

Schools vs. Smog: The Bigger Picture

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Context

In November 2024, the Graded Response Action Plan (GRAP) mandated a shift to online learning in Delhi schools due to **severe air pollution**. While this aimed to protect children from health risks linked to poor air quality, it raised concerns about **scientific validity**, **practicality**, and long-term consequences for **education and public health**.

Impact of Air Pollution

1. Health Risks Across AQI Levels:

- Even at moderate AQI levels (51-100), air pollution starts to affect vulnerable groups, including children, the elderly, and those with pre-existing health conditions.
- **Prolonged exposure** to AQI levels between 51 and 399 can cause **respiratory issues**, **cardiovascular problems**, and **developmental delays**, especially in children.

2. Children: The Most Vulnerable Group:

- Children breathe more air relative to their body weight, increasing their exposure to pollutants.
- Many low-income families live in **poorly ventilated homes**, where indoor air can be as polluted as or worse than outdoor air.
- **Schools with air purifiers** may offer a safer environment compared to their homes.

3. Socioeconomic Disparities:

- Wealthier families can afford air purifiers and other mitigative measures.
- **Children from low-income families** often rely on schools not only for education but also for **mid-day meals and cleaner environments**.

Shortcomings of School Closures

- **Disruption to Education:** Closing schools disproportionately affects underprivileged children, who lack access to technology for online learning.
- **Reactive Approach:** Focusing only on severe AQI levels overlooks the chronic pollution that harms children throughout the year.

- **Worsening Inequities:** Shutting schools deprives disadvantaged children of **safe spaces and essential services**, exacerbating health and education inequalities.
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Online Learning and Mask Use

1. Limitations of Online Learning:

- Schools are not just academic spaces; they support **holistic development** through social interaction and extracurricular activities.
- Prolonged online learning can harm **cognitive and physical development**, especially for younger children.

2. Mask Policies:

- Universal mask mandates lack scientific backing for young children and can cause discomfort.
 - Instead, mask use should be **individualised**, prioritising children with respiratory conditions or other vulnerabilities.
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Way Forward

• Keep Schools Open with Mitigations:

- Suspend outdoor activities.
- Equip classrooms with air purifiers and maintain sealed environments.
- Individualise mask policies for vulnerable children.

• Adopt a Proactive Strategy:

- Address **chronic air pollution** with long-term solutions rather than reactive measures.
 - Ensure equitable access to education and health benefits, regardless of socioeconomic status.
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Conclusion

Shifting schools to online learning due to poor air quality is a **reactive and ineffective measure** that fails to address root causes. A **science-based approach** is essential to protect children's education and well-being without deepening societal inequalities. **Valuing schools as indispensable spaces for development** reflects a society's commitment to its future generations.