

Digital Education in India: Will students with disabilities miss the bus?

**SWABHIMAN – State disAbility Information and Resource
Centre, Bhubaneswar**



Children with disability run a huge risk of dropping out of school because of not being able to cope with the switch to online/digital medium of instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic which has led to closure of schools. Two surveys conducted by Swabhiman, a non-profit, working for the rights of disabled people, particularly children, show the current extreme vulnerability of CwDs. Swabhiman's Dr. Sruti Mohapatra said that an underlying reality was that children from government schools belonged to poor families, and a large proportion of them were not users or owners of smartphones which are being used for online education.



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Foreword

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Foreword

Children with disability in India are supported by two important legislations so that they have an inalienable right to education. While the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act or Right to Education (RTE) Act protects the right of all children to education, the Rights of People with Disabilities Act further guarantees the right to education of children with disability. Yet, documentary evidence shows that a large number of children with disability are not in school, and that they are at a huge risk of dropping out early.

A 2019 UNESCO report showed that 75% of children with disability at age 5 did not enter school, 25% of them between 5 and 19 years were not in any school or educational institution. With promotion to higher classes, students continued to drop out. Fewer girls than disabled boys attended school, while many of them preferred special schools run by the National Institute of Special Schooling over regular schools. This is due to a lot of gaps between policy and implementation and a lack of coordination between various departments and units of the government which work on various aspects related to persons with disability, including students.

In this background, the context of the lockdown and restrictions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, set Swabhiman, State disAbility Information and Resource Centre, working for the rights of persons with disability, in Odisha, to conduct surveys to assess the well-being of children with disabilities, and their adaptability to the changed learning environment. The findings show a larger dropping out trend from the inaccessible digital learning system.

Dr. Sruti Mohapatra
Chief Executive Officer

Acknowledgement

Swabhiman (DLU-East), along with members of Odisha State disAbility Network and students with disabilities in Odisha, conducted a survey to assess the education of children with disabilities in post Covid19 phase. This report is a first step in the direction of more comprehensive and elaborate surveys and research in this critically important area of Inclusive education in the post Covid Digital Learning period. Coordinated effort between different agencies of government, and between government-non government and expert bodies; and large budgetary allotment is the need of the hour.

This survey would not have been possible without the contribution and support of Odisha State disAbility Network partners and students of Odisha. We express our thanks and gratitude. We are deeply grateful to Arman Ali, Executive Director NCPEDP (National Centre for the Promotion of Employment of Disabled People) who enabled setting up of the DLU-East, introduced us to the World Bank inclusive education team, and also helped in publicising the report. We are thankful to Akhila Sivdas and CFAR team for giving the report visibility. My sincere thanks to members of NDN (National disability Tulika Das of Sanchar (WB), Srinavasalu of NdPO (Telengana) and Arun Kumar Singh from Jharkhand Vikalang Manch for their views. We thank all our team members, volunteers, parents and teachers who made this report possible.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background

The United Nations World Declaration on Education for All (EFA), in 1990, endorsed the rights of all children, including children with disabilities, to get education in regular schools. As India was a signatory to EFA, Parliament made 93rd Amendment in 2001, to uphold Government's pledge to Education for All, which in Sanskrit translates to Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA). Presently rechristened SMTA (Samagra Siksha Abhiyan), is further strengthened by international UNCRPD 2006, national laws - Right to Education Act 2009 and Rights of People with Disabilities Act 2016. India has thus progressed considerably in developing a strong legal framework for the protection of the educational rights of both children with disabilities. India's consolidated education policy is a huge step in bringing education and socialisation in the lives of children with disabilities, and empathy and diversity into the horizon of children without disabilities, and thus laying the foundation for a more just and equitable future for all.

However, UNESCO report (2019), N for Nose, depicts an unhealthy picture of the education of children with disabilities stating that

- 75% of Children with disabilities at age 5 do not enter school.
- 25% of Children with disabilities between the ages of 5-19 are not in any school or educational institution.
- As the children get promoted to higher classes, so also the number of those continuing school drops.
- The number of girls is far below that of boys among children with disabilities.
- A big percentage of Children with disabilities prefer NIOS over regular schools.
- There are many gaps in both the RTE Act and the RPwD Act, and no coordination, with regards to authorities, norms and standards to be followed etc.

Hence, further measures are needed to ensure quality education for every child to achieve the goals of Agenda 2030 and more specifically Sustainable Development Goal 4.

1.2. Impact of Covid19

Observing the thinning attendance in schools, mostly government schools, government took a decision and according to Times of India (16/03/2020) a government order from School and Mass Education department, Government of Odisha, read "All Government, Aided, Public and Private Schools of the State will remain closed and examination of all classes i.e. from class I to IX and Class-XI stands postponed." It further instructed teachers, not to attend schools but directed them to be available over the phone for any specific instructions. This followed nation-wide. Overnight, students with disabilities and their families were burdened with both lack of socialization and mid-day meals. Quantifying the impact of disappearance of an ecosystem – school, peers, books and materials, one hot meal is challenging.

On 20/03/2020, Swabhimani formally closed office for a week, which was extended to 31st of March and then till 3rd of May 2020. One of Swabhimani's focus area is Inclusive Education and we have named it as "ADDHYAYAN." Addhyayan's vision is to provide a support system where every child and youth with disability can grow up healthy, protected from harm and educated, so they can reach their full potential, get employment and live with dignity. Its various projects are:

- Anjali Scholarships for meritorious college students – are awarded to meritorious students with disabilities who are unable to support their college education. Scholarship amount enables purchase of books, payment of mess fees, transport expenses and such expenses which are necessary but not provided by college

authorities. buying memory cards for phones, photocopying, reader and scribe payment etc.

- The Scholar Enrichment Program - aims at providing educational support to meritorious students to prepare them for competitive examinations, personality development and create leadership qualities.
- Teacher Support to special schools - Very few teachers are being allotted to government special schools. To fill the gap, we appoint qualified unemployed youth with disabilities as teachers in the schools. Thus, supporting both schools and individuals.
- Saksham Educational Support for school students from slum areas - Children with disabilities studying in government schools, from slum areas, are provided all round support through this to ensure retention, hone their skills and get established in life.
- Audio Books production
- Braille kits distribution – To students from poor economic backgrounds.
- Braille books printing
- YLTEP - Our youth with disabilities are not adequately prepared with the life skills needed to succeed in our increasingly interconnected 21st century society and economy, by building their capacities, inculcating leadership qualities and preparing them to get good career opportunities

On 23rd March we started a telephonic survey to assess the health and well being our beneficiaries from the slums, as these are unclean places with not much emphasis on hygiene. Though most children were doing well, we got a sense of restlessness among many of our students and few expressed annoyances for being confined to the four walls. This became a routine weekly activity. A rapid assessment was conducted involving 1048 respondents with disabilities from across Odisha. It was found that there were four areas of concern that were common to most respondents.

- Food and Essentials
- Financial Stress
- Health, Care Giver and Assistive Devices
- Communication and Accessible Information

When asked why were they at a greater risk, the four common responses were:

- Physical barriers to access hygiene
- Need to touch things
- Difficulty in enacting social distance
- Difficulty in accessing information

At this point the issues were more about relief, disability pension, home delivery of medicines, special passes to reach hospital and therapy centers but no reference to education. Accordingly, relief operations were initiated.

In last week of March, Swabhiman developed a questionnaire and started taking feedback from all beneficiaries of Swabhiman in past three years and members of OSdN (Odisha State disAbility Network). The questionnaire had only 3 questions on education (Annexure 1).

- Has the lockdown for COVID19 restricted the individual or child's studies?
- If yes, is there any alternative way of learning proposed?
- Do you have any learning materials?

An important finding was that education is highly affected because children with disabilities do not have any learning materials with them. The most important follow up of this finding was initiation of one to one counselling so as to provide and engage the child with lots of home based activities like drawing, craft etc. We also provided e-learning facilities to those who have

the smart phones with them. By mid-April, a picture was clear that, few students/children joined the classes on a regular basis, some intermittently and some never came online. In the first week of May we were introduced by Arman Ali, Executive Director of NCPEDP, to the World Bank's Disability Inclusion team to conduct survey to understand if learners with disabilities and their families have access to the supports they need to continue learning while schools are closed due to COVID-19. This survey gave us further awareness on the struggle at grassroots by parents for education of the children with disabilities. The urgency of the survey was also necessitated by the fact of Swabhiman being part of several detailed discussions in online platforms which led to important reports being published. First was, "COVID-19: Issues, Challenges, and the Suggestions for the Inclusion of persons with disabilities." The report was the outcome of the meetings organized by ASTHA, New Delhi. Second was, "Locked Down and Left Behind (A Report on the Status of Persons with Disabilities in India During the COVID – 19 Crisis), an outcome of the deliberations initiated by NCPEDP, New Delhi. Third was, "Written Evidence to International Development Committee of UK Parliament - Humanitarian Crisis Monitoring: Impact of Coronavirus COVID-19, by the Commonwealth Disabled People's Forum. Fourth was the South Asia Covid19 Comprehensive report.

In the meanwhile Government of Odisha started online classes. New Indian Express wrote "Despite limited resources, the Government is taking all measures to offer digital learning to students during this crisis. While teachers have been asked to use NCERT-recognised Diksha app to impart online teaching to Class IX and X students, WhatsApp groups have been formed in schools for distribution of notes and online classes for the students." But this was not in an accessible format. Though UNESCO came out with many apps and resources for remote learning, we found it mostly in English, and had general curricula. We also contacted Aveti Learnig and Books Rapid who have converted all textbooks of state schools in Odisha to online resources, however none were in alternate format.

The present findings are based on two surveys. In total, we covered 3627 respondents from different areas of Bhubaneswar, urban and rural slum areas, across Odisha, from other states, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Tripura, Chennai, Sikkim, Nagaland, Haryana, Jammu etc. 303 houses were physically visited, and 86 interviews were conducted.

1.3. Objectives of the Survey 1

- To find out how children with disabilities were continuing their education in post lockdown state.
- To find out if there were any difficulties related to attending and learning in digital classes which was a completely new learning environment for most.
- To find out the concern of parents relating to their children's education.
- To find out ways for successful and meaningful education of children with disabilities.

1.4 Objectives of the Survey 2

- To find out the number of students who have smart phones
- To find out the usages of smart phone by beneficiaries/ their family members.
- To find out their internet connectivity and data availability
- To find out alternative ways of teaching through online education
- To find out the percentage of people who know about digital/ virtual education

1.5 Scope

1.5.1 Respondents

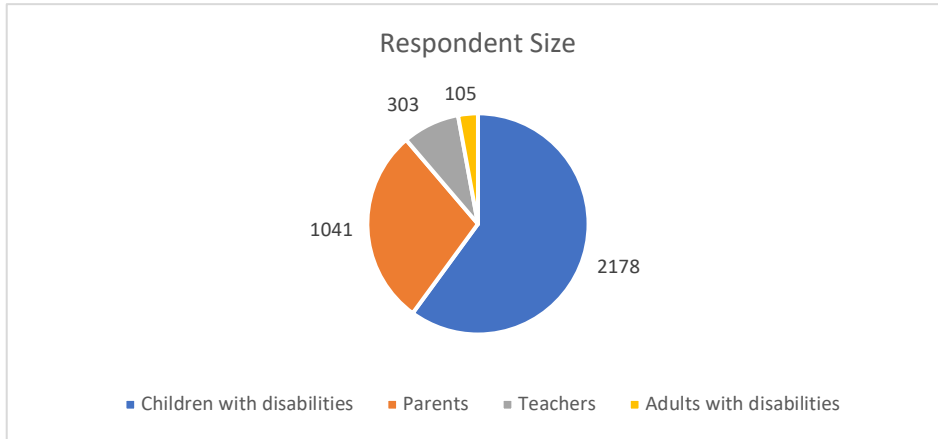
Numbers

2178 children from class I to XII

1041 parents with 839 mothers

303 teachers from class I to XII

105 adult persons with disabilities

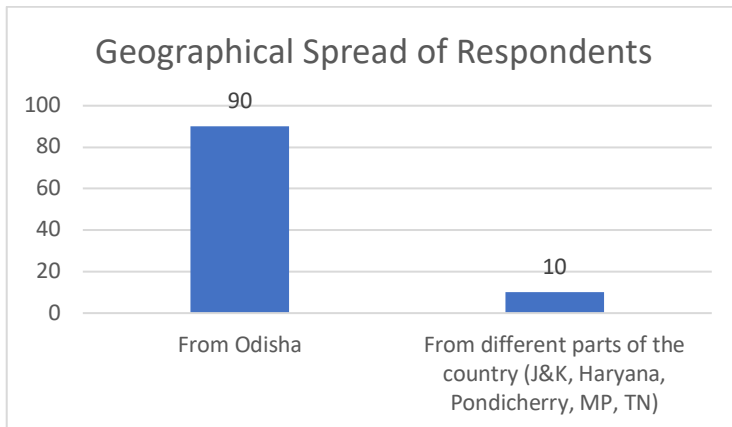


1.5.2 Location

Geographical Location

90% respondents from Odisha

10% from different parts of the country (J&K, Haryana, Pondicherry, MP, TN)



1.5.3 Categories of Disabilities

Disability Categories

Orthopedically Impaired

Visually Impaired

Speech and Hearing Impaired

Intellectually Disabled

Multiple Disorders

1.5.3 Methodology

1.5.4 Continuation of Education

1.5.5 Student Categories

CONTINUATION OF EDUCATION

56.48% students are continuing their study and the rest 43.52% will drop out or not continue their study because only 56.48% had smartphone, either personally, or collectively in the family.

STUDENT CATEGORIES

- Upper Primary Level students
- High School Students
- Class Xth
- Class XII, +2. Polytechnic, Engineering and ITI

1.4. Impact of Covid19

METHODOLOGY

The survey questionnaire was prepared by Swabhiman in consultation with experts. The questionnaire focussed on eliciting both information and opinions of the four major stakeholders in education – students, teachers, parents and people with disabilities. Over online meetings all the surveyors were explained the objectives and the information that was to be gathered from each category of stakeholder. The findings and recommendations are compiled together in this report. Survey was conducted both physically and digitally.

- Telephonic survey
- Emails
- Physical visit from house to house
- Online and telephonic interviews

2. IMPORTANT FINDINGS AND OBSERVATIONS

Students in government schools are from poor economic backgrounds. Due to their financial condition or personal issues, they are not using smart phones. We covered all the details if they had own phones, or family had one, or siblings or other close relatives, living next door, about whatsapp group classes question-answer session, teaching practices through Sikhsya/Diskhya, or other apps that used by teachers for the regular classes, data connection, knowledge etc.

Of the 56.5% students who are struggling yet attending classes (2049 students approximately), irregularly, underneath is the availability of various services/possession of knowledge.

2.1 Priority Concerns

Parents of Children with Disabilities

Teacher are not giving attention to CwDs – 90%

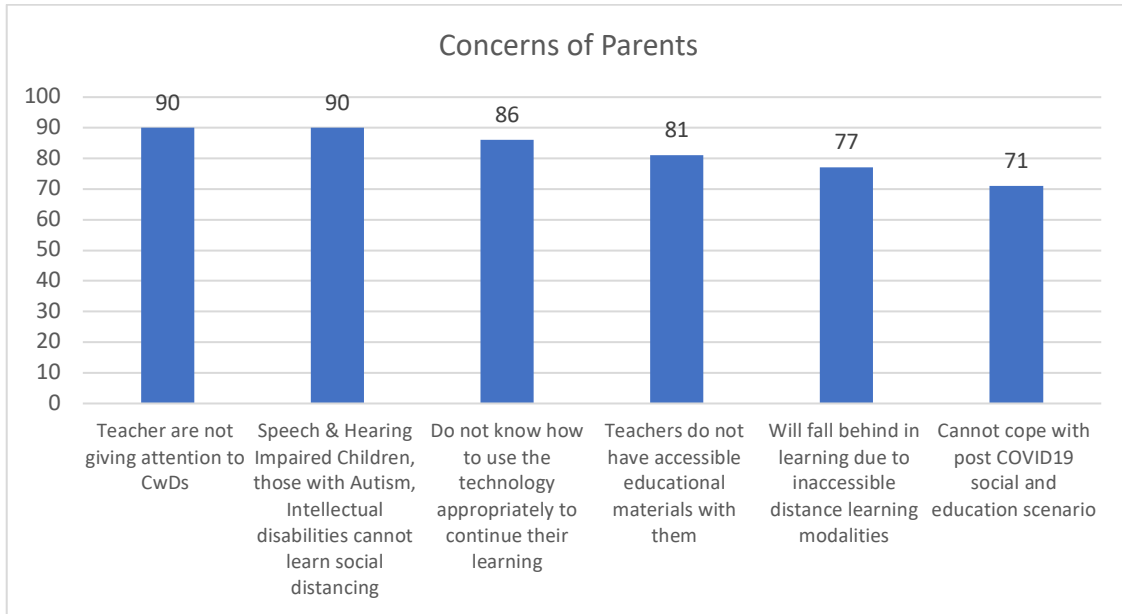
Speech & Hearing Impaired Children, those with Autism, Intellectual disabilities cannot learn social distancing – 90%

Do not know how to use the technology appropriately to continue their learning – 86%

Teachers do not have accessible educational materials with them – 81%

Will fall behind in learning due to inaccessible distance learning modalities – 77%

Cannot cope with post COVID19 social and education scenario – 71%



Teachers of Children with Disabilities

Maintaining social distancing, use of mask and handwashing among CwDs – 90%

Teaching those with learning disorders, autism and LV without touching – 79%

Students do not have smartphones and computers at home – 64%

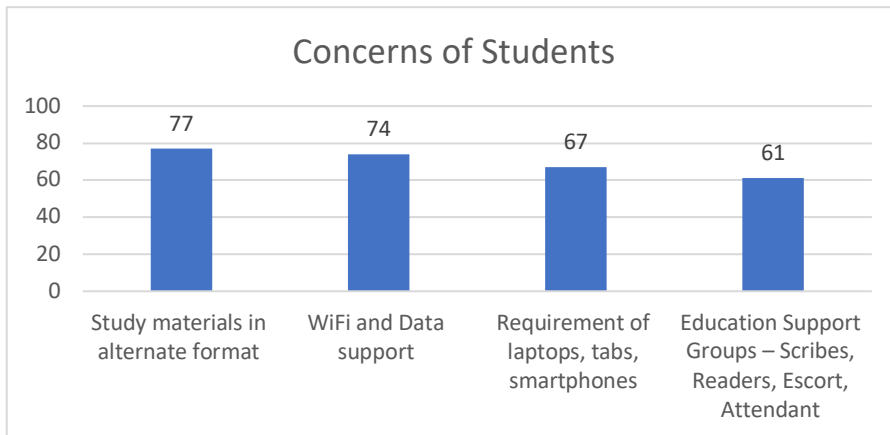
Students with Disabilities

Study materials in alternate format – 77%

WiFi and Data support – 74%

Requirement of laptops, tabs, smartphones – 67%

Education Support Groups – Scribes, Readers, Escort, Attendant – 61%



2.2 Digital Educational Requirement (In percentage)

Categories	Upper Primary Level Students - Class I to VII	High School Students - Classes VIII-IX	Class Xth	Classes XII, +2. Polytechnic, Engineering and ITI
Availability of Smart Phones	41.6	41.6	39.8	43.87
Data Services	61.4	62.3	60.1	75.3
Knowledge of Digital Learning and Virtual Education	35.3	35.4	40.9	63.1
Attending Online Classes	6	6.4	31.8	10.5
Need training on Use of Smartphones -	57	83.4	0	0
Need Training on Online/Virtual Education	81.4	6	27.2	63.1

2.3 When enquired why they did not attend the digital/online classes regularly:

1. In most homes, father is the only person who has the smart phone and most of the time they are out of home for their livelihood purpose (71%).

2. Purchasing of smart phone is costly and not possible as most children studying government schools are from lower middle and poor financial backgrounds (61%).
3. Poor internet connection (87.4%).
4. Online classes consumed data of the whole day, hence fathers did not like the concept of online classes (78%). Most recharge amounts were 399/599 for 86/54 days with 1.5 to 2GB per day.
5. Some time, the speed of data, is very poor so it's difficult to listen the voice of the teachers clearly (82%).
6. Due to network issues and poor connectivity it's difficult to play the video clearly and downloading the essential assignments and documents (54.8%).
7. Whatsapp digital classes upon hang after few minutes, slow downloading and it's not possible to do digital submission of homework and assignments (54.2).
8. In online platform many people switch on other things at home like radio, or they talk loudly, and the classes are not like our school classes (55.4%).
9. While, attending any kind of online classes from different source/online apps, it's not possible to attend for long, like one/two hour classes through mobile phones. Most students with disabilities were unable to sustain attention on phone (61%).
10. Being a visually impaired student, I am unable to understand lessons with many students talking simultaneously (39%).
11. No sign language interpreters are present in the webinars, so I do not like to attend them (44%).
12. Most of the mothers who help children at home do not know how to operate learning apps (76.5%).
13. Most of the parents don't know about the online classes/virtual education classes or any other classes (89%) and most mothers requested digital literacy (96.2%).

2.4 Concern Raised by Teachers and Special Educators

1. I teach my students, sitting next to them, holding their hands, telling stories, keeping them focused – how will I teach remotely?
2. Students with learning and cognitive disabilities have low attention span. I can't teach them on a device.
3. While I teach, the child keeps pulling at the device and presses other buttons, parents cannot manage online education, until provided training.
4. I am not well trained in teaching through a device. How will I teach a child who needs specific attention and technique to be taught?
5. Parents are not educated to teach special children. How will they help my students at home?
6. It is over burdening. First let me cope with virtual education of general students. Then we can discuss this.
7. How will I teach maths remotely to my VI students?
8. Most of the time, they refuse when I call. First let us educate them, then their children.
9. Who decided to conduct virtual education for children with disabilities? Did they consult with special educators?

2.5 Therapy, Nutrition and Hygiene

1. 300+ children visited physically in Bhubaneswar have lost weight, look emaciated and malnourished. Upon enquiry children report of eating only rice and sometimes without any accompanying item. Dal is a luxury and rationed in most houses visited. Protein intake is almost nil.
2. Parents reported deterioration in speech with discontinuation of therapy for over 3 months.
3. Children who had started sitting up on the bed or those who had started gait training have deteriorated.
4. Assistive devices unused / need repair.
5. No books, note books, colours, pencils at home.
6. Complete confinement has led to behaviour change and aggression, vacant looks, ignoring the person talking to them etc.

7. Children need to be provided a space and opportunity to talk and express their feelings without fear of any family member hearing them. They were overjoyed to see our team members and many wept.
10. The one thing that struck to the eye was rampant uncleanliness, no social distancing and no use of masks in economically poor areas.
11. Houses were close to each other and many members (3-11) lived in just one room.
12. Rampant piling of garbage everywhere.

3. VIEWS FROM OTHER STATES

West Bengal – Tulika Das (Sanchar)

There is hardly any education happening. In case of some educated parents of middle and upper middle class, who are sending their children to private schools, some children with disabilities, including young deaf students are getting education and support through video calls and online classes. Most students from lower middle class and poor backgrounds are going to government schools where the situation is very acute.

In WB there are noticeable school dropouts of children with disabilities. In 2019, SSM was having meeting, discussion with us (NGOs working with children with disabilities) regarding the dropouts and how to bring them back to school. Steps were planned and initiated But then Covid19 arrived. Our children will become invisible in education once again. At least they were going to school as a result of twenty years of continuation of SSM. It was hard work of us as well. We provided study materials, colors, home based support, sign language and Braille trainings and pushed them to school. At least attendance, involvement in sports, they met friends, there were resource teachers visit. This complete stop of going to school is very harmful. When schools reopen, I don't think they will be motivated to go to school anymore. Even if they go it will be difficult to make up for the loss. Education, whatever development happened, it will be again reversed.

Jharkhand - Arun Kumar Singh - Jharkhand Vikalang Manch

A survey for education of disabled! That's far flung – there is no education for children with disabilities. Ten days back special educators have been asked for list of CwDs they used to teach.

When basic things like disability pension have lost foot, I am unable to comprehend about our dire situation. 2 lakhs of people with disabilities were getting disability pension in Jharkhand including both central and state pension schemes. Earlier CDPO was disbursing. Now, in the process of transferring disability to social welfare, due to technical issues, many, about 40000, aren't getting their pensions. In April, we filed a writ in HC and had a hearing on June 1st. Collector was ordered to release funds and few people got 6-7 months of pension amount.

Telengana and AP – Srinivasalu

Education not a priority. As cases are increasing, government is in a panic mode. Opposite parties are squabbling.

Learning or no, at least children with disabilities were going to school, meeting friends, teachers were supporting their education and they were getting hot meals. Parents are calling every day. Children with disabilities are very lonely. There are many mental and psychological issues and they need counselling.

Our focus now has to be to ensure all people with disabilities get two square meals a day. Our people were mostly small vendors. We must get 5% budget of the Atmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyan economic package. There is no sure way of knowing how much the government will spend at the end of this financial year, but most calculations suggest the actual government expenditure in the Atmanirbhar package is just 1% of GDP. We should get 5% of that.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Children with disabilities constitute a huge student population and constitute a heterogeneous group
 - a. Educational needs cannot be grouped into one category “disabled child.” As per individual IEP, they must be educated.
 - b. Reading material in alternate format is a non-negotiable.
 - c. One month prior to classes - TLM, lessons in relevant format and guidelines for parents must be sent.
2. Special educators are confused, some aggravated
 - a. Need to be given equal status and respect as regular teacher
 - b. When decisions are taken regarding new mode of teaching, like online in post Covid times, they must be consulted to ensure proper steps for education of children with special needs.
 - c. More time needs to be invested in planning individually for each disability.
 - d. More funding and training for TLMs that can be used remotely and guidelines for parents
 - e. App to be developed for online teaching in alternate format
 - f. Education budget must be thoroughly discussed and changes done according to new needs.
3. Parents will play a greater role in lockdown times in teaching children with disabilities.
 - a. They need training on smartphones, apps and technology.
 - b. Need simple guidelines for revising and guiding lessons of their children.
 - c. Illiterate parents seek tutors and support system
4. Education Support Hardware & Software
 - a. Tabs, smartphones and computers must be distributed to make education accessible for all.
 - b. Gadgets need to be firewalled to unwarranted sites.
 - c. As data cost and internet connectivity are major issues, recharge and portable WiFi must replace travel allowance in budget.
 - d. Classes need to be blended, as in group classes followed by one to one for better understanding.
 - e. Sign language must be taught to all teachers and family members on an urgent basis.
 - f. Accessible digital libraries/repositories/knowledge bank must be built class wise for follow up and revision by students.
 - g. Areti Learning and Books Rapid must be explored for Odisha student’s school education and lessons converted to alternate formats.
5. Examination
 - a. All examination must be suspended till normalization of the situation.
 - b. Simple assessments to be conducted to keep learning ongoing.
 - c. Students of class X and XII to be provided regular examination and career related counselling to allay both fears and concerns.
6. Other Means of Teaching
 - a. Many special educators suggested use of Community Radio as teaching medium.
 - b. Like Rajya Sabha TV, a channel to be dedicated for school education in local language in each state.
 - c. Tutors from neighborhood, local unemployed youth, could visit door to door and support home revision of lessons.
7. Therapy, Nutrition and Hygiene
 - a. Physical and speech therapy must be started on an urgent basis.
 - b. Nutritious food/protein packs/bars must be home delivered
 - c. Teachers must start dance-song-art-craft classes online too.
 - d. Cleaning of poor areas, distribution of masks and hand wash/soaps abundantly.

Annexure – 1

Survey Questionnaire 1

Rank the choices in order of your priority as 1, 2, 3, 4, 5. Students with disabilities to respond to section A, teachers to respond to section B, Parents to respond to section c.

Section A

Students with Disabilities

Study materials in alternate format

Requirement of laptops, tabs, smartphones

Education Support Groups – Scribes, Readers, Escort, Attendant

WiFi and Data support

Examination

Section B

Teachers of Children with Disabilities

Teaching those with learning disorders, autism and LV without touching

Students do not have smartphones and computers at home

How will these children come to school

Maintaining social distancing, use of mask and handwashing among CwDs

Mid-Day Meal

Section C

Teachers do not teach our children

Teacher are not giving attention to CwDs

Teachers do not have accessible educational materials with them

Will fall behind in learning due to inaccessible distance learning modalities

Speech & Hearing Impaired Children, those with Autism, Intellectual disabilities cannot learn social distancing

Do not know how to use the technology appropriately to continue their learning

Cannot cope with post COVID19 social and education scenario

Mid Day Meal

Annexure II

Excel Sheet – Attached.