WED, MAR 31, 2021 | UPDATED 11:20 AM IST

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INDIA

Covid-19: A forcing function to overcome the digital divide in education

May 16, 2020, 4:13 PM IST / Prachi Windlass in Voices, India, Tech, TOI

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In response to Covid-19, India has been thrust into an unprecedented lockdown, which has created a sudden need for schools to quickly pivot to online learning. Government and low-fee private schools face significant obstacles in making the transition. From difficulty with students accessing online teaching, to a lack of
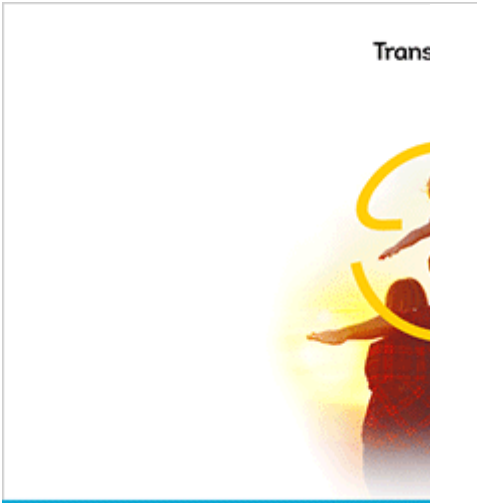
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stable internet access, to no/shared smartphone devices, to homes without adequate space for learning, to teachers struggling with teaching effectively in an online format, a number of challenges have left millions of children without any form of academic instruction. The pandemic hit fast and hard, and schools simply did not have enough time to train teachers and students for this new reality.

Some state governments have reacted quickly to find solutions for their students, including leveraging the support of civil society organizations. Haryana, Rajasthan, Himachal Pradesh, and Jharkhand — states that were already working towards school transformation —swiftly directed their teachers to form WhatsApp groups to help parents and students transition to a #GharPeSchool model, and are supporting their
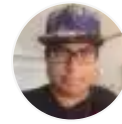
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schools with daily calendars mapped to student learning competencies, and guidelines for structured 1:1 weekly phone interactions between teachers and students. Recognizing that home digital access is often limited, some states are also adding other mediums like TV and radio.

The results of these efforts are encouraging. In Rajasthan, more than 20,000 WhatsApp groups cover 95 percent of schools and their students and parents. When user surveys were shared along with learning content in Rajasthan, 39,000 parents completed them without any nudge, and more than 90% of users — including students, parents, and teachers — responded positively. Himachal Pradesh reported close to two lac users, with more than three million page views on learning resources

within three days of the launch of the initiative. Teachers and parents are interacting more, and early data shows children and parents login at 9 a.m. on WhatsApp groups to check their lessons for the day.

While some states are better positioned than others to take on these challenges, the magnitude of this crisis requires an India-wide response with a combination of efforts from states, philanthropies, and industry partners. We have a great starting point with some early and key learnings that we can scale up:

1. <u>Familiar and simple is scalable</u>: Remote learning needs to be kept simple and the use of familiar platforms like WhatsApp increases the adoption and ease. Specialized ed-tech apps might be the next step but given their limited penetration in this target segment pushing them first

could delay the transition for millions of students. It is equally important to extend the principle of familiarity to content — ensuring online lesson plans and student resources are linked to regular classroom curriculum.

2. Sharing existing content well is more important than creating new content: It is essential that states use their time and resources to create new and innovative strategies to improve access to education, not recreate the wheel. We see the value in organizations tapping the huge repository of existing content for K-12 while states focus on execution and reaching as many households as possible. We all have a part to play. To fill in the gaps of what state governments can provide, we have come together with partner organizations — Samagra, Boston Consulting Group, Central Square Foundation,

Pratham, Khan Academy, Akanksha, Akshara, Education Alliance, Teach For India, Avanti, among many others — to make their existing content libraries and expertise available to teachers and students. States should focus on ensuring teachers are fully equipped for this new method of training and are reaching out to as many children as possible. Existing content libraries will need to be tagged to the state curriculum, but there is enough available to start homeschooling. Parallel messaging from state leadership to stress the importance of this initiative will increase the uptake in parents.

3. Parents and teachers are equal partners: Without the construct of the traditional school setting with a teacher for support, students need the help of their parents. Haryana's example of keeping the same schedule every day has helped parents and children,

especially when they are sharing a learning device. Teachers are recording and sending videos in Himachal and Rajasthan, which makes it easy for parents to understand what their children need to do.

Our collective work is far from done. There is a dire need to innovate education delivery models quickly in the face of this crisis. If the current situation extends into periods of switching between lockdowns and normalcy, we will all need to collaborate and prototype-test-scale-improve to help children succeed.

This is the time to ensure continuity of education for all our children so the gains we have made in education over the past few years continue to be meaningful and sustained. Fueled by the urgency created by Covid-19, together we can bridge the digital divide.

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