

Sri Lanka: Reopening schools: Schools record very low attendance

Monday 1 August 2022, by [HANNAN Sarah](#) (Date first published: 31 July 2022).

A week has passed since schools reopened in Sri Lanka. However, the smooth running of schools is yet to be seen given a multitude of unsolved issues, mainly the lack of affordable transport services and the various socioeconomic crises that parents and school staff are facing.

Although the Ministry of Education and the Department of Education decided to allow schools to function on a three-day in-person class schedule and a two-day online class schedule, it is evident that these schemes are not practical as many school children are unable to physically attend school or follow online lessons.

The situation is now becoming a humanitarian crisis as the loss of education is visible, with children finding it challenging to assimilate with the on-again-off-again school schedules and the ever-changing timetables and lesson structures. To top it all off, examinations are being pushed around the calendar with general education almost coming to a standstill.

Many schools in Colombo have seen only one-third of the student body attending in-person lessons. Although Minister of Education Susil Premajayantha said at the beginning of the school week that necessary steps had been taken to restore public transport services along with regular functioning of school buses and vans, parents, teachers, and even school children had faced a very different experience over the past week.

The Sunday Morning spoke to suburban parents with children attending schools in the greater Colombo region. R. Nizam, a resident of Jayawadanagama, noted that the morning bus for the housing scheme which regularly transported school and office crowds was no longer functioning.

“With schools starting on Monday, we lost the only functioning bus which took many of the people and school children into Colombo. It is a Sri Lanka Transport Board bus and we are told that it had been assigned to transport school children under the ‘Sisu Seriya’ service. We are all inconvenienced by this. My husband has to now take a taxi, if he is fortunate enough to catch one in the morning, to get to Pelawatta so he can take the bus to get to Borella. In the case of our child who is in Grade 3, this week I decided to keep her at home,” Nizam noted.

According to Nizam, the school van that took the kids from the housing scheme in Jayawadanagama had informed them that it was no longer conducive to operate due to the lack of fuel and more importantly because it was unable to offer the school van service at a nominal rate.

“We have to now arrange transport with a tuk but even that is not cheap these days. The daily cost of transport alone for the child to go to school and come back now exceeds Rs. 2,000. I am trying to wrap my head around the costs once school commences full time and they have to go to school on all five days,” Nizam added.

Meanwhile, in Kandy, parents who live closer to schools have decided to walk or cycle with children to school.

"I set off from home a little early so I can drop my child at school and then head to work. If the weather is favourable, we can cycle to work and drop the kids at school on the way. However, as Kandy weather goes, when it rains it is impossible to cycle," Sumith Silva, a Kandy resident explained.

Circulars v. ground situation

"The entire country is facing numerous challenges on a daily basis and we at the Department of Education are looking at continuously providing access to education for school children. Already they have missed lessons. The decision was to conduct schools for three days and have online learning for two days, but we gave the principal of each school the authority to decide how they want to conduct classes. At least for the Western Province Department of Education, we are following the schedule that is published for now," Western Province Department of Education Provincial Director of Education P. Srilal Nonis explained to The Sunday Morning.

Minister Premjayantha initially noted that nearly 40,000 vans and buses were transporting children to schools, but it was unclear whether all areas of the country had functioning transport services.

However, Government Teachers' Association General Secretary Shehan Dissanayake said: "The circulars issued by the Ministry and the provincial education offices cannot be put into action in reality. Schools are unable to function as instructed because we have teachers who travel almost 100 km to get to certain schools and for them the allocated fuel quota is insufficient. The back-and-forth journey alone comes up to 200 km, so it is not practical to have quotas, especially for motorbikes or even three-wheelers."

Dissanayake further elaborated that since student attendance had been poor during the last three days of in-person school, even if the lessons were not conducted systematically, the section of students that could not attend school lost their time in class and missed the lessons taught.

"Online classes cannot be conducted, because most of the students still do not have proper devices or data to follow the lessons," he added.

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