

Private unaided schools deserve a better bargain

The rot in India's primary education was bound to affect the quality of our workforce. There is a direct bearing of poor learning outcomes in primary schools on the students' future, and these concerns have been verified by Pratham's latest Annual Survey of Education Report (Aser) 2017, "Beyond Basics", that focuses on students in the 14-18 age group.

The survey finds that while 86% of adolescents are enrolled in schools, they are under-equipped to contribute to the economy in any meaningful way. Twenty-five per cent of the students cannot read a basic text in their own language fluently. Forty per cent of 18-year-olds cannot read a simple sentence in English. And they lack basic arithmetic skills; only 43% of them could perform a simple division. This translates to unacceptable performance in everyday tasks, gauged by proxy tests like measuring length, calculating time, applying the unitary method and comprehending the instructions written on a pack of oral rehydration solution.

India has achieved universal enrolment at the elementary level. This is a great achievement, but getting students to school is only the beginning of human capital formation. Learning requires a lot more than attendance. In order for students to stay in school, the school needs to create a palpable difference in the students' abilities. The drop in the enrolment rate in secondary education (78.5%), despite the high returns to education, shows that something is wrong in our quality of instruction.

The starting point of the analysis has to be the performance of private unaided schools, vis-a-vis government schools.

Research by Geeta Gandhi Kingdon has demonstrated that private unaided schools have much better learning outcomes per unit of expenditure. Contrary to popular opinion, most private unaided schools are inexpensive; 80% of them charge a fee that is lower than the government's per-pupil expenditure (PPE). Averaging across states, private school fee is less than 47% of the PPE of government schools (which Kingdon suggests is underestimated.) In terms of learning outcomes, both private and government schools performed poorly, but private schools perform better. In the 2014 Aser report, the difference between the percentage of private and government school students in class V who were able to perform a division and read a class II text was 18.6% and 20.3%, respectively. Controlling for students' home background, the difference falls but an achievement gap of 0.10 to 0.35 standard deviation remains. Thus, the data shows that private unaided schools are delivering the same, if not better, learning outcomes than government schools at a fraction of the cost, despite resource constraints.

This shows that more inputs do not translate into better outputs. Despite qualified teachers, mid-day meals and free admissions, 13 million students left government schools between 2011 and 2016, while private school enrolment increased by 17 million in that duration.

Clearly, people are choosing private schools for their better service. What implications does this have for India's education policy?

For starters, the government needs to acknowledge the fact that "unrecognized" private unaided schools play an important role. The Right to Education Act stipulates that private schools cannot be established or continue to function without obtaining a "certificate of recognition" from the state government, i.e. until they meet stipulated norms such as the maximum pupil-teacher-ratio and infrastructure. This has made many schools economically unviable and forced them to shut down.

Given that millions of students have left government schools for private ones, the government

should support their education by giving school vouchers to all underprivileged students. The students can choose to spend the voucher in their government school, or give it to a private school. This will increase the purchasing power of all parents and allow them to send their child to school for more years, or send them to a better school. Better managed schools will attract more students and expand, while poorly performing schools will shrink. The increasing number of government schools that are emptying-out, but continue to drain resources, will have to improve their performance or they might cease to exist.

The Aser report points to another important problem: more girls than boys drop out of school between ages 14-18. While boys drop out to work, girls usually stay at home and help with domestic chores. The societal conception of gender roles is an important factor, but perceived threat to safety and distant senior secondary schools (especially girls-only schools) might also be a factor. Policies such as free bicycles to girls in Bihar have been successful in increasing enrolment by improving mobility. Building gender-specific toilets in schools is another measure that helps in improving girls' enrolment.

As a welcome move, the upcoming New Education Policy is likely to focus more on outcomes than inputs. An educated citizenry is vital for a democracy. If our education system does not enable people to comprehend the written word, keep stable jobs and participate in reasonable debates, it is a problem that needs immediate redressal.

While the Aser report does not paint a favourable picture of the quality of the present workforce, education reforms can change the situation for the next generation.

How should the education system respond to poor learning outcomes? Tell us at views@livemint.com

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