



Pratham

Every Child in School & Learning Well

PRATHAM EDUCATION FOUNDATION AND EAA'S DIGITAL SCHOOL PROJECT PILOT

Pratham is one of India's largest education NGOs dedicated to providing quality education for millions of children and youth across 21 states and union territories in India. During the COVID-19 lockdown, Pratham strived to create contextualized content, work in partnership with 14 governments, and over 200 nonprofits and ensured a resilient two-way communication channel with 12000 communities. Pratham created new content for mediums such as TV, Radio, Interactive Voice Response (IVR) and SMS and continued to disseminate digital content in 11 regional languages.

Pratham and EAA partnered in 2019 to co-design and implement the India-based pilot of Digital School Program (DSP) with over 2000 learners in over 150 villages in the state of Uttar Pradesh. The average age of the learners is 17.5 years, and 89% of the enrolled learners are female. The DSP is a blended learning model designed to provide quality education for out-of-school adolescent learners by working around the circumstantial constraints faced by these learners such as distance to school, employment, and familial responsibilities. The educational team consists of facilitators, coaches, and student course leaders.

Facilitators are trained on facilitating student learning in a technology-enabled environment, while coaches are community youth volunteers who guide the students and support the facilitators. Student course leaders are DSP students who are selected to serve as a bridge between facilitators and students by working with coaches to support the learning of students on days when facilitators are not present.

The goal of the DSP pilot is to provide students with access to quality content for English, Math, and Language (Hindi) to build their skills in these subjects. The pilot enables them to sit the grade 8 NIOS exam and work toward completing the 10th grade NIOS school leaving diploma exam in the next phase of the EAA-Pratham partnership. In the DSP model, learners study:

- in village-level groups in their community centers under the supervision of a facilitator (serving as the teacher)
- in smaller neighborhood-level groups guided by volunteer coaches;
- and individually using tablets that are pre-loaded with learning applications in addition to printed materials.



Following the spread of COVID-19 and the announcement of the countrywide lockdown, mobility in the villages was restricted, and all visits by facilitators and meetings by students were paused. To circumvent this challenge, **Pratham's COVID-19 response in the DSP project was centered on the use of phone calls, SMS messages, radio, TV IVR to ensure the continuity of students' learning and engagement.**

The Pratham team conducted an exercise to map every student to a device they had access to, whether a smartphone, regular phone, or feature phone, with the help of the facilitators. The team was able to connect to 60% (about 1300) of the learners through mobile phones.

During the first three weeks of the lockdown, facilitators delivered lessons by calling students individually or connecting to 2-4 students together through conference calls. On average, each facilitator made nine phone calls (of about 20 min each) to his/her five village groups every day over the first three weeks of the lockdown.

Facilitators began sending short, curated text messages (SMS) to their students every week from the fourth week of the lockdown. Each text message outlined an activity related to a subject - Language, Math, or English. Facilitators called each student individually twice a week to explain

the activities, check if the students had completed the activities, and help them with any challenges they faced. **On average, each facilitator speaks to about 35 students every week. Over 1000 students in DSP are in touch with their facilitators twice a week. 70% of students complete the activities sent each week.**

SOLUTION

Criteria	Category	Details
Technological Readiness	Basic phone/SMS	Facilitators send short, curated text messages (SMS) to their students every week. Each message outlines an activity related to a subject - Language, Math, or English. Facilitators also call each student twice a week to explain the activities to the students, check if the students had completed the activities, and help them with any challenges they faced.
Content availability	No	Content is developed by Pratham and aligned with the national Indian curriculum as well as learners' contexts and learning levels. It is delivered through digital applications and printed materials to ensure a balance of digital and non-digital learning.
Personalization	Yes	The content is appropriate for the learners' contexts, linguistic background, and learning needs. It includes several learning levels starting with foundational skills to advanced levels. Content shared through SMS and phone calls is also personalized according to student levels and gradually increases in difficulty.
Interactivity	Yes	Pratham's learning content on tablets is highly interactive and uses simple game-based activities to engage students. The DSP model ensures an engaging experience in all learning settings (group

		vs. individual). Although the phone and SMS model is not interactive in the technical sense, the delivery of the SMS followed by phone calls from facilitators makes up for lost tech interactivity.
Mode	Synchronous	Facilitators maintain a regular schedule of calls and SMS texts that always take place through a mobile phone.
Feasibility to replicate		
Time	Short	The week before the lockdown started, facilitators began calling students and conducting remote sessions. Initially, the aim was to keep students engaged until new learning content was curated in the message format. Two weeks later, the messages were ready, and facilitators began sending text messages to students.
Effort	High	To keep students engaged, facilitators send messages, and conduct follow-up calls at least twice a week. Calls and messages vary based on students' learning levels. Facilitators also undergo weekly subject-specific training on how to conduct remote calls and enable student learning for students of different learning levels. Facilitators also have to record their interactions with the students for monitoring purposes.
Money	Low	Pratham reported that the project cost was USD 50 per village for a scale of 150 villages.

FOLLOW-UP AND IMPLEMENTATION

Criteria	Category	Details
Preparedness of teachers to design and facilitate learning	Low	Subject matter experts created the educational content of the messages, which were then shared by facilitators who, in turn, shared them with their students and conducted follow-up phone calls.
Availability and ability of parents or caregivers to facilitate effective home-based distance learning	Partially	Parents were not able to guide the students, as most students are first-generation learners. Some students were supported by their siblings, who assumed the role of a guide/coach but not an educator.
Monitoring and evaluation capacities		
Monitor distance learning processes	Yes	Facilitators collected information about each phone call they made to the students. Every week, they summarized and recorded this information in a form. The form was submitted through Pratham's Dynamic Data Entry application. Every week, facilitators reported on the number of students they spoke to, the number of students they were not able to reach, the number of students who completed the activities, reasons why students were not able to complete the activities, and the number of students who took help to complete the activities.

Track the access to courses and engagement	Yes	As a result of the COVID-19 lockdown, students who had the tablets were not able to share them with group members as was previously done. Students who had tablets were given activities to do on the tablets. However, most students have not had access to tablets for two months. Content shared through SMS was shared directly and followed a set schedule, which made it easy to track.
Assess learning outcomes	No	Remote assessments were conducted for students who could only read words. The assessment tool was sent to students as an image via WhatsApp, and facilitators assessed the students over a phone call.
Sustain immediate distance learning responses for achieving long-term goals	No	The new DSP model was developed to circumvent the challenges imposed by the lockdown and will be used until the lockdown is lifted and in-person group sessions can be resumed. This model will likely be used until September 2020.

IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGES

The spread of COVID-19 introduced new challenges to the implementation of the DSP. About 10% of students don't have access to a phone and have, therefore, not been able to benefit from the COVID-19 response outlined above. Another 30% of students live further away from the village center and have not been reachable since the beginning of this lockdown. Attempts are currently being made to reach these students, who will likely require special attention to be brought up to speed.

Additionally, parents and spouses of students were initially unsupportive of the messages and phone calls made by facilitators due to cultural factors. Since most learners are young women, some of whom are married, long phone calls or those made during the evening were a challenge. Facilitators spoke to the learners' families and explained the importance of staying in touch during this time, following which many parents and spouses cooperated with the team. Given the current uncertainty regarding mobility and the lifting of the lockdown, Pratham intends to continue using the current COVID-19 response model to engage students until further notice.

TAKEAWAY LESSONS

In this pilot project, Pratham had explored various options each of which enhances current program capacities. Sending SMS messages during the lockdown period has opened up a new avenue of communication between students and facilitators. Facilitators can continue sending messages to students after the lockdown is lifted to keep students engaged through the week.

Once some restrictions are lifted, student course leaders and coaches can be trained to play an essential role in facilitating remote learning. Students also need to be trained to use technology to widen the scope and reach of remote mentoring and learning. However, the use of SMS for home delivery of content and individual focus will continue. Following up on phone calls is also an activity that will likely continue.

Pratham was able to reach more than 1000 students during the lockdown, 89% of which are female. Pratham continues to expand their models across the technology spectrum to be able to reach all beneficiaries in varied contexts and regardless of their circumstances.