

Schools starting to reopen today at long last

Care must be taken to keep students and staff safe

Wholeheartedly welcome the resumption of in-person classes at schools all over the country in phases starting today. After a hiatus of almost a year and a half since the pandemic began, it is reassuring to know that students will finally be able to return to their classrooms. This is a step in the right direction if our goal is to recover the learning loss students suffered during the pandemic and to try to regain some semblance of normalcy.

As per the current plan, HSC and SSC candidates for 2021 and 2022, and PECE candidates for 2021 will attend classes every day. Students of classes 1 to 4 and 6 to 9 will be attending classes in person once a week and primary school students will attend at most three classes a day.

Though this decision from the government could have come much earlier—given that most other commercial, social, and economic activities went on relatively normally in-between lockdowns—we are pleased that it is finally happening.

However, it is crucial that health and safety precautions are practiced vigilantly by school staff and students. Even though the rate of Covid-19 infections has lowered significantly from what it was a couple months ago during the peak of the second wave in the country, the threat of a surge still remains. We commend the Directorate of Primary Education (DPE) for issuing an order stating the responsibilities of all stakeholders in reopening schools amid the pandemic. Such directives as keeping schools shut in areas the government deems to be “red zones”, ensuring mask-wearing and social distancing, and allowing only two students to sit on each long bench in a classroom will go a long way in ensuring the safe reopening of schools.

Besides this, though, we also hope that all school premises have been thoroughly cleaned and that authorities have actively tried to keep their schools free from Aedes mosquito larvae, given the disturbing rise in dengue cases nationwide. Children may be less affected than adults when it comes to Covid-19, but the same cannot be said for the prevalent dengue virus strain, which has infected over 2,000 people in the first week of this month alone.

We hope the reopening of schools will go smoothly and that the government and relevant authorities already have plans in mind for any potential crisis that may arise. It is reassuring to know that many students who were deprived of education due to not having proper access to digital learning resources will again be able to study in a familiar and supportive learning environment. That said, we would urge school and college authorities to prioritise the safety of students and staff at every step of each reopening phase.

Take action against wilful defaulters

Our economy is being dragged down by them

We are delighted to hear the current president of FBCCI, the apex trade organisation of the country, call for the punishment of wilful defaulters of bank loans which, as of June this year, amounts to nearly one lakh crore—a rise of 11.80 percent in the last six months and 3.21 percent compared to last year. Defaulting bank loans or non-performing loans (NPL), has been with us for many decades now. Successive governments have treated them with kid-gloves and have thus allowed them to not only exist, but also grow to the present state. What is an aberration in any well run banking system anywhere else in the world has become a common practice in our case.

It is important to distinguish between defaulters and wilful ones. The former category are the product of circumstances and the latter create their own to justify not repaying the banks. It is the wilful defaulters—people who deliberately and in a planned manner do not pay their scheduled instalments—who create the havoc in the system. These people are playing with the depositors' money, making a mockery of the financial laws of the land and are essentially defrauding the depositors.

This paper has been waging a war against these elements who, we feel, have been given too many chances, too much flexibility and pampered in ways that have sent a wrong signal as to the seriousness of the authorities to deal with them. Time and again their loans were rescheduled, with each rescheduling interest rates being lowered or part of it written off and instalments made easier.

Each time a loan defaulter is allowed to go free we are discounting a genuine borrower who ends up repaying higher interest rates than the wilful defaulter. It is time we really become serious about reducing our NPLs. The rising trend is dangerous for the health of our banking system. We greatly appreciate the call of the FBCCI president but must point out that one time call will hardly remove the malaise. What is needed is concerted action by the business community and the banking sector working together for this national cause.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Stop border killings

Every year, multiple citizens of Bangladesh become victims of border killings. Reportedly, in 2020, the BSF killed 48 Bangladeshis.

If anyone commits a crime at the border, let them be brought under the law. Despite several rounds of talks between Bangladesh and India, the border situation has not changed. But sincere efforts by India can help stop border killings of Bangladeshis.

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Children's learning and wellbeing, not testing, is the priority



MANZOOR AHMED

12. Education Minister Dipu Moni announced on September 5. The SSC and HSC exams are planned to be held in November and December, respectively.

State Minister of Primary and Mass Education Zakir Hossain said the next day that plans are underway to hold the primary completion exam (PECE) at the end of November and early December with a shortened syllabus on all six subjects.

Schools remained closed for the better part of two school years and students were deprived of their normal school life. Children and their families are still



Physical and mental well-being of children and helping them return to a meaningful learning process should be the priority. PHOTO: STAR

subject to the trauma of the pandemic and the disruption of life and livelihood. Emotional stress and the mental health effects of the pandemic on children have been severe, according to surveys and expert opinion. In light of that, how justified is the single minded-focus of the education authorities on holding the exams?

Ever since the PECE (at the end of grade five) and JSC (at the end of grade eight) national examinations were introduced in 2009 and 2010, education experts have been questioning the need and value of adding these high stake examinations to the existing SSC and HSC examinations (at the end of grades 10 and 12). With the hindsight of a decade, it has become obvious that the two additional exams for the young children have not helped to improve pedagogy in schools or the learning outcome for children. Instead, the exams

have diverted the attention and energy of teachers, parents and students to preparing and securing high scores at any cost in the public exams. As documented by Education Watch study (2014), these have created a new industry of coaching centres, guidebooks, mock tests, second guessing of probable exam questions, memorising answers, and even criminal activities related to question paper leaks and cheating in exams.

The simple logic seems to have been forgotten that it is teaching and learning in the classroom, not testing and exams, that help students and improve quality of education. There is an important role for assessing student's learning in good pedagogy. A teacher has to ensure that students are learning every day and making progress during the school year. This is known as formative assessment in contrast to summative assessment, such as the public exams and the annual exams in schools. Regrettably, in our schools, formative assessment as a tool for pedagogy is neglected, while formal exams, especially the national ones, are

mathematical problems, which would be a challenge for a student at levels two or three grades higher. The girl spent a whole day trying to understand and answer the first 28 questions and in desperation turned to her father for help. One wonders what purpose is served by this kind of testing, except perhaps to justify to parents the high fees they charge; and adding to the mental stress of the child.

A conundrum seems to have escaped the attention of the decision-makers as the school restarts. It is difficult to decide at what grade level children are ready to restart. Should it be where they were last year when school closed, or one grade higher now where they would normally be without Covid-19. It is almost the last quarter of the current school year and by the time the trial and error of the phased reopening is carried out, the year will be over. Come January 2022, should the students then be in the next higher grade—skipping two grades without much teaching undertaken in school? Whatever the education authorities' narrative about online and distant teaching and weekly “assignments” may be, most observers agree that the large majority of students, who live in rural areas and belong to low income families, were practically out of touch with learning activities for most of two academic years.

The official thinking seems to be that—regardless of total school shutdown for almost two academic years—students who were in grade three in March 2020, should be considered in grade four in 2021 and would be in grade five in January 2022. But with no schooling for most of two years, are the students prepared for the lessons in their new grade level? How will the teachers adjust and adapt their lessons for the students' level of readiness? How will the students cope with the new grade level content without the pre-requisites learned earlier? Will the accumulated deficits handicap a generation in their future learning, except perhaps the few fortunate ones who are highly gifted or whose families can afford expensive private tutoring? Should there be a rapid assessment of students' core skill level when school restarts to decide where they should be placed?

An alternative approach is, of course, a set pattern of examinations and testing, for which students are drilled to memorise the answers in school and in coaching centres and they pass their exams. Acquiring the knowledge and competencies from studying the subjects is not necessary to pass these exams. Is this desirable, though this seems to be the accepted practice in our schools?

The decision-makers have forgotten or are not willing to admit that when schools run normally before the pandemic, the majority of students did not acquire the basic competencies in Bangla and maths, i.e., literacy and numeracy, expected at the grade level by the national curriculum. This outcome unfortunately has been revealed by national student assessment (NSA) at the

primary level and learning assessment at secondary institutions (LASI). It is highly likely that the situation has further aggravated, especially for the disadvantaged children from low income families.

The Directorate of Secondary Education claims that late last year, 94 percent of the students collected assignments from schools and returned them. It is not known whether the students' work were marked properly by teachers, how well students performed or how credible was the reported data from schools. But on the basis of this information, it was claimed that students were very much engaged in learning. The officials seem to live in a make-believe world of their own!

The key messages, emphasised by me in an earlier op-ed (“To open or not to open schools,” ...The Daily Star, May 31, 2021) remain valid. First, going for reopening in stages observing health and safety protocol is the right decision, but more effort is needed for coordinated planning by health and education authorities, especially at the local level. Secondly, a learning loss recovery plan has to be formulated and implemented with at least a three year time-line including extension of the current academic year by six months to June 2022, and opportunistically, changing school calendar permanently to September-June.

There are also pedagogy, curricular arrangements, teacher support and learning assessment elements which need attention. Curriculum shortening and public exams have to be based on epistemological reasoning focusing on “core competencies”, rather than sticking to the whole gamut of subjects in the syllabus. The latter path seems to be favoured by the officials. PECE and JSC examinations this year should be abandoned and a sound alternative should be considered for the future. Abridged SSC and HSC exams should be held on core subjects early next year, instead of rushing to exams within this calendar year.

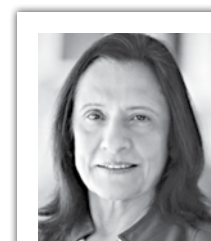
Thirdly, effective management and implementation of the recovery plan is critical with upazila-based and institution-based planning, work teams formed involving non-government stakeholders and adequate financing. The financial support should include institutions, teachers and students currently outside of government support. Finally, the short-term actions have to be placed within a medium term and longer term framework.

The pandemic is not over yet. Physical and mental well-being of children and helping them return to a meaningful learning process should be the priority. Students falling behind by a year, if necessary, will not be the end of the world, if a proper learning recovery plan is implemented effectively.

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Plan to build back better

Increased public investments in health must be allocated towards strengthening primary healthcare services



POONAM KHETRAPAL SINGH

including in the WHO South-East Asia Region—continue to aggressively respond, battling new and more transmissible variants. Social and economic disruptions continue.

The Covid-19 crisis is not over—far from it. We have many more months ahead. Global vaccine inequities continue to be a challenge, causing avoidable disease and death, and risking the emergence of new variants. If you are eligible, get vaccinated. Whatever one's vaccination status, continue to take precautions: Wear a mask, wash hands and watch distance. Avoid crowded places, close-contact settings, and confined and enclosed spaces. We must not let down our guard.

The pandemic will soon enter its third year. In addition to Covid-19, the region faces a range of pressing threats, from emerging and re-emerging diseases, to natural disasters and climate-related weather events. In 2021 alone, India, Indonesia and Timor-Leste have responded to floods. Indonesia and Nepal have responded to earthquakes. In all countries of the region, the need of the hour is to strengthen capacities to prevent, prepare for, respond and recover from Covid-19 and other health emergencies, and to accelerate progress in all areas of health, towards our eight Flagship Priorities and the health-related Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

We know what is required. Strong health systems that are primary healthcare (PHC)-oriented, and which leave no one behind, create populations that are

healthier, more productive and financially secure. Resilient health systems are the bedrock of emergency preparedness and response, and ensure that when acute events occur, essential health services can be maintained.

In ordinary times, every dollar spent on PHC-oriented health systems yields an average return of at least nine to one. In lower-middle-income countries, that return can more than double, and accelerates progress on other SDG targets, such as zero poverty, decent employment and gender equality. Consider that in September 2020, the Global Preparedness Monitoring Board estimated that it would



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take the world 500 years to spend as much on investing in preparedness—including on PHC-oriented health systems—as it was losing due to Covid-19.

Countries of the region unanimously agree: Action to build back better essential health services cannot and must not wait. And they have a clear plan on how it should be done, as detailed in a “declaration” issued at the 74th Session of the WHO Regional Committee.

First, health leaders will mobilise leadership and accountability across

sectors, with full recognition of the need for a health-in-all-policies approach that addresses social, economic and environmental determinants of health, and which empowers communities. Governance of the health sector in particular will be strengthened, including through greater oversight and engagement with the private sector and civil society organisations.

Second, increased public investments in health that are allocated towards strengthened PHC services, enhanced human resources for health, and increased access to essential medical products. Since 2019, WHO has advocated that all

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times, empowering local networks, and responding to on-the-ground needs as and when they arise.

Fourth, leveraging the potential of traditional systems of medicine, as well as key innovations in digital and disruptive health technology. We must draw on our past in a way that is safe, effective and well-regulated. We must embrace our future in a way that is appropriate and sustainable, and which integrates technologies into existing systems.

Fifth, strengthening partnerships. Covid-19 has shown that robust and reliable bilateral, multilateral and public-private partnerships are critical to emergency response and to maintaining essential health services. Such partnerships must continue to be strengthened, not only to anticipate and respond to emerging needs, but to feed into and support an overall vision that is cohesive, and which is aligned with our long-term targets and goals—our Flagship Priorities and the SDGs.

We have before us a once-in-a-century opportunity to strengthen and transform health systems, accelerating a health and economic recovery that is more equitable, resilient and sustainable for all. The future belongs to the bold.

Dr Poonam Khetrapal Singh, WHO South-East Asia Regional Director.