Pakistani Teachers’ Response to COVID-19
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When COVID-19 first emerged in Pakistan, state institutions began deliberating upon and enacting a series of emergency response measures, starting with school closures across the country in March 2020. For this report, the Pak Alliance for Maths and Science (PAMS) and Zindagi Trust (ZT) spoke to public school teachers to explore their views on the state’s immediate response as well as to get their recommendations on measures to be implemented once schools reopen. With over 1.6 million school teachers in Pakistan – half of them employed by the state – the two organisations felt that any education sector response to COVID-19 must have significant input from those directly responsible for what happens inside our classrooms.

The outreach to public school teachers was done via telephone calls, virtual focus group discussions, and exchanges on email and text messages. Initially designed as a structured interview, the consultation process evolved as we received feedback and input which required further exploration.

More than 250 government school teachers from all provinces gave their input as part of the consultation that took place for the compilation of this report. While this number is not a representative sample, we feel that in the absence of any representation of government teachers in the national discourse on Pakistan’s COVID-19 response, it is important that the recommendations of the few that are shared in this report be considered.

It must also be noted that the purpose behind compiling this report is to inform the debate around the desired state response to COVID-19 by adding opinions from teachers, who remain largely absent from the public discourse.

This report would not have been possible without the support of government school teachers, particularly Zafar Jamil, Faiz Gul Chalgari, Malik Attique-ur-Rehman, Ghazala Soomro, and Tufail Muhammad.

A number of Zindagi Trust members provided critical input through detailed focus group discussions including Munira Hirwani, Madiha Siddiqui, Shahnaz Hunzai, Sana Zaidi, Shaista Naz and Anam Palla. From PAMS, this report would not have been possible without the outreach to teachers by Wajih ur Rehman, Umer Orakzai and Roshaan Bukhari. The credit for the structure of the teachers’ interview and the compilation of findings from the extensive consultative process is Huma Zia Faran’s.
A timely decision by the Inter-Provincial Education Ministers’ Conferences (IPEMC)\(^1\) regarding school closures in March 2020, a considered consensus on the cancellation/postponement of the summative examinations (matriculation and intermediate) as well as the postponement of the Cambridge Assessment International Education, and the launch of TeleSchool and Taleem Ghar within weeks of schools closing illustrates a clear indication of political will for emergent action.

However, in what will be six months of schools’ closure in mid-September 2020, little initiative has been seen to reach out to a workforce of over 800,000 government school teachers for their input on a COVID-19 response for education. The only example of teachers’ involvement in developing the state’s response to the pandemic was the consideration of their input when curating content for the TeleSchool\(^2\) channel by the Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training.

Many key decisions for schools that formed the state response to COVID-19, such as the timing of closing and reopening schools, the development of SOPs, and the adoption of reduced syllabi for the academic year 2020-21 have been taken by state functionaries with limited or no input from the teachers who will be responsible for implementing said decisions in Pakistan’s classrooms.

Based on the input from Pakistan’s government school teachers, this report seeks to address the looming challenges of learning losses\(^3\), potential drop-outs of girl students, addressing school-based governance systems, financing the COVID-19 school response, and the adoption of technology-based solutions. This effort is not meant to represent all voices and opinions, but hopes to impact how the federal and provincial governments will look at COVID-19 as an opportunity to reset base processes for improved and equitable access and quality in our classrooms.

The Pakistani Teachers’ Response to COVID-19 report has been compiled based on data collection via targeted online surveys, telephonic interviews of government school teachers from all provinces, online focus group discussions of government school teachers by Zindagi Trust’s team, and targeted follow-up conversations to seek additional information on teachers’ recommendations.

**Limitations**

This report was designed to seek input from government school teachers. In the absence of teachers’ collectives (unions, associations) in the private sector, madaris, or the non-formal schools, PAMS and ZT decided to reach out only via virtual platforms (telephone, video-conferencing) and limited the outreach to teachers employed by the state.

The consultative process was not designed to be representative of all government school teachers across Pakistan, but a concerted effort was made to ensure inclusion of voices from all provinces, across various school tiers and covering both female and male teachers. The report is not intended to represent an academic study and does not claim to be backed by a robust quantitative and qualitative survey representative of teachers.
During the course of the outreach to teachers across Pakistan, there was a stark contrast in terms of input was between the ones teaching in schools in the ‘Summer Zone’ compared to those based in ‘Winter Zones’⁴. The districts and areas which fall in the Winter Zone have a two-week summer break and a three-month winter vacation, compared to a longer summer vacation and a shorter winter break for those falling in the Summer Zone.

42 districts in Balochistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Gilgit Baltistan are categorized as ‘Winter Zone’ for the purposes of the school year. This is in addition to parts of 11 districts in Azad Jammu & Kashmir, Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa which fall under the same category. In these districts and areas, students have attended at most two weeks of school in early March 2020, with schools in most districts in the ‘Winter Zone’ yet to be opened before the notification to shut all schools in Pakistan due to the spread of COVID-19.

If schools reopen in mid-September, students scheduled to appear in the 2021 matriculation and intermediate examinations would only have a maximum of twelve weeks to cover the entire academic year’s content before the long winter break starts. This is less than a third of a typical academic calendar for schools in these districts and areas. Of the 36 weeks in a typical academic calendar, students enrolled in schools in the ‘Winter Zone’ would have lost over 22 weeks’ worth of classroom time in the 2020-21 academic year. In comparison, students enrolled in schools in the Summer Zone would have lost 12 weeks of the 2020-21 academic calendar due to the COVID-19 school closure.

### Geographical significance

#### Summer Zone Districts

- Academic year starts: Apr-20
- Summer break: 22 weeks’ instruction, 2 weeks’ break
- Winter break: 0 weeks
- Academic year ends: Mar-21

#### Winter Zone Districts

- Academic year starts: Apr-20
- Summer break: 0 weeks
- Winter break: 12 weeks’ instruction, 12 weeks’ break
- Academic year ends: Mar-21

If schools reopen in mid-September, students scheduled to appear in the 2021 matriculation and intermediate examinations would only have a maximum of twelve weeks to cover the entire academic year’s content before the long winter break starts. This is less than a third of a typical academic calendar for schools in these districts and areas. Of the 36 weeks in a typical academic calendar, students enrolled in schools in the ‘Winter Zone’ would have lost over 22 weeks’ worth of classroom time in the 2020-21 academic year. In comparison, students enrolled in schools in the Summer Zone would have lost 12 weeks of the 2020-21 academic calendar due to the COVID-19 school closure.

### In-school days: 160-180

**Days lost: 75-115 (COVID-19)**

42 districts in Pakistan are categorised as falling in the ‘Winter Zone’; in most of these districts, students will re-enter schools after a 9-month long gap.

In addition to these 42 districts, there are over 11 districts which partially fall in the Winter Zone (e.g. Murree in Rawalpindi, union councils in Kurram district).

Typically, Winter Zone districts have a three-month long winter vacation and a two week summer break.

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⁴ 2 districts in Balochistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Gilgit Baltistan are categorized as ‘Winter Zone’ for the purposes of the school year. This is in addition to parts of 11 districts in Azad Jammu & Kashmir, Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa which fall under the same category.
The lack of strategic policy reforms and financial investment in education has added another layer of complexity to an overtly health and economic crisis. The dependence of the system on private providers at the school, college and higher educational levels has opened the state to pressures from groups and collectives which it otherwise would not have had to cater to.

The decision to close, reopen, and re-close schools (if needed) should ideally be taken at the local level based on number of active infected individuals in the community. In the absence of local governments in any province, the state’s functionaries at the district, tehsil and union council should be deciding the process of managing the school calendar.

If schools are to be reopened, the first and foremost consideration should be how Pakistani children will cover the loss in learning from the extended school closure, and impending start-stop scenario in the coming months.

Given that decisions around school education are largely driven by the federal and provincial summative examinations (5th, 8th, matriculation and intermediate), the Inter-Provincial Education Ministers’ Conference should focus on how the system will manage the learning of our children in the coming months and years, cognizant of the added learning pressures on teachers, students and parents if a forced ‘accelerated learning’ process is adopted.

**Will learning suffer: context**

Pakistani students have had their share of temporary school-closures in recent history, but this is the first time where schools across Pakistan have been closed for an extended duration.

This is also the first time that supply-side changes (e.g. revising syllabi, postponing exams, etc.) are being considered at a system-wide level to address the ‘learning losses’ expected as a result of the extended school closures in Pakistan.

As evidenced from the RISE Working Paper, short-term solutions to address learning losses will only delay and exacerbate the challenge. If medium-term plans are developed and executed, not only can learning losses be minimized in the long-term, but the system will not be stress-tested beyond its existing capacity. This was one of the key challenges we discussed with Pakistani teachers while seeking their input for a COVID-19 response and their recommendations are recorded in the following section.

### Educational institutions’ closure seen locally pre and during

- Operation Clean-up 1992 (Karachi)
- Post 2005 earthquake (AJK/GB)
- Operation Rah-e-Nijaat 2009 (South Waziristan)
- 2014 dharna (Islamabad)
- Operation Zarb-e-Azb 2014 (North Waziristan)
- Army Public School massacre 2014 (country-wide)
- Operation Black Thunderstorm 2009 (Swat Buner, Lower Dir, Upper Dir, Shangla)
- Clashes in public universities during 1980s to early 2000s (Sindh and Punjab)
- The Flood in 2010 (over 30 districts across all provinces)
While we designed the consultative process to be as inclusive as possible, we could not have predicted the extent of variation in teachers’ opinions. The teachers’ views on several key decisions regarding school reopening and future planning priorities varied not only across province, regions, gender, or school tiers, but also within cohorts of teachers belonging to the same gender, school tier, district and even school.

During the process of compiling recommendations from over 250 teachers, we felt it was important to prioritise input on issues which would be instrumental in shaping how the country’s education system responds to the expected learning losses. It must be noted that this compilation does not include teachers’ recommendations on SOPs for safe reopening, nor is it intended to be reflective of a comprehensive and robust quantitative and qualitative research exercise.

Apart from a very small minority, most teachers agreed that there was no perfect education response to COVID-19, nor an ideal situation in which schools could reopen, guidelines for a reduced syllabus developed, teachers trained, and all aspects of education service delivery supported by health systems.

One area where there was a clear consensus among the government teachers was the need for strong mental health support to be in place when schools and other educational institutions reopen. Our conversations with teachers provided a clear insight into the need for psychological support for students, parents and teachers; driven from a recognition that they have all been facing varying challenges during the school closure, and are expected to face a set of new and unprecedented challenges once Pakistan comes back to school.

There was a clear divide on teacher opinion regarding the usefulness of technology for both teachers and students during the extended school closure. School teachers who taught at the primary level were largely uninterested in using tech approaches; this was particularly true for teachers operating in a multi-grade teaching environment. Teachers in middle and high schools were more open to the concept of using technology as one of the ways in which Pakistan’s education system could respond to COVID-19 in the medium and long-term, but were largely averse to using content developed without significant input from government school teachers. The teachers open to using technological solutions for education were of the view that unequal access means that students without a television, internet and computing devices at home are being left further behind. While data on the number of internet-enabled devices in Pakistan is often cited to show how widespread the availability of internet is, teachers felt that having an internet-enabled mobile phone in the home does not necessarily translate to students’ access to the device.

The Headteachers surveyed during the course of this exercise stressed on the need to reset the school financing model to ensure provision of additional funding for the implementation of COVID-19 SOPs. They also identified the need for a change in the rules so that schools would be allowed to use funds to hire temporary teaching and non-teaching staff – a solution to both addressing learning losses and school crowding in under-resourced schools.

One in every five government primary schools in Pakistan operates with one teacher for all six grades. In such cases, the provision of additional non-salary component of school financing will allow for the hiring of additional temporary teaching staff to address the learning gaps, even if a reduced syllabus is to be followed during the upcoming academic year.

Teachers working in high schools were skeptical of the government’s decision to promote students without any assessment. While they largely understood the reasons behind this decision, they were apprehensive about the ability of federal and provincial education departments to make provisions for teachers to hold students back in case they were unable to cope with the course-load of the promoted grade. The main concern of the teachers was not necessarily the cancellation of exams but the challenges that indiscriminate promotion to the next grade would bring in their classrooms, with some of them suggesting alternative promotion criteria.

A significant majority of the teachers surveyed felt that it was critical to set aside a few weeks for the revision of instructional content from the previous academic year before introducing new content in the classroom. They stressed that with students having been away from the classroom for six to nine months, teachers would need to revise foundational skills and concepts before putting any additional burden on students to catch up to pre-COVID19 grade-level standards.

Over a third of all government schools in Pakistan have two teachers or less. More than 40% of government primary schools have an average of one teacher per three grades.
Educators from the Winter Zone districts were apprehensive about their students’ ability to perform well in the 2021 summative (matriculation) examinations, given that their students would have been home-bound for nine consecutive months prior to the expected school reopening in September 2020. With a three-month long winter break due in another 10-12 weeks, Winter Zone teachers looked forward to the IPEMC coming together to shift the matriculation examinations beyond the 2021 summer break.

During the outreach, teachers were specifically asked about their views on the practicality of an accelerated learning framework. We found that teachers of students who are (i) scheduled to appear in summative examinations in 2021, (ii) slow-learners, and (iii) particularly those in a multi-grade teaching environment felt that only a select group of high and higher secondary schools will be able to implement an accelerated learning program, while the rest will invariably fall further behind after such an intervention.

Detailed recommendations by teachers are presented within a framework as below

![Framework for Pakistan’s COVID-19 response to education challenges](image)

**Health**
- The health of students, their parents and teachers needs to be the foremost priority and a critical consideration in any decision taken for schools
- Schools need to be equipped with adequate number of classrooms (or ample outdoor space as an alternative), running water, soap, etc.
- Clear guidelines should be made available in case teachers, students, or families of either test positive for COVID-19

### Availability of drinking water

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<th>School Level</th>
<th>Total</th>
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<th>Not available (%)</th>
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<td>Primary</td>
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<td>37302</td>
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<td>16529</td>
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Source: Pakistan Education Statistics 2017-18, AEPAM, pg. 57, Table 7.10 (Enrollment in Public Sector Institutes by Stage, Location, Gender & Provinces/Regions 2017-18)

### Availability of washrooms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Level</th>
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<th>Not available (%)</th>
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Source: Pakistan Education Statistics 2017-18, AEPAM, pg. 128, Table 9.6 (Availability of Latrine by Level, Location, Gender & Provinces/Regions 2017-18)
**Learning losses – short and medium term**

- Due to extended school closures, significant learning losses are expected. This is a unique situation, and course correction should not be viewed from the lens of only one academic year.
- Needs for the short term (3-6 months) and medium term (1-3 years) should be devised to address learning losses.
- A school-specific customizable ‘Ready-to-progress’ framework needs to be put in place, with quarterly targets.
- Schools to cover ‘smart’ or reduced syllabi (covering only a selected portion of the goals set out in the curriculum) in the coming year.
- Linked to the reduced syllabi, the formative and summative assessments should be revised at the system level for the upcoming year/s.
- The education departments should develop content-specific learning packs which can be provided to students to support learning continuity at home.
- During distance learning, teachers should be assigned tasks according to their expertise so that the focus is on optimizing the student learning experience, and not necessarily teachers’ facetime. *(Some teachers are better at curating and preparing content and others at delivery)*.
- Content to be shared with students remotely (e.g. via WhatsApp) should be produced by teachers best at developing content. This will allow the best content/presentation to be shared with the students and will reduce significant duplication of efforts.

**Assessment systems**

- Student assessment systems on a sample basis need to be put in place when schools reopen to assess the state of students’ learning after months out of school.
- Clear guidelines need to be put in place for teachers and headteachers to take school-based decisions for students unable to cope in the promoted grades, given all students were promoted without examinations.
- A medium term plan must be devised to bring matriculation / intermediate exams back to the current schedule by 2023.
- The schedule for college and university admissions should be adapted to cater to the delayed matriculation and intermediate examinations.
- The respective provincial education departments must provide strong support to school leaders on formative assessments enabling teachers to track students’ performance.

**Students’ psychological well-being**

- Schools must monitor the impact of COVID-19 on students’ psychological well-being (economic impact at the household level, sociological impact of students staying at home for an extended duration, family and community’s health considerations, students/children with physical and/or learning disabilities among many other factors).
- The state’s response should explore avenues with health department to train teachers to be enable to provide some counseling support.
- Teachers and school management must be sensitised and, if possible, trained to look out for and support children’s mental wellbeing as they adjust to the new normal.
- The state must encourage schools to start or re-start healthy and safe extra-curricular programs like art and sports with SOPs to ensure students have safe, enjoyable activities to look forward to.
- To ensure that children are protected from the increased pressure of accelerated learning as schools rush to cover syllabus, any system designed to address learning losses should be planned over an extended duration (rather than a 1-year approach).

**Empowering teachers**

- Input from teachers should be included in policy-making (during and post-COVID).
- Support systems need to be embedded within the teacher-training institutions to enable teachers to become creators and users of technology-based content.
- Teachers should be at the core of content development.
- The state must explore innovative and immediate ways of addressing teacher shortage, given that the challenge of multi-grade teaching will become more pronounced with the implementation of SOPs (e.g. the requirement of maintaining physical distance between students).

### Source:

- **Pakistan Education Statistics 2017-18, AEPAM, pg. 139, Table 9.9 (Number of Institutions by Frequency of Classrooms, Level, Location & Provinces/Regions 2017-18)**

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- **Pakistan Education Statistics 2017-18, AEPAM, pg. 61, Table 6.8 (Number of Public Sector Schools by Teaching Strength, Location & Gender 2017-18)**

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<th>1 teacher (%)</th>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>148218</td>
<td>27715</td>
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**Localised leadership and decision-making**
- The state should provide legal cover enabling school leaders to decide on school opening, closing, and/or reopening. The decision should be made by school management in consultation with local community members via School Management Councils/Parent Teacher Councils (SMC/PTC)
- Devise clear policy guidelines for school leaders and teachers for outreach to parents and students during current (and any future) school closures related to COVID-19
- Negotiate low-cost solutions with telecommunication providers for government school teachers to maintain connectivity with parents, students and community leaders
- The state should provide financial autonomy at the school-level to enable school leaders to invest in resources required for safe reopening (implementation of Standard Operating Procedures, covering learning losses, purchasing consumables, temporary hiring of teachers)

**Financial resources**
- Provide access to funds to district, tehsil/town/taluka, and schools to respond to immediate needs
- Streamline the process of SMC/PTC and school-specific and non-salary funding to allow school leaders and parents to procure services and goods locally in an efficient manner without bureaucratic delays

**Equity - girls dropout and re-enrolment**
- The state should proactively make specific interventions to ensure that girls return when schools reopen and are provided need-based financial support through the Parent Teacher / School Management Councils, given that long summer and winter vacations have been seen to result in drop-outs of girls, particularly at middle and high school level.
- Disburse the first tranche of the middle and high school girls’ stipend prior to schools’ reopening to ensure return and re-enrolment of girl students
- Extension of Waseela-a-Taleem to children, particularly girls, of beneficiaries of the Ehsaas program enrolled in government middle and high schools
- Encourage teachers of girls’ schools to stay in contact with parents and students in transition grades during school closure

**Plan 2023**
- The content for each grade should be divided into four quarters, with a defined Ready-to-Progress framework in place for each subject and grade
- Planning for delivery should be done on a quarterly basis, keeping in mind the possibility of the stop-start school closure/reopening being a regular occurrence in the coming months
- Matriculation / Intermediate examinations should be pushed beyond the 2021 summer vacations (August/Sept), with the 2022 exams scheduled for May, and back to the normal routine (exams in March) in 2023 to address the needs of students in the ‘Summer’ and Winter’ zones’ districts.
- Colleges and universities will need to revisit their admission schedule, with classes to begin in January 2022 (for students appearing in exams in 2021 Aug/Sept), from November 2022 (for students appearing in exams in May 2022), and finally back to the September schedule from 2023. N.B. This change in universities’ schedule used to be the norm up till the late 1990s, and in some cases, even in the early 2000s.
References


Special thanks to teachers from the SMB Fatima Government Girls School and the Khatoon-e-Pakistan Government Girls School for their valuable input. This report would not have been possible without their support.

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