

## Policy Action Points

This document is intended to provide help in informing the Government of Sindh's ongoing reform and COVID-19 response assurance efforts. It presents findings from Early Learning Partnership Phase II Research conducted by Idara-e-Taleem-o-Aagahi in eight districts of Sindh<sup>1</sup>.

The key research questions guiding this research are related to ECE in COVID-19 in terms of response, prioritization, learning at home, staff support, and eventual return to school. The study deployed a mixed-methods approach with quantitative data spread across 8 districts, 1600+ households, and 100+ schools in Sindh. Our findings provide some key insights into the early learning situation in Sindh.

- **Prioritization:** While the government actors have over the past few years worked well to transform ECE up to modern standards, our findings show that there are still some major milestones to achieve. The limited prioritization of ECE during the pandemic and the learning losses shown in our findings highlight the need to develop a more coherent, entrenched, and formalized ECE-specific strategies at a systems' level that can mitigate the negative impact of emergency situations and ensure high outcomes in other times.
  - There is also a need for developing a centralized data collection system for early years to monitor, assess, and evaluate early learning outcomes.
  - There is also a need to develop clear cut terminologies for pre-primary classes and delineate the age of the incoming children in ECE.
- **Coherence of response:** At the systems' level, there is not a separate budget head for ECE in the province during the latest fiscal year and nor was ECE included in the resilience plans built by the federal government for school education during the pandemic.
  - There is a need for coherence across various departments working in ECD: nutrition, health, childcare. This would involve inter-sectoral coordination via development of a repository of ECD data that can be accessed by all stakeholders.
- **Learning at home:** There is inherent potential in play-based learning. The high prevalence of play-based learning at home with parents, with guidance from teachers, is a major positive outcome particularly due to the increasing recognition that play is gaining within ECE pedagogy worldwide. More than 66% of the parents engaged with their children in play-based learning activities including storytelling and book reading to keep them stimulated. There is thus an opportunity to engage parents further to ensure that the learning environments for children are well-developed at both the class-room and household level.

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<sup>1</sup> The districts are: Badin, Karachi-Malir-Rural, Kashmore, Khairpur, Larkana, Shaheed Benazirabad, Sukkur, Tando Allah Yar.

- **Teachers:** Despite the challenges faced during the pandemic, there is evidence of teacher engagement. 47% of the teachers reported meeting parents regularly 68% of the teachers reported taking measures for children's psycho-social wellbeing during the pandemic and as many as 78% of the teachers reported assigning activities to children during lockdown. This is despite the fact that only one-fifth of the teachers received any professional development during the pandemic. There is thus scope for further progress in this regard.
  - Of the various trainings being provided to ECE teachers by a wide spectrum of stakeholders—SELD, civil society, international development partners—there should be a central repository so teachers' professional development could be tracked.
- **Equity & Inclusion:** Our findings with regards to households show that access to distance learning during this period was limited. One of the key mediums for distance learning is the internet but 32% of households reported not having an internet or wifi connection. Nevertheless, the participation in distance learning via radio, and printed materials was comparatively high, indicating a sustained effort by the ECE service-providers to keep children engaged. 57% of the children accessed free printed materials during this period. There is reason for optimism with regards to government's efforts in ECE during the pandemic, there are also challenges.
- **Return to school:** Evidence from the data indicates enrolment loss and a significant drop-out ratio, which in turn requires a systems-level response to early learning in the province.
  - There should be a revisit to these schools to ascertain whether these children are drop-outs or absentees and whether the period after school reopening brings further children back to school.