

# The Peal of First Bell at School: Lessons from Kerala's Schooling during COVID-19

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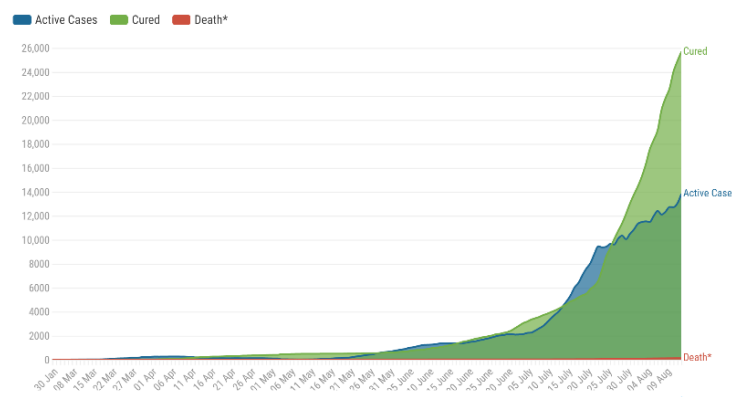
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**For centuries, the first bell at school successfully ensured school started on time. This case study is about how, with the First Bell Initiative launched on June 1, 2020, Kerala got 4.13 million children back to school on time for the start of the 2020-21 academic year, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic.**

In June 2018, when schools across the country were re-opening after summer vacation, Kerala alone decided to continue to keep its schools closed longer due to the Nipha virus outbreak. Social gatherings were called off, people remained indoors, as many were reported deaths due to the virus. Kerala learnt its lesson from that experience. 2020 brought with it the deadly COVID-19 pandemic, and schools across the country shutdown in March. In Kerala the public examinations for class 10 and 12 were yet to be held; schools were in session. The state government decided to take the school into the homes and communities of children, thus becoming the first state to digitally start its new academic session for the year 2020-21 on June 1 as per schedule, on time. Students now held television remotes and the mouse of their computers, in place of pencils and pens.

More than 9500 children were reported receiving online counselling for the challenges that they faced. School closure was not only obstructing learning, it was also resulting in a psycho-social crisis. Reduced interactions with friends and teachers was resulting in increased fear and anxiety. Children from economically weaker and marginalized communities being the most affected as they were being sent out to work as child labourers. There was a growing concern whether many of these children would even come back to school once schools reopened.



While the number of COVID-19 cases continued rising sharply after May 2020, what was not being captured was the mental stress that was affecting children due to the lockdown since March 2020. There were cases of 66 children having committed suicide in the state, and the reason for such high numbers were domestic issues including alcoholism of father, lack of learning facility at home etc.

## The building blocks for digital education

In the year 2016, an innovative **General Education Rejuvenation Mission** was set up by the Government of Kerala, to initiate a series of reforms to transform the public education system in the state. This included technology based modernization of public schools. Government schools with classes 8 to 12 were provided with laptops, projectors, USB speakers and broadband internet connectivity.

**Kerala Infrastructure and Technology in Education (KITE)**, a government agency, earlier called It@schools planned for **'total digital education in public schools'** from June 2019. Government teachers were trained to deliver lessons through videos, using tools like power point presentations. Even during school vacations in 2020 a massive online refresher training on digital skills was organized for teachers.

Hence, the state had already some of the building blocks in place to turn a disaster into an opportunity to roll out digital learning. What was now needed was to have the **content readiness** and **system readiness** to deliver it at scale. UNICEF Chennai office, which primarily focusses on social policy advocacy, catalyzed this climate and advocated with policy makers to invest in these essential blocks for a state-wide digital schooling system.

## Content readiness

UNICEF had started to advocate with the state government as early as March 2020 to increase the volume of digital teaching-learning material in its 'Samagra' portal, in case schools could not be opened in June. The immediate fallout of this was the formation of a team of 150 teachers/educators from across district institutes of teacher training, to map and review class-wise digital material and guide preparation of new tools and worksheets by teachers.

While schools initially announced vacations, KITE released digital content, including games and puzzles, stories, poems, through a popular initiative called 'Avadhikaala Santoshangal' (Happy holidays). Learning content was presented in an entertainment format through television. The content was received with enthusiasm by children. This was evident from the **50,000 entries received from 5000 schools**, on activities where children had to develop creative content on themes related to COVID-19. The department uploaded some of the best entries on School Wiki, a website for student, to the sheer delight of children and families.

Students had online access to textbooks in digital format. UNICEF supported the State Council for Education Research and Training (SCERT) in converting the life skill education material into digital format. This content was specifically designed for the adolescents to better deal with the uncertain 'new normal'. Through this partnership, an innovative pedagogical approach namely 'flipped classroom' is being implemented where children learn through a blended learning model – using digital material and self-practice at home. This would prepare them for the shorter duration classroom sessions once schools reopened.

A public notice to prepare video lessons with animation, puppetry etc., led to more than a hundred individuals and organizations wishing to contribute to digital life skills education, thus making it a people's participatory process even during the pandemic period. The lockdown is unlocking creative expression of people.

UNICEF also supported the state government by offering a **digital career guidance portal** for students in secondary classes. Students could enroll to explore the various career options and know about the preparation required. The information from the portal could also be used by policy makers for strategic decisions for higher education.

## System Readiness

For the system to be ready to deliver state-wide online education, a detailed government order was issued with specific roles and responsibilities of government departments and agencies at the state level including Director General of Education, SCERT, KITE, Samagra Siksha Kerala (SSK), State Institute of Educational Technology (SIET). It also included responsibilities of district level administrative officers, committees like parent teacher associations/school management committees, school head teachers and other teachers, students, parents and caregivers. The government order also suggested roles for other departments and especially local self-governments, including the gram panchayats and district panchayats.

With the help of UNICEF's support, SSK prepared a comprehensive COVID-19 response plan for state and all 14 districts. Secretary for General Education, A. Shajahan says, "Kerala's public education system is a grand exercise where the social and educational institutions are engaged in seamless coordination. So, several ad hoc, customized initiatives are introduced and implemented by enthusiastic teachers and parents. We welcome all of that and extend support."

## The First Bell Initiative

On June 1, Kerala launched its "First Bell" initiative, a programme for statewide digital classes to be held in the homes of children. Just as teachers and students would assemble at the peal of first bell in school, now they were expected to sit before the television/computer/phone (for YouTube and Facebook). Considering the age of children, the broadcast time is fixed as 30 minutes a day for classes 1 to 7, one hour for classes 8 and 9, an hour and a half for class 10 and two hours for class 12. Classes for students of class 11 must wait for results of class 10 public exams, as students would choose their subject streams. The transmission is like a regular school week from Monday to Friday, with an airtime of 9 hours daily. The lessons were re-telecast on weekends. The timetables for each class are announced in advance through media.

Continuous content development for the First Bell initiative has been a shared responsibility among the different government agencies; Samagra Siksha Kerala (SSK) prepares digital lessons for classes 1, 5, 6 and 7; KITE prepares lessons for classes 2 and 4 and classes 9 and 10, and SCERT is responsible for developing materials for classes 8 and 12. Digital resources for 52 vocational subjects have also been developed by the vocational higher secondary wing under DGE.

There are several critical tasks being done to ensure the quality of lessons being telecast. Episodes of lessons are reviewed for their academic rigour before they go to the television channel VICTERS (an edutainment channel; versatile IT enabled resource for students for broadcasting). Feedback is sought from block resource coordinators and education committees across all districts, for making improvements in the content and transaction. Worksheets for follow-up activities are prepared for children. A helpdesk for responding to students' queries and clarifications has been made functional. For children who do not have a television set at home, televisions have been made available at public spaces in the local panchayat. There is continuous monitoring to ensure that students and teachers in every nook and corner of the state actively participate in the digital classes.

Class	Telecast	Repeat telecast
XII	8.30 a.m.-10.30 a.m.	7 p.m.-9 p.m.
I	10.30 a.m.-11. a.m.	
X	11 a.m.-12.30 p.m.	5.30 p.m.-7 p.m.
II	12.30 p.m.-1 p.m.	
III	1 p.m.-1.30 p.m.	
IV	1.30 p.m.-2 p.m.	
V	2 p.m.-2.30 p.m.	
VI	2.30 p.m.-3 p.m.	
VII	3 p.m.-3.30 p.m.	
VIII	3.30 p.m.-4.30 p.m.	
IX	4.30 p.m.-5.30 p.m.	

First Bell timetable (PC: The Hindu)

Monitoring of the programme is aligned to the decentralized governance system of the state. Mechanisms have been set up at state, district and sub-district level. The Director General of Education (DGE) oversees accurate and timely instruction to teachers and facilitates smooth digital learning transaction through issuing necessary orders. At the village/ school level, class groups, subject teacher groups, and parent groups have been formed. The purpose of these groups is to provide continuous support to children for the activities they must do as a follow-up of the session telecast. Although a natural class environment is not possible, such interactive efforts make children feel that they are not alone.



Victers app live streaming

The First Bell initiative has a special programme called White Board to address issues and concerns of disabled children. This has user friendly technology-assisted resources and new online groups based on class/subject/disability category to support children with special needs. Home visits are done to deliver worksheets to these children.

### Leaving no child behind

Prior to the launch of the First Bell initiative, in the first week of May SSK conducted a rapid e-profiling of students attending government schools in the state. A simple Google Form was developed for teachers to record availability of television, smart phone, internet connectivity etc. for every child in their respective class. The survey results showed that **261,000 children in the state (about 6% of total students in government schools)** did not have access to any digital tool to access lessons.



Live class online

This was a big challenge that needed to be addressed before the new academic year activities were initiated. Government appealed to the public for their support and several civil society organizations and individuals, elected Local Self Governments (rural panchayats and urban wards), Kudumbashree units (women's self-help groups), Scheduled Caste – Schedule Tribe Department, libraries, co-operative institutions/societies, public sector undertakings and private enterprises contributed funds and services. The state government issued guidelines to allow panchayats to utilize development funds available with them, other elected representatives were asked to contribute from their local area development funds. This mobilization of funds helped procure television sets, laptops, mobile phones, tablets and internet data plans, which were delivered to the homes of needy children. **Within two-weeks the number of children without digital access was reduced to less than half the children not having any devices as nearly 150,000 children had been supported. When the classes began in June only 17,774 children needed access to digital tools.**

In its mission to leave no child behind, television sets were organized in common spaces like local body offices, libraries, community study centres, pre-matric hostels, single teacher schools (MGLC), anganwadis, block resource centres and service units like Akshaya Kendras and Kudumbashree Kendras for these children. In remote locations television facilities were provided in the '**ooru vidya kendras**' (local study centres). A WhatsApp video showing officials crossing a makeshift weed bridge over a roaring river in Adimali block of Idukki district to install a TV in the learning centre, went viral. In some cases, solar panel were provided in remote hamlets in forest areas where regular electricity supply was an issue. In tribal communities without internet or cable facility, teachers and coordinators recorded the TV classes on their phones and tablets and played them for the students during home visits.



PC: The news minute



PC: The Hindu

While planning for the digital classes was ongoing, the state government decided to conduct class 10 and 12 public examination which had been earlier stalled. About 1.3 million students appeared for these exams between 26-30 May 2020. UNICEF stepped up to support SSK in delivering printed hand-outs to children who did not have access to digital learning resources. Academic support and guidance cum counselling was provided through 200 learning resource centres, in remote hamlets. Children studying at these centres were served refreshments. Children gained confidence to appear for their exams. SSK received special permission from the health department for conducting exams by following the norms of distancing and hygiene. The government conducted the public exams with close coordination across departments in 3000 examination centres where over 5000 infrared thermometers were provided to check all students and 2.5 million face masks were used. All measures were taken to conduct the exams in a safe environment.



COVID time exams in Kerala Pic (c) Indian Express

## Next steps

The Kerala government's success of taking school to the home of every child has been made possible due to detailed planning, close coordination of various agencies and departments, and decentralized implementation. The state is likely to continue its blended model of learning, such as the flipped classroom approach, once the schools reopen.

However, whether and how effectively digital learning is reaching all children needs robust assessment. UNICEF has stepped in to support the government on this. An assessment is currently planned, the results of which could inform further course correction and suggest policy reforms and investments for children.

While the state has significant private provisioning of school education, efforts like the ones being made during the COVID-19 pandemic are building people's confidence about the public education system. The increase in enrolment of students in Kerala's government schools during the last two years has shown that public services are availed when quality services are delivered. There are several lessons that can be learnt from the Kerala model.

*Edited by Sunisha Ahuja and Poornima Ravi Shankar*

<https://unicef.sharepoint.com/sites/IND-COVID19/SitePages/The-Peal-of-First-Bell-at-School--Lessons-from-Kerala%E2%80%99s-Schooling-during-COVID-19.aspx>

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