

## Misadventures in education

The Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) has attracted much attention in recent weeks for two reasons. First, it put out for public consultation the draft Higher Education Commission of India (HECI) Bill, which seeks to replace the University Grants Commission. In response, it received 10,200 suggestions/comments from various stakeholders. Second, the Right to Education (Amendment) Bill, 2018, was passed by the Lok Sabha on July 18 and is now before the Rajya Sabha. It seeks to eliminate the no-detention policy and reintroduce testing for Classes V and VIII.

Such misadventures in education are triggered by a long-standing concern that we need a thorough policy shift in our systems of education. While a number of reports and data validate our concerns of plummeting standards in education, the response of the government can, at best, be called short-sighted.

Thousands of concerns have been aired by academics, policy makers, and civil society on the HECI Bill, particularly because it is dubiously silent on concrete reasons to replace the UGC. This is not to argue that there are no problems with the UGC. Both the National Knowledge Commission Report (2006) and the Yashpal Committee on Higher Education (2009) made a solid case for bringing in a new regulator.

However, the draft HECI Bill makes the problem worse through over-centralisation and enhanced political interference. The move to entrust all grant-giving powers to the Ministry can lead to politicisation of grant allocation and more interference by the bureaucracy.

Further, instead of preserving autonomy, the Bill allows the Chairperson of the new Commission to be a member of the Central government, something expressly prohibited in the UGC Act. The bill also transgresses the autonomy of higher educational institutions by allowing micromanagement, for instance, on syllabi. The new over-arching body does not involve the States sufficiently and or accommodate the diverse needs of the country. Therefore, instead of this half-hearted measure, the government would have been better off plugging the loopholes in the UGC.

The Right to Education (RTE) Bill 2018 does away with the policy that children cannot be detained till they complete elementary education in Class VIII. The amendment gives States the option of holding regular examinations either at the end of Class V or Class VIII, or both. Students who fail this exam would be given a chance to re-appear after two months from the date of declaration of results. In case they still cannot pass, the States will have the option of detaining them. This would potentially push out many children who are unable to meet standards because they have been deprived of quality education. The no-detention policy was to be implemented together with continuous assessment, which would help identify learning deficiencies and correct them. However, the education system has failed to provide continuous assessment and so the government is falling back on examinations and detention, which can lead to students becoming discouraged and higher dropout rates.

The larger question is whether the no-detention policy will improve the learning outcomes of children if it is brought back. Nine years since the launch of the RTE we have achieved near universalisation of enrolment of children at the elementary level. The no-detention policy is successful in that sense. However, if the aim is to improve learning outcomes, the policy alone is unhelpful. To improve learning outcomes in children, there are other specific provisions in the RTE that need attention. Besides maintaining a good pupil-teacher ratio (PTR), proper infrastructure like all-weather buildings, barrier-free access in schools, separate toilets for boys and girls are pertinent measures to improve qualitative standards enshrined in the RTE. Government data show

that out of 10,72,742 government schools at the elementary level, only 7.5 lakh have ramps, 6 lakh have playgrounds, and 9 lakh have libraries.

Declining funds is another reason why the RTE has not been implemented in letter and spirit. For example, an Accountability Initiative Report shows that allocations for the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, the main vehicle to drive RTE implementation, have remained much below the resource estimates made by the MHRD. Quality-related interventions accounted for only 9% of the total approved budgets in FY 2016-17.

Interestingly, States like Kerala that wish to continue with the no-detention policy spent nearly all their allocated budget on quality in 2016-17. It is evident that no-detention can work only if there is improved quality, which the current amendment to RTE does not ensure.

These legislations are only a patchwork agenda of the government as they provide no long-term solution to the issues plaguing the system of education in India.

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