

## The challenge of going back to school

Guidelines on re-opening schools focus more on health measures than on addressing learning difficulties

### Leaving no child behind

1. Despite the scale of the shock to the education system, a review of the State governments' Standard Operating Procedures/guidelines on school re-opening shows that the emphasis is on health and sanitation measures.
2. There is very little discussion on the practical approaches required to ensure that every child returns to school and to address the learning difficulties that children will face.
3. Across the world, guidance on school re-opening centres around certain principles. The first is a strong focus on equity. Special efforts must be made for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, who were disconnected during the pandemic so that they can return to school in an environment that fosters belonging.
4. The second is effective and regular communication with parents. The third is to support students' socio-emotional development.
5. The fourth is to re-organise the curriculum to reinforce core academic skills, focusing on language learning and mathematics, especially in the elementary years.

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### Spending On Education Down Since 2014



\*Revised Estimates

\*\*Budget Estimates

Source: Government of India Budget Documents

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6. The fifth is to extend learning time and hire additional teachers where needed. The sixth is to enhance training and regular support for teachers. And finally, to secure additional funding to address the crisis.

### Education budget:

1. Let us start with the issue of additional funding for education. A recent study by the World Bank and UNESCO shows that, for a sample of 29 high-income, lower-middle-income and low-income countries across the world, the average annual education budgets not only increased post-COVID-19 but increased at a higher rate than before COVID-19 (4% post-COVID-19 compared to 1.1 % before the pandemic).
2. In the group of 14 lower-middle-income countries to which India belongs, five countries (Bangladesh, Morocco, Nigeria, the Philippines, and Ukraine) increased their spending substantially.
3. India reduced its spending by over 9 %, along with Uzbekistan. This comes on top of a 2% decline in education spending in India in the previous year.

### Bringing all back to school: Equity

1. Even the task of bringing every child back to school in India is a herculean one and requires detailed planning. First, millions of migrant children saw their education disrupted.
2. Second, close to 40% of school students in India are in private schools. Most of them are in 'low-cost' schools for the poor, which have been buffeted by the crisis.
3. Over 60% of government and private school principals in India stated that their schools suffered from dropouts and face financial challenges, according to a recent survey (Global School Leaders and Alokit, report forthcoming).
4. The School Children's Online and Offline Learning (SCHOOL) survey covering 15 States and Union Territories, conducted in August 2021, revealed that over 25% of children who had previously been enrolled in private schools had switched to government schools.
5. If this ratio is approximately correct for the country, we might expect a transfer of about 20 million children from private to government schools.

### 'Bridge courses'

1. On the academic front, many States have announced short 'bridge courses', sometimes as short as 45 days. The goal is to resume the textbook-based syllabus of the current grade of the child as soon as possible.



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2. Examination timetables are being drawn up, as if nothing happened. These unrealistic expectations are being framed in the face of overwhelming evidence of the devastating learning losses suffered by children, especially disadvantaged groups (see research brief of the National Coalition on Education Emergency, for example).
3. The SCHOOL survey showed that 42% of students in grades 3-5 in villages and urban basis could only read a few letters. Only 55% of students in grades 6-8 could fluently read a simple conversational sentence.
4. The required knowledge of the academic language in the upper primary/lower secondary grades would be all but lacking.

### Way Forward:

1. The guidance and support to teachers and schools, especially in elementary education, has to be to focus on language learning, core mathematical competencies and socio-emotional learning.
2. It would be necessary to restructure the 'daily timetable' to focus on these areas and provide additional instructional time.
3. Support to teachers must be practical and regular, adopting a 'coaching' model, instead of mass teacher training programmes.
4. It may be necessary to mobilise retired teachers and volunteers also. All this requires long-term commitment, resources and organisational effort.

### Crackdown there, hope here

China's sweeping overhaul of its tech sector could benefit India in the near future.

### The crackdown:

1. Last year, China stopped Ant Group's blockbuster initial public offering. This came as a shock to the world as Ant Group, Alibaba's fintech arm, was on track to raise \$37 billion and its valuation was reportedly nearing more than \$300 billion.
2. This episode was perceived as an attempt to rein in the successful entrepreneur, Jack Ma.
3. Prior to this incident, he had committed one of the cardinal sins in modern China, which was to publicly criticise the government's tech policy for stifling innovation.

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4. A year since hardly a week goes by without the world hearing of yet another high-profile crackdown on a Chinese tech company.
5. China has foisted sweeping regulations, antitrust and anti-monopoly lawsuits, cyber security probes, and algorithm controls on the entire tech segment, ranging from e-commerce websites, search engines, ride-sharing and food delivery apps to e-learning portals.
6. These clampdowns are estimated to have wiped off over \$1.5 trillion of value from Chinese tech stocks.

### To retain Chinese Communist Party-led state dominance

China's obsessive efforts to ensure that no private entity gains enough data to ever be in a position to even remotely challenge Chinese Communist Party-led state dominance and that no competing country gains access to the citizen database through any unforeseen means, drive much of this overhaul.



## China's regulatory crackdown



### Support to hard tech:

1. We should not overlook the fact that these efforts are limited only to the consumer tech sector.



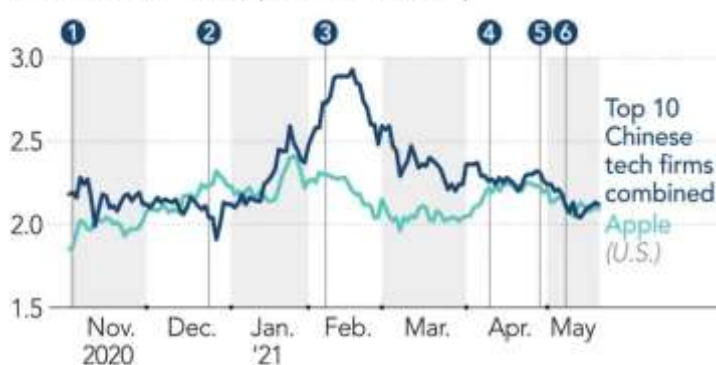


2. State support to manufacturing and 'hard' tech industries, which are perceived to be of higher value, including 5G/6G, semiconductor chips, artificial intelligence, biotechnologies, batteries, aviation and space tech, has only increased.
3. We are witnessing a conscious redirection of efforts to areas that would maximise China's geopolitical and geo-economic gains. It would not be surprising to see more state-owned enterprises like ZTE and state-supported heavyweights like Huawei focus on strategic high technology and attempt to be pioneers in the global market.

### Benefits for India:

1. These developments could be beneficial for India. The rate of digitisation accelerated during the pandemic in India. India's tally of unicorns has crossed 60. This trajectory and India's projected growth will make the country the first destination of the funds fleeing Chinese stocks during these crackdowns.
2. However, mirroring the U.S. start-up ecosystem, India's emphasis too is on consumer tech, from which China is tactically distancing itself. Not to be forgotten, the U.S. also has a far-reaching system for research and development of strategic technology.
3. The recently concluded Modi-Biden talks as well as the Quad summit emphasised technological cooperation. The U.S. undoubtedly remains China's lone rival in the high tech space, and the extent of this partnership will be important for India.
4. U.S. interests will more likely be inclined towards the possibilities of market entry and penetration of its firms. India should strive to move beyond this to complementary collaborations.

Market caps of Chinese IT, high-tech firms plunge due to crackdown (In trillions of dollars)



- 1 Ant Group delays IPO
- 2 Antitrust regulators investigate Alibaba's head office
- 3 China announces new antitrust guidelines
- 4 China fines Alibaba \$2.8 billion
- 5 Financial regulators issue instructions to Tencent and 12 other online firms
- 6 Internet regulators instruct firms such as Alibaba and Tencent to correct operations

Source: QUICK-FactSet

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## *Open to partnerships*

1. India should also remain open to partnerships with friendly nations, keeping the enhancement of its internal capacity as the objective.
2. An example would be the ongoing talks with Taiwan to bring in a semiconductor chip manufacturing plant to India. If successful, this could drive next-generation industries, including 5G devices and electric vehicles.
3. The strides India has made in sectors including biotech and space tech have shown that with the right political will and private participation, India could be self-sufficient and also reach global competitiveness.
4. Similar concerted efforts to develop indigenous manufacturing and hard technology are vital if India is to retain its strategic autonomy and securely reach its stated goal of being among the largest three economies by the later stages of this decade.