



# **An Assessment of the Primary Schools of Kumaon Division, Uttarakhand (India) during the Covid-19 Pandemic**

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## Abstract

In the wake of the new COVID-19 outbreak and resultant lockdowns, essential instruction across India has been severely influenced with a huge number of understudies out of school. When the lockdown started, despite, the geographical challenges and harsh physical conditions, many teachers devised new ways to engage with the students through phone, what's App calls, and video tools like YouTube etc. When the restrictions on movement of people started to ease, many teachers voluntarily paid home visits to distribute offline worksheets, shared their devices and even took help from volunteers of different NGOs. But the persistent low-level of learning outcomes during this pandemic has raised difficult questions. In the present paper an attempt has been made to excavate the practical underpinnings of the primary education system during the pandemic and also examines major themes in education and the current situation in particular to filter out four pillars through which we can evaluate the service delivery of government education in the state

**Keywords:** Pandemic, Primary Schools, Awareness, Literacy

## Introduction

In the wake of the new COVID-19 outbreak and resultant lockdowns, essential instruction across India has been severely influenced with a huge number of understudies out of school. As indicated by the Education Portal of Uttarakhand's Kumaon Division, Nainital 93,663 understudies have been influenced by COVID19 school terminations. For a youthful populace contending around the world, misfortune in instruction for a particularly extensive stretch conveys a gigantic expense for every single influenced partner.

One of the biggest challenges in the hilly terrains is the digital divide, exacerbated by poor Internet connectivity. One of the studies was conducted by the Additional directorate office; Nainital shows that only 46% of primary students in hilly regions have Internet access. When the lockdown started, despite, the geographical challenges and harsh physical conditions, many teachers devised new ways to engage with the students through phone, what's App calls, and video tools like YouTube etc. When the restrictions on movement of people started to ease, many teachers voluntarily paid home visits to distribute offline worksheets, shared their devices and even took help from volunteers of different NGOs. But the persistent low-level of learning outcomes during this pandemic has raised difficult questions.

To excavate the practical underpinnings of the primary education system during the pandemic, this study examines major themes in education and the current situation in particular to filter out four pillars through which we can evaluate the service delivery of government education in the state. These four pillars are:

- (i) Attendance;
- (ii) Engagement;
- (iii) Learning; and
- (iv) Well Being.

The paper then looks at how key institutions have implemented various policies and have fulfilled their roles. For example, it assesses how the Mid-Day Meal Program and other schemes are being administered in the present situation. In this paper an attempt has been made to look at the state bureaucracy's functions, in carrying out critical tasks and ensuring adhering to strict guidelines while implementing education policies during COVID-19. The paper then presents its major findings – an assessment of the achievements and success factors, as well as identification of the gaps. Overall, the study reveals reasons for the reverse migration of students from private to public schools and rejects the false hypothesis that state agencies in Kumaon division of Uttarakhand have failed to deliver quality education during these difficult, unprecedented times. The paper concludes with recommendations for decision makers on how to adapt to the 'new normal' with a clear strategy for primary education including a major push on addressing the digital divide and enabling effective e-learning for government school-children in a cost efficient manner.

## **METHODOLOGY & LIMITATION**

In this study, we evaluate a series of downstream effects caused due to COVID-19 in the education sector and the scaled-up efforts by the government to combat different challenges. A total of 18 blocks across four districts of Kumaon Division (Nainital, Almora, Bageshwar and Champawat) has selected for this study. The data have been collected from in-depth interviews with teachers, bureaucrats, policymakers, parents, and students through field research, Zoom, Google Meet, and Whats App video calls. The study was supplemented by various government guidelines and reports before and after the pandemic. However, the study suffers from the limitations of having a small sample size due to time constraints and unavailability of teachers in various blocks, especially in Pithoragarh district due to poor internet connection. The names of interviewees have been kept anonymous.

## **EVALUATION OF PERFORMANCE IN KEY FOCUS AREAS**

Below is an evaluation of how the system has fared in terms of four key focus areas:

### **A. ATTENDANCE**

In terms of the key educational performance metrics for the hill districts of Kumaon Division, an assessment of data from the Education Portal yields the following findings:

- No drop out case been reported during the COVID-19 crisis. Teacher absenteeism has been greatly reduced in the surveyed districts and several teachers have been seen to go above and beyond their regular duties to assist students at home.
- 52.5% of students have access to smartphones and the Internet. Attendance during lockdown is related to this variable, i.e. ability of students to participate online.
- The Supreme Court decision which directs states to supply Mid-Day meal has been regular even during the pandemic in Uttarakhand. A certain sum is put into the enrolled beneficiary bank account while dry ration like rice is either distributed at the public distribution shops or at the school (children in non-containment zone schools are called with their parents to collect their ration and offline assignments).

### **B. ENGAGEMENT**

- Several teachers started engaging with the students at a more personal and empathetic level through regular phone calls to rejuvenate them during the lockdown period.
- After the lockdown eased, teachers increased their interaction with the students while distributing offline worksheets door to door and helped them solve their assignments.
- They devised several methods like storytelling, organizing different competitions like spell bee, fancy dress to increase student engagement.
- The inclusivity of parents and the community has increased over the past few years. We see examples of this where school management committees have been instituted across the state involving locals, teachers, and the village head. Any decisions relating to infrastructure development is taken by this group.

**C. LEARNING**

- As a result of the new reality of the lockdown and children being unable to attend schools, the government developed multiple options to mitigate the loss of learning.
- The major limitation affecting the ability to provide quality online learning is that only 52% of households have smartphones. In the past also, e-material has been sent to students who can access it. In many places, students shared their devices with other students, helping to extend the reach of online teaching beyond device owners.
- Despite this, a major gap in access remains and almost half of the total students cannot be reached through digital mediums as of now. To address this issue, and provide support to students without access to smartphones, educational content was disseminated via Doordarshan Dehradun and radio for elementary classes as well.
- During the study visits, it was evident that some apps (e.g., DIKSHA and e-Pathshala) were being used by a majority of teachers to make learning more interesting, suggesting the further use of such apps to improve learning outcomes in students.

**D. WELL BEING**

- All of the surveyed households of enrolled students had minimum housing and two square meal available.
- The students surveyed, when asked several questions about COVID-19, were well informed about precautionary measures by the teachers.

- A majority of teachers informed that they had started inculcating various health and hygiene measures from March 2020, like training students to wash their hands and conducted several drills on such topics to make it a regular habit.
- The teachers regularly discussed and updated students and their parents with all the recent guidelines and helped the families maintain their overall wellbeing. In this capacity, they played a critical role during the most difficult phase of the pandemic.

## **V. BUREAUCRATIC NORMS IMPACTING EDUCATION**

The involvement of state education officers was evident in various blocks. Their major role is to ensure the proper dissemination of learning materials to children. It has been clear from our study that these officials have developed creative learning methods according to their area and worked with teachers to disseminate these to students.

In the study it was found that several state bureaucrats were in touch with the parents of students who have been enrolled and helped address concerns from parents about the uncertainty of the pandemic and school closures. In a few places, Civic agencies and officials were seen working together and assisting the teachers operating smart devices and helping enable other digital learning solutions. Overall, it can be said that the state bureaucracy has played a very supportive role in helping the teachers and school administrators in dealing with challenges caused by the pandemic.

## **MAJOR GAPS IDENTIFIED**

In addition to the primary challenge – that of the digital divide, enabling access to devices and data connectivity – there is a range of other issues impacting the education system which have been worsened by the pandemic and need to be grappled with.

The following is an assessment of the key gaps observed during the survey:

- The majority of single teacher schools are in interior regions excluding the model schools. Model schools are an initiative started by the Uttarakhand Government (total of 44 model schools in 4 districts surveyed). They have 3 teachers for different subjects like maths, science and one language subject. By contrast, in single teacher schools, it is logistically impossible for the teacher to reach out to every student effectively in a meaningful manner. When we look at the teacher-student ratio of 1 to 13, what we need to understand is this one teacher has to teach all 5 grades. The counter-argument is to practice multi-grade teaching, but this has a low percentile of

learning outcomes. While exploring the density of teachers in the state we find that teacher's scarcity is not the issue. Due to the sparse population and scheme for universal primary education, and thus opening an elementary school in every 1 km proximity, there is a mismanaged placement of teachers. We were also informed during the survey that often these schools are situated at some distance from the main area and are not located in the middle of the village due to improper planning and implementation.

- The teachers were observed to be engaged in a lot of paperwork. Even during the lockdown, they had to manage mid-day meal registers, updating learning outcomes, ensuring it reaches maximum students, correcting the assignments, and uploading it in several block-level groups. Overall, teachers are extremely overburdened with non-teaching work requirements, which seriously hampers their ability to teach to their maximum potential.
- Agriculture, which has always been a challenge in the hilly terrain, faced a further shortage of labour during this pandemic. A majority of girl students were expected to work on fields and complete household chores due to school closures. A large proportion of students from families owning patches of fields and animals were forced to spend time either grazing grass or carrying loads of grasses. It is thus understandable that the loudest demand for schools to re-open is from the children themselves as much as parents.
- Many parents have complained about the behavioral issues that arise from deviations from normal discipline in online classes amongst these young students. For example, during the classes or online submissions, students play online games or unnecessary scroll through the phone for long hours.
- The majority of the schools are run in the Hindi medium, and students face challenges when certain subjects migrate to English. For example, teachers revealed to us how Class 3 students loved environmental studies as a subject as it was engaging but now faced difficulty because it is being taught in English, causing them to start disliking the subject.
- Many students shared that they initially found online classes interesting and engaging as it was a new way of learning but as the lockdown period continued, they felt increasingly withdrawn from it.
- A very small portion of elementary teachers was found to be trained in digital devices. Either they learned it on their own or from relatives or colleagues. Middle school teachers and above have been given ICT training.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The study clearly indicates that, the education system of the state of Uttarakhand has overall done a commendable job of dealing with the Covid-19 crisis which has resulted in unprecedented disruption to the lives of students, their families, teachers, and the entire state education machinery which has worked overtime and creatively over the last several months.

However there is a need to urgently develop appropriate education content and delivery mechanisms to enable effective digital learning for primary students in government schools, who will always have socio-economic circumstances and challenges with home schooling due to lower literacy levels of parents in addition to the lack of hardware and connectivity. There is a range of simple, free, and easy to use tools such as what's App, PowerPoint, YouTube, etc. that can be used in conjunction with offline worksheets and textbooks to more effectively deliver critical educational content and ensure basic learning outcomes.

The most critical action item with immediate benefits is to provide proper training to teachers on regular interval basis on how to develop and use e-learning material and offline worksheets. There is a range of non-profit education service providers who can support these efforts and help the government and specific schools address this bottleneck in an effective and cost-efficient manner, i.e., requiring minimal government funding due to their philanthropic support. Workshops and seminars for teachers on how to use e-learning, and government-sponsored training and facilitation, can greatly help address the challenge of the digital divide.

Overall, the state needs to build a long-term strategy for 'the new normal' and even use this as an opportunity to improve the quality of the school system, administration, and curriculum, leveraging both the new digital tools and traditional classroom model. Besides, decisions on school openings and social distancing (e.g. to open schools on alternative days for different classes in non-containment zones), there need to be standard operating procedures for reopening schools which can be easily followed and monitored, as well as for determining responses in the event there are new cases or hotspots that emerge.

Tackling the new challenges thrown up by Covid-19 requires enormous commitment and creative thinking. Every policy which is being made in this sector will take time to bear fruit. The main focus of education administrators needs to remain on both inclusion or equity, how to integrate minority or marginalized groups, as well as the quality of learning outcomes, ensuring that students are not falling behind during this period of disruption.