

# What Bangladesh can learn from the reopening of US schools



MANZOOR AHMED

**A**BOUT 56 million children in 130,000 primary and secondary schools in the United States, including about six million students in 30,000 private schools, are returning to a second school year this autumn under the spell of the pandemic, according to the National Center for Education Statistics. About 13,000 autonomous school districts in the US manage the public schools under guidelines from the state and federal governments. The schools' funding also comes from the state and federal governments and local level taxation. An average of USD 13,000 is spent per public school student every year—and a total of over USD 700 billion or 6 percent of GDP—in the US.

By comparison, Bangladesh has half of the population of the US and about 30 million school students. Proportionately, Bangladesh has a larger child population. Its budget allocation for education for FY2021-22 is Tk 71,592 crore (USD 8.5 billion), which amounts to roughly USD 300 per student. The annual public education spending in the US is more than double the total GDP of Bangladesh.

Most schools in the US had suspended in-person schooling for various periods in the last school year, which ended this June. The large majority of students relied partially or fully on school-organised distant learning. The expectation now is for resumption of a large measure of normal school activities in the new academic year. By the end of August, 52 percent of adults were fully vaccinated in the US, while 61 percent received at least one jab. A project is underway to vaccinate children of age 12 and above. But the pandemic's sway, particularly the highly infectious Delta variant, continues quite severely in several states. The barriers to effective application of the protection measures—some of them politically driven—

cast a shadow on the expectations about normal school operations. There may be useful lessons for Bangladesh from their experience.

Questions that loom large now: Should children attend in-person classes at all? Beyond vaccinating all adults and now children over 12, should children be required to wear masks? What other measures should be taken?

Paediatrics experts Kanecia Zimmerman and Danny Benjamin, Jr, who tracked one million students in North Carolina through the last academic year, recently said that vaccination is the best way to prevent Covid-19, universal masking is a close second, and with vaccination and masking in place, in-school learning is safe and more effective than remote learning, regardless of community rates of infection.

The two researchers also insist that results can be achieved only by mandatory mask-wearing (*The New York Times*, August 10, 2021). They go on to suggest that once vaccination is available for all children and universal masking is enforced, it's reasonable for schools not to require quarantining or testing after exposure for asymptomatic children and adults. But school districts should keep using ventilation and social distancing and continue to perform routine testing for unvaccinated students.

The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in a report on August 27 (cited in the *Los Angeles Times*) mentioned the case of an unvaccinated, unmasked California elementary school teacher who came to school in May with symptoms, which she dismissed as allergy, and infected a dozen students, half her class, with the coronavirus. These children were all too young to be immunised. Altogether, 27 children and adults including four parents of the children were infected in the outbreak, which involved the Delta variant.

"A multipronged prevention strategy, including masking, physical distancing, testing, and most recently vaccination of children and adolescents [aged 12 years or older] will remain critical to reducing

transmission as more students return to the classroom," the report concluded.

An issue that is much in discussion is: With many students falling behind in learning, especially the underprivileged ones, how can they be helped to recover? Two main approaches are: a) Remediation or repeating what students have missed or did not learn; and b) Acceleration by focusing on what students need to know to participate in the class they will begin this year. Amy

that would focus on core learning content—Bangla and maths at the primary level, and Bangla, English, maths and science at the secondary level. This focus would apply both in classroom instruction and in public examinations.

The education authorities, especially the curriculum board, however, appear to be unwilling to stray from the trodden path. The board's plan is to teach as many lessons in all the subjects as the number of days

examinations on the non-core subjects in the streams of Humanities, Science and Commerce. At the primary level, the authorities plan to conduct the full Primary Education Completion Examination (PECE) when school reopens, though educationists consider it as well as the JSC examination (at the end of Class 8) unnecessary and counterproductive.

Successful "acceleration" of students requires support and resources. Teachers need technical advice, guidance and time for planning and assessing students to determine where they need help. They also need to learn about using ed-tech material to help their students.

The scale of resources that may be provided to schools in Bangladesh, of course, will be modest compared to the US, but extra resources have to be made available. As I argued in a previous column (on August 8), the current school year should be extended to June of 2022. Opportunistically, the school year should be changed permanently to September-June starting from this year. The current school year, if necessary, can be extended to July or August next year, foregoing summer vacation as part of the recovery plan.

The measures on school calendar, focus on core learning content in instruction and public exams, and additional resources to support schools and teachers are a must-do as essential elements of the learning recovery plan in an unforeseen emergency fraught with uncertainty.

The recommendations made by the Education Watch group and others regarding school re-opening will still apply. These include a step-by-step approach; ensuring safety measures in all schools with financial support from the government; health and education sector collaboration at the local level to protect and keep children, teachers and families safe; and involving local stakeholders—NGOs, parents and local government—in implementing and monitoring the learning loss recovery plan.

The Ministry of Education proposes to conduct the public SSC and HSC

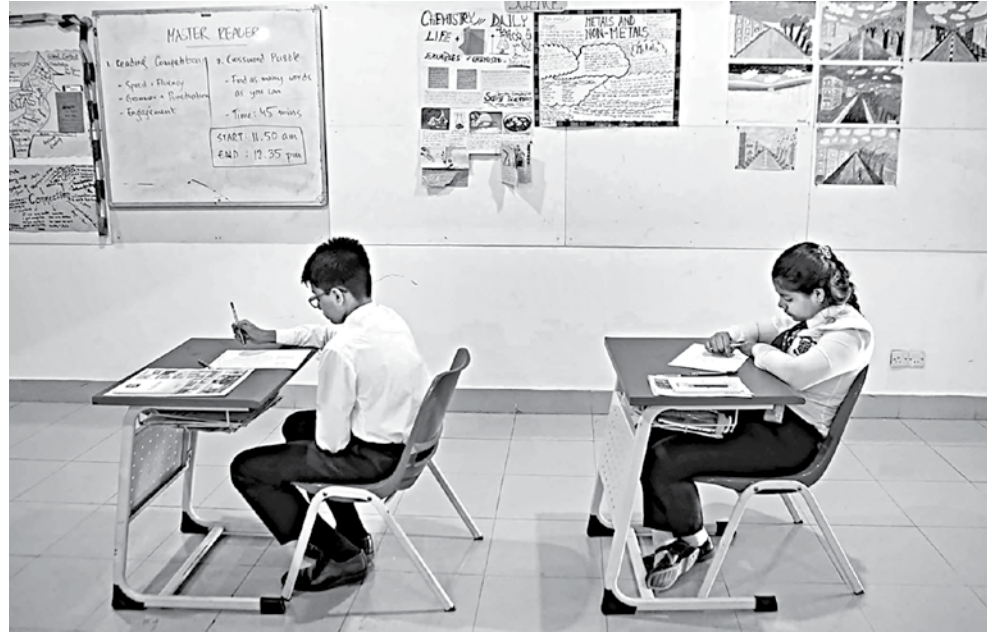


PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA

Takabori of Carnegie Learning, a Pittsburgh-based education technology support company, says, "Remediation is entrenched in the past: what students missed last year and what they need to redo. On the other hand, acceleration focuses on the present... moving students forward on grade level and setting them up for success with just-in-time training on required foundational skills."

The acceleration approach to overcoming learning loss is akin to suggestions made in Bangladesh about a learning recovery plan

will allow when schools reopen. What the students may learn, or if they will, does not seem to be the authorities' concern. They seem to be sticking to the present school calendar, though there may be very few instruction days left, if and when schools open. They have not responded to the suggestion for changing the school year to a September-June calendar as part of the recovery logistics.

The Ministry of Education proposes to conduct the public SSC and HSC

## Escaping the empires' graveyard



MOSTOFA SARWAR

**N**OW that the United States' destructive 20-year war in Afghanistan has ended, Afghans tremble at the last laugh of the Taliban. The world waits for the country's plunge back into the darkness of the Middle Ages under

the rule of extreme religious zealots. Many observers were shocked to see this outcome emerge from the deadly, two-decade nation-building effort of the United States. But this terrible fate was obvious to many, including me.

After receiving my East Pakistan runner-up trophy in the All-Pakistan Television General Knowledge Quiz competition at a national celebration event in Islamabad, the capital of Pakistan, I had the opportunity to visit several cities of Pakistan as a guest, sponsored by the government. My itinerary included Peshawar, the Khyber Pass, Jamrud Fort, and Landi Kotal—areas which are all inhabited by the ethnic Pashtun. That same culture constitutes the dominant majority of neighbouring Afghanistan.

At the end of a festival in Peshawar, I saw Pashtun children jumping on trucks and ox carts with guns hanging from their shoulders and belts of ammunition across their chests. While I was travelling through the Khyber Pass, I noticed children armed with rifles herding sheep in meadows. They appeared from and disappeared into caves and the many mountain passes that dot the sprawling landscape of the Hindukush mountain range. In the bazaar at Landi Kotal, guns were openly made and sold. Even to my young, non-military eyes, this did not seem like the place for anyone to wage a war.

Afghanistan is known as the "Empires' Graveyard," perhaps because in its more

recent history, after earlier conquests by the Achaemenid Persian, Greek Seleucid, Indian Maurya, and Turkic Timurid empires, Afghans have shown stubborn resistance to attempts by external forces and their proxies—the Safavid, Russian and British empires, and now the United States—to rule their land. Afghanistan is at the crossroads of famed conquerors, and is a roundabout of ancient Silk Road trade routes for commerce and conquest. Its inhabitants include conservative

America's Afghan war was initiated by the heinous 9/11 attacks perpetrated by al Qaida terrorists. On September 11, 2001, suicide bombers commandeered four commercial airplanes and used them as deadly projectiles, destroying the iconic Twin Towers in Manhattan, and damaging the Pentagon in Virginia. Al Qaida was sheltered by Afghanistan's Taliban government, who refused to hand over the 9/11 attack's masterminds to the United States. President



File photo of a US soldier keeping watch at an Afghan National Army (ANA) base in Logar province, Afghanistan.

PHOTO: REUTERS

and independent-minded warrior tribes living in a hostile geography—a lethal recipe for waging guerrilla warfare. It is not surprising when external attempts to transform the country's population in any fashion prove futile. It took more than 200 years to convert Afghans to Islam.

George W Bush declared war on October 7, 2001. The Taliban, together with al Qaida, ran for their lives, leaving Afghanistan and taking refuge in Pakistan.

After a quick military victory, the United States started a nation-building programme in Afghanistan with a huge occupying force. The

Taliban simultaneously waged a protracted guerrilla campaign from its sanctuaries inside Pakistan. With active American involvement, a democratic constitution was installed guaranteeing universal human rights for men and women. Billions of US dollars were spent to build infrastructure, schools, colleges, and hospitals, in addition to a massive Afghan army and police force. Two elected Afghan governments—the first headed by Hamid Karzai and the second by Ashraf Ghani—governed. The Taliban insurgency continued, becoming increasingly intense. The United States, with the token help of NATO forces, did the heavy lifting. Afghan government forces also fought, but rarely as an independent entity, as we have seen.

The United States paid a hefty price for trying to rebuild Afghanistan in the image of Western norm and polity, and the effort ends in resounding debacle. The 20-year project failed after spending over USD 2 trillion, sacrificing the lives of over 2,400 American service members, and bringing back more than 20,000 injured. Eight hundred thousand military personnel completed a tour of duty in the battlefields of Afghanistan.

The devastation for Afghan citizens has been similar. Half-a-million Afghans, mostly civilians, were killed or injured by American fire. Two million Afghans were forced to flee to neighbouring countries as refugees.

For all of this, "Operation Enduring Freedom" wrested power away from the Taliban for 20 years, only to give it back.

Both US President Joe Biden and his predecessor Donald Trump played a vital role in negotiating the final settlement with the Taliban. Trump concluded the Doha Agreement with the Taliban, agreeing to withdraw troops in exchange for a pledge to prevent al-Qaida from operating in Afghan regions controlled by the Taliban. The agreement was negotiated without Ashraf Ghani's administration, striking a devastating blow to the elected government's legitimacy,

and granting de facto legitimacy to the Taliban. And Biden's rapid withdrawal has caused immense suffering to friends of the United States. It did not go as planned.

Given the history, geography, ethnicity, and culture of Afghanistan, the United States' plan was probably doomed from the start. A unitary central government in Afghanistan is probably not a viable solution, and the Taliban government is destined to fall apart if it tries to put such a system into place. The Taliban's extreme Sunni Islam grip will not be able to resist the centrifugal force of various freedom-minded ethnicities that make up the rest of Afghanistan. The Mujahideen governments in the 1990s learned this lesson the hard way. Various ethnic players within those failed governments shared politico-religious understandings from the teachings of Sunni Islamic theologians. But when they took power after defeating the atheist USSR and its proxies, their religious glue fell apart under the tremendous pressure of anti-central tribal forces. A loose confederation of autonomous states of various ethnic groups could be a better choice. We will see.

At the end of the day, did the United States learn anything? I hope so. America should better evaluate the risks, rewards, and costs—blood, money, resources—before embarking on another nation-building adventure. It should look to lessons from the collapse of older empires stretched thin due to unnecessary wars. Perhaps in the future, it should focus on using surgical military operations to capture the perpetrators of attacks on its soil—with less blood of its brave soldiers spilled and less of its children's money spent. And the United States should redouble its efforts to keep better, sharper watch for future attacks by deranged monsters.

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**QUOTABLE Quote**

**KIMBERLE WILLIAMS CRENSHAW**  
(born May 4, 1959)  
American lawyer

*When feminism does not explicitly oppose racism, and when anti-racism does not incorporate opposition to patriarchy, race and gender politics often end up being antagonistic to each other, and both interests lose.*

**CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH**

**ACROSS**

- 1 Fleet unit
- 5 Location
- 9 Suggestions
- 11 City on the Loire
- 13 Available
- 14 Belly button type
- 15 Sense of self
- 16 U-235, for one
- 18 Made a home
- 20 Dandy
- 21 Slate source
- 22 High-elev. places
- 23 Print units
- 24 "Zip-A-Dee-Doo—"
- 25 Price holders
- 27 Clan symbol

**DOWN**

- 1 Pumps, e.g.
- 2 Door parts
- 3 Madonna song
- 4 School org.
- 5 Arose
- 6 Sullen look
- 7 No longer in danger
- 8 Stumble over
- 10 Kitchen goofs
- 12 Percolates
- 17 Notice
- 19 Works leather
- 22 Swimmer
- Biondi
- 24 Buck
- 25 Frat party costumes
- 26 Kitchen come-ons
- 27 Bus. card no.
- 28 Succeeded
- 30 Old poets
- 31 Like some questions
- 33 Love song, often
- 37 Mauna —

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**TUESDAY'S ANSWERS**

C	H	E	F	A	P	A	R	T	
R	E	V	E	P	C	A	N	E	R
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R	E	E	K	S	D	A	D	S	

**BEETLE BAILEY** BY MORT WALKER

WHAT'S WRONG WITH YOU NOW?  
I TWEAKED MY BACK.  
LET ME UN-TWEAK IT FOR YOU.  
YOU'RE NOT A CHIROPRACTOR !!

**BABY BLUES** BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT

MOM, I NEED TO USE THE RESTROOM. CAN WE STOP?  
ZOE, THE MOTORHOME HAS A BATHROOM. REMEMBER?  
YEAH, BUT...  
I DON'T WANT TO GET BUCKED OFF THE SEAT AGAIN.  
THAT WAS A POTHOLE! NOT MY FAULT!