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.

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.

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.

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.