schools run by the Municipal Corporation of Delhi, Delhi Cantonment Board, and the Delhi Government. The government also set up **public English medium schools** and launched a pilot project on imparting spoken English classes to students in Delhi Government schools, liaising with agencies like Macmillan Publishers, India, British Council, India, and the Academy for Computers Training (Gujarat).

The Pragati Series aimed at **producing alternate learning tools** and **summer camps** endorsed peer learning through interactions beyond the classroom. Moreover, the **Happiness Curriculum** was initiated in 2018 by the Delhi Government. It allowed a specified time of the day as a happiness period where students meditate, share stories and thoughts.

Training & Administration: The Principal Development Programme aimed to facilitate school principals' leadership skills and introduce them to a broader perspective on learning through workshops and skill development sessions and exposure to international education programs at the **University of Cambridge** and Finland respectively. The **Mentor Teacher Programme** gave the teachers a comprehensive on-site learning and pedagogical exposure to better teaching experiences. The mentor teachers inspect the classrooms to provide ground support to enhance the learning quality. Towards that end, the mentor teachers

went to cities across the country to study the school-system and bring back the best practices among those systems.

The project involved teaching children with **special needs** to help teachers with children with special needs on a case-to-case basis and come up with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs).

In another noteworthy initiative to promote research on classroom learning and the learning-teaching process among teachers, a **Core Academic Unit**, comprising 29 teachers and one 1 Principal, was established.

School Infrastructure: Multiple initiatives have also been undertaken to improve school infrastructure including the construction of schools and the introduction of three-tier library systems among others. In this regard, initiatives by the Delhi government intersect with multiple Central Government sponsored Schemes and policies on school education. The **Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan** (2001) forms an implement drive for the **Right to Education Act** in its approach towards universal education across categories and communities. It is implemented through a Centre-State partnership model.

Another historically important intervention is the **Mid-Day Meal Scheme (MDMS)** initiated in 1995 as the National Programme of Nutritional Support to Primary Education (NP-NSPE) funded by the Centre. The scheme is aimed at bettering nutrition levels along with the improvement in enrollment, retention, and attendance across primary and upper-primary pupils, madrasas, and maktabhas, along with children registered under the National Child Labour Project. The Delhi government expanded this vision by planning to set up **kitchens of the Akshaya Patra Foundation** to serve healthy and nutritious food to the students across government schools in Delhi.

The Central Government has also initiated the **Shala Siddhi** scheme as a part of the National Programme on School Standards and Evaluation in implementing the idea of quality education through multiple stakeholder-involved processes while treating each school as an individual unit.

Successes and Concerns

Concerning the improvement of the quality of school education, the Government of Delhi did achieve some remarkable progress. The initiation of English medium schools inspired other States to **emulate** the idea. Analysis of **data** from a field survey suggests that although teachers on the ground faced some difficulty in implementing the Mission Buniyaad scheme, there was active concern and engagement with regard to the scheme.

However, there are major areas of concern. The report titled **State of Public (School) Education, (March 2019)** provides a comprehensive analysis of the condition of public education in Delhi schools and the prevalent issues. For instance, it suggests a drop in enrollment of pupils in both MCD and State Government-run schools in the past 5 years.
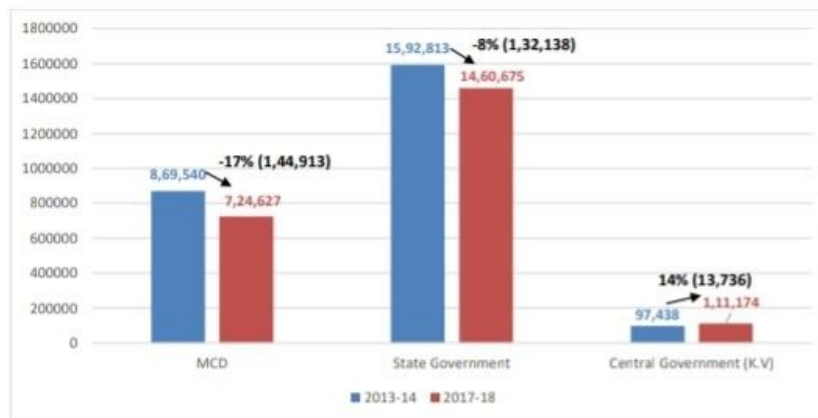
Inference:
Enrolments in MCD schools have fallen by 17% in the last five years (from 2013-14 to 2017-18) whereas, the fall is 8% in state government schools during the same period. Enrolments in central government (K.V) schools have risen by 14% from 2013-14 to 2017-18.

Courtesy: State of Public(School) Education, Praja Foundation, 2019

Between Classes 1-6, retention rates for MCD run schools have increased to a greater extent as compared to a meagre 1.1% rise in schools run by the Delhi Government.

Table 4: Retention Rate - Class 1 to Class 6.

Standard	Academic Year	MCD	Retention Rate (%)	State Government	Retention Rate (%)
1	2012-13	1,43,809	-	22,628	-
2	2013-14	1,62,900	113.3	23,097	102.1
3	2014-15	1,70,521	118.6	22,932	101.3
4	2015-16	1,78,414	124.1	23,378	103.3
5	2016-17	1,88,626	131.2	24,140	106.7
6	2017-18	-	-	2,02,691	-

Inference:

- Retention rate is the percentage of school's first time enrolled students who continue with the same school next year. The retention rate of students at the primary level is higher for MCD schools than the state schools and shows an increasing trend from 1st to 5th standards.
- In the 6th standard the number of enrolments for state schools increases drastically since students from MCD schools (primary schools run upto 5th) would shift to state schools. However the 6th standard students enrolment in state schools for 2017-18 is 2,02,691 students, which is 5% lesser than 2,12,766 (total of MCD and State shools 5th standard students in 2016-17) students if all would have continued for 6th standard in State schools.

Courtesy: State of Public(School) Education, Praja Foundation, 2019

Total number of enrollment in Class 1 shows significant dips in percentage, which is likely to increase in the next few years.

Table 3: Change in Class I Enrolments from 2010-11 to 2017-18.

Year	MCD		State Government	
	No. of students enrolled in Class I	% Change Year on Year	No. of students enrolled in Class I	% Change Year on Year
2010-11	1,69,215	-	23,605	-
2011-12	1,65,959	-1.9%	22,973	-2.7%
2012-13	1,43,809	-13.3%	22,628	-1.5%
2013-14	1,33,862	-6.9%	23,360	3.2%
2014-15	1,28,416	-4.1%	23,522	0.7%
2015-16	1,23,325	-4%	22,579	-4%
2016-17	1,12,187	-9%	23,304	3.2%
2017-18	95,817	-14.6%	22,181	-4.8%
2018-19*	78,420	-18.16%	21,020	-5.23%
2019-20*	59,127	-24.6%	19,787	-5.87%
2020-21*	37,938	-35.84%	18,484	-6.59%

Inference:

- Class one enrolments for MCD schools fell by 14.6% from 2016-17 to 2017-18, while class one enrolments for state schools have fallen by 4.8%. However, in absolute numbers state government schools have much lesser Class 1 enrolments as compared to MCD in 2017-18, because around 32%[7] state schools run primary (1st to 5th standards).
- (*) Using a time-series regression we have estimated the year on year trend in total student enrolment, extrapolating this to the next three academic years from 2018-19 to 2020-2021[8]. The time series shows a disturbing trend in MCD schools, Class 1 enrolments have fallen by 43% in 2017-18 as compared to 2010-11 and are further expected to fall by 78% in 2020-21.

Courtesy: State of Public(School) Education, Praja Foundation, 2019

The report also indicates **persisting levels of poor learning outcomes**, despite multiple attempts by the Government of Delhi. Continuous and comprehensive evaluation results indicate that the majority of the students in classes 6, 7 and 8 manage a score below Grade C. According to the **Delhi Economic Survey 2019**, the **number of teachers in Government schools remained abysmally low with high vacancy** across teaching posts. Among other logistical issues, some **lapses** in hygiene have been noted in mid-day meal services as well.

The Negative Loops of COVID-19

The pandemic has made policy issues relating to access and quality of school education a lot more complicated. It has resulted in the closure of schools across the State of Delhi. Prolonged closure is estimated to have a **huge negative impact on education among children** in Delhi. Some of these impacts are already widely prevalent now. Whilst the Government tried to maintain access through online modes of education, the issues of logistical and economical limitations in ensuring such access have posed greater challenges now.

The Problem of Internet Access: During the lockdown, the Delhi Government **initiated** online classes in the month of July. Even before the pandemic, according to **studies**, only 12% of the households of students in India had an internet connection. According to the National Sample Survey data gathered for the Survey on Education in 2014 **only 27% of urban Indian households of students have internet access**. Again, internet access is not the only problem; **only around 47%** of the households that have an internet connection, **have access to a smartphone or any other computing device**. There is also a wide **gender gap** among mobile internet users in India. 43% of Indian men use mobile internet while the figure is as low as 23% for women.

According to **reports**, among the students enrolled in Delhi Government schools, around 15% have not been integrated into the new system of online classes. Effectively, this **15% represents the visible drop-out rates**. However, **government data** suggest **that as high as 6 out of 10 government school students have not been integrated into online classes over YouTube or Whatsapp**. The Delhi HC **raised issues** over the lack of access to the internet among students. Indeed, poor access to the internet along with the absence of smartphones or other devices as well as remote locations have proved to be spaces for crucial policy intervention.

Termination of Mid-Day Meal Services: As an outcome of the pandemic, another major cause of concern is the **paucity of access** to mid-day meal services due to the physical closure of schools. In fact, the **prolonged lack of access to mid-day**

meals might lead to negative outcomes in terms of relational deprivation. It will not only lead to children being left without proper nutrition but will also push a lot of families, which depended on mid-day meals to feed their children during the day, into **poverty traps due to the additional burden of the money required for funding the day meal for their children**. In a highly gendered society, this might mean that the **women in the house might lower their calorie intake to adjust the budget for food in the household**, leading to dismal results for indicators like maternal mortality rate as an aftereffect of such nutritional deficiency. Again, increasing pressure on the households to spend on the child's food requirements would mean **a trade-off resulting in the lowering of spending on other crucial needs including health, which is the most undesirable during a pandemic**. Keeping these concerns in mind, the Delhi High Court had **noted** that midday meals in Delhi schools cannot remain suspended for months as it is a basic right. In July, the Central Government **informed** the High Court that it had released Rs. 27 crores to the State Government of Delhi for extending mid-day meal services during the lockdown; however, there are no conclusive reports to analyse the implementation of this plan by the Delhi Government.

Lack of Teacher Training for Online Education: Along with the **shortage of teachers** across schools in Delhi, the COVID lockdown brought to the fore a fundamental issue that proved to be **a hurdle in developing online learning methods - the lack of training among teachers**. Teachers across the State have been facing a wide variety of structural problems. For instance, studies have **suggested** that teachers across government schools in Delhi are more engaged in non-teaching activities, and they are overworked.

The pandemic has made things worse **in terms of their training and adaptability to the online mode of learning**. Teachers have highlighted many aspects of online teaching that are difficult for them to be adept at, which is why teachers believe they **need time** to get comfortable with teaching online. In the meantime, they are struggling through difficult-to-explain concepts through advanced audio and video visuals. The teachers are often not equipped to

conduct classes over the internet; a problem that is **most starkly faced** by older teachers.

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Policy Suggestions

In one of his essays, Dr. Amartya Sen highlights the importance of schooling. Quality education addresses capability deprivation and helps in employment, presents opportunities to engage with and exchange information and knowledge with people from starkly different backgrounds. Education also improves the understanding of rights and contributes significantly to the health and economic independence of both women and men.

In this context, and given the newly arisen challenges owing to the pandemic, we suggest the following policy reforms for improved access and quality of school education in the State of Delhi:

- **Access to Online Education:** The pandemic has accelerated the need to integrate technology into classroom learning as the growing rate of infection is forcing schools to stay shut. However, it is easier said than done as internet connectivity issues continue to plague a large proportion of students. **Socio-economic constraints, gender inequity, and low-bandwidth of service providers are persistent hindrances to accessibility of online education**. To make online learning more inclusive, the Delhi Directorate of Education (DoE) must focus on infrastructural changes that can deal with the present digital divide especially to keep up with the **Alternative Academic Calendar**, as rolled out in April 2020. The Government should prioritize the improvement of digital infrastructure to assist educational institutions in reaching out to their students. Delhi, which reports the **highest internet penetration** in the country and consists of the second-highest number of internet users **should ensure equity in access by focussing on areas with lower bandwidths and support students who cannot afford to purchase internet packages**. The State should work with the telecommunication units to provide stable and affordable internet connections by subsidizing internet packages for students of the economically backward sections. Access infrastructure can widen if authorities **remove barriers** to investments, promote open

access, and make licensing affordable. This would include more participants in the sector who can offer competitive prices for wider access to the internet which would benefit more consumers. In September 2020, the **Delhi High Court** directed public and private schools to provide data packages and smartphones to economically backward students and reimbursement to schools to cover reasonable procurement costs for the same. The **State Education Department's collaboration with private service providers to fund projects that increase access to e-devices along with data packages will potentially raise the percentage of students who can access online classes** without adding to the economic burden of their families. **The** INR 7,031 crores **devoted to educational policy and scheme implementation in the Delhi Education budget of 2020 should be used to create separate corpus funds for each school to cover procurement and distribution costs of electronic devices and internet packages.** The School Management Committee of Delhi should work with CSOs to acquire accurate data on how many children cannot access online education due to lack of access to the internet. The government should focus on access to online education for female students because they face more hindrances than male students in accessing e-devices and the internet for education.

- **Ensuring Regular Supply of Mid Day Meals:** To address the gaps in fulfilling the goals of the mid-day meal scheme in crucial times like these, laying out immediate provisions for guaranteed mid-day meals for all children in public schools should be a part of the policy agenda. To achieve this, the Delhi Government can look towards the policy of Kerala, which has **rolled out** a scheme for distributing free food kits to students registered under the mid-day meal programme in the State, wherein Rs. 81.37 crore has been allocated for the same. Additionally, **analysis** of the Kerala State Budget for 2019-20 shows a generous allocation of Rs 526 crore for the expenditure on the mid-day meal programme. A similar scheme can be adopted by the State of Delhi. The distribution of meals in

the event of schools being closed can be ensured through the **School Management Committees (SMCs)**. The Government of Delhi has already empowered the SMCs in several ways including capacity-building among its members, organisation of SMC sabhas, and the initiation of the SMC apps. These SMC sabhas can undertake the task of coordinating the distribution. The Central Government has already released Rs. 27 crores for the extension of the mid-day meal scheme. Besides, the Delhi Government's **budget** for 2019-2020 has seen the education sector take the highest share of allocation amounting to 26% of the total budget. The recent **budget** of 2020-2021 is also indicative of a high share of allocation of the budget. A special fund from the allocation made to education can be drawn out to serve this purpose, as the mid-meal scheme plays a crucial role in ensuring school enrollment, which in turn is an important starting point to guarantee access to education.

- **SMC participation for extending access to learning**: The Delhi Government has maintained lists of students and parents for extending classroom exercises during the lockdown. These include all information of those with and without access to Whatsapp. Such details are useful to ensure that weekly worksheets are available to all students. But despite their **efforts**, **a large number of students in the State remain unaccounted for**. In this regard, local SMC members can collect data from the schools regarding address or alternate guardians' contacts, wherever available and necessary. Once such data is acquired, if phone or data networks are unavailable, SMC members can reach out to students through local contacts and trace them more efficiently. **In case of non-availability of data in this regard, the SMCs can coordinate with CSOs to gather accurate information about all the students enrolled in government primary schools across the State of Delhi.** This task can be efficiently undertaken by accounting for the unavailable data. On a need basis, region-specific data should be collected for reaching out to all the students enrolled in government schools.

- **Encouraging group learning**: There is a need to extend the Mission Buniyaad to student groups and initiate monthly meetings to engage in group activities, in the presence of a teacher following COVID protocols. Such monthly engagement through peer-learning and evaluation under a teacher will check the progress made through the worksheets and will **help keep track of the learning levels of the student in terms of access and reception of information through the mode of online teaching**. This entire exercise can prove beneficial in generating better learning outcomes in the absence of daily classroom interaction.

- **Assisting teachers with Online Teaching**: The Delhi government working with the District Institutes of Education and Training (DIETs), and, the State Council of Educational Research and Training (SCERT) needs to initiate **online workshops or videos as guides for teachers to conduct online classes**. Online groups should be used to circulate demonstrative classes to assist teachers who have no prior experience in online teaching. Mentor teachers can play a major role in occasionally inspecting the worksheets given to primary school students and the ways in which they are evaluated to check on the progress of the teachers with respect to online teaching and innovative and relevant practice sheet designing.

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