

Cutting school syllabus by half shouldn't come at the cost of learning

The announcement by Human Resource Development Minister, Prakash Javadekar, that the syllabus of National Council for Educational Research and Training (NCERT) books for classes 1 to 12 will be slashed by half is welcome, but also raises some vexing issues. The government's emphasis on digitisation and slimmer textbooks will help reduce the weight of schoolbags. These changes may be in place by 2019. Mr Javadekar said the school syllabus at present was more than that of B.Com and BA courses. The burden of course work left teachers with little time to impart life skills and inculcate creativity among students.

But the reduction of the quantity of course syllabi should not come at the cost of learning. As it is, the comprehension levels of students across the country are below par. The recently released Annual Status of Education Report for 2017 said 40% of students between the ages of 14 and 18 surveyed in rural schools in 24 states across the country couldn't tell the time from a clock and 57% couldn't do basic mathematics. It is not hard to understand why. Our education system has not focused enough on learning outcomes. It has not kept up with advances in technology. Improving the quality of our students may involve enhancing the quality of our educators. Of the 20 lakh teachers which were to be trained in 2015 under the Right to Education Act, only five lakh have been trained so far. There is a clear mismatch in the supply and demand for educators with 70 lakh teachers teaching close to 26 crore students in 15 lakh schools across the country.

So, merely dropping chapters from books might not be enough. It needs to be augmented by greater rigour in the evaluation process. An element of competition among students through regular assessments is desirable to improve their learning abilities. To its credit, the government has brought back board examinations for class 10 in 2017 and is planning to introduce a Bill in the Parliament to restore examinations and detentions. In 2017, the Right to Education Act was amended to incorporate a competency-based evaluation study covering 2.2 million students across 110,000 schools to understand what a child should be learning in various classes. One of the recommendations of the T.S.R. Subramanian committee, entrusted with preparing a new education policy for India, is compulsory certification for teachers in government and private schools, with the provision for renewal every 10 years based on independent external testing. Lighter textbooks with relevant course work and better teachers could well be the recipe for improved learning outcomes.

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