

# ON THE LEARNING CURVE: TRANSFORMING EDUCATION OUTCOMES IN INDIA

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Education and related issues

Among the lakhs of employees on the payrolls of State governments in India, the education department, unarguably, has the largest share of employees. Besides frontline service providers (teachers), there are a number of other officials and administrators who form an important part of the educational set-up.

Given the size of the education department, any effort to introduce education reforms must ensure that the incentives of all stakeholders are aligned throughout the system to ensure their participation. Education transformation programmes by States run the risk of falling flat, as they are often unaccompanied by a single transformation change road map that all key actors agree upon and work towards. A successful example of implementing such a road map can be seen in Haryana, which has created a race among its administrative blocks to be declared as 'Saksham' (Hindi for abled/skilled), i.e. have 80% or more students who are grade level competent.

Under this campaign, State officials nominate their block for the 'Saksham Ghoshna' once they are reasonably confident that their block has achieved the 80% target — as a result of remedial programmes, teacher training and internal assessments. This self-nomination is then followed by rigorous rounds of third party assessments to vet their claims. If a block is found to be 'Saksham', the block officials are recognised by no less than the Chief Minister, and a large-scale 'show and tell' event is organised to honour them. Further, when all blocks in a district are declared as 'Saksham', the entire district is also accorded 'Saksham' status.

According to the latest third party assessment in February 2019, 94 blocks out of a total of 119 in Haryana have been declared 'Saksham' and overall grade competence has been assessed at 80%, which is a giant leap in learning outcomes when compared to the overall grade competence of 40% in 2014. Given these early successes, many other States are also embarking on such programmes.

The valuable lesson from all this is that inducing competition among administrative units helps invigorate key stakeholders to work in tandem in order to achieve intended outcomes. Competition also makes abstract goals such as 'learning outcomes' more real by defining exact 'actionable' metrics on which improvement is desired. Further, with encouragement from above, such campaigns lead to a shift in the mindset of a State's education administrators, many of whom otherwise believe that high learning outcomes are almost unachievable. Political commitment to improving the quality of education backed by strong review and monitoring mechanisms can spur meaningful activity in States.

Since its inception, the NITI Aayog (National Institution for Transforming India), has also been a believer in competitive federalism that puts pressure on policymakers across States to perform better on pre-defined goals and metrics. To translate this to education, we have now developed the State-level 'School Education Quality Index' (SEQI), which seeks to make improvements in learning outcomes a focal point of governance. It gives scores to States based on their educational performance and puts this data out in the public domain. The SEQI uses three data sources, including the National Achievement Survey, to come out with 33 indicators to measure education outcomes, of which the largest weightage (48%) is given to learning outcomes. By having a two-fold ranking system — one which recognises well-performing States via an overall performance score, and a delta ranking that measures the level of improvement made by States

from their base year — the NITI's Aayog's State ranking not only encourages competition among States but also rewards and motivates other States to consistently improve.

The NITI Aayog's Aspirational Districts programme, launched in early 2018, also draws from this template. Here, 112 under-served districts across the country compete with each other in order to achieve targets in five crucial sectors; these include education, which has among a weightage of 30%. These districts are monitored real-time and ranked on the basis of their progress. The follow-up for each indicator is handled by the respective Ministry in charge of the same, while NITI Aayog handles the data compilation and dissemination.

Most importantly, there is a constant focus on recognising and disseminating best practices of select districts to other States, which act as a reward for well-performing local administrations while providing impetus to other districts to adopt similar measures. This strategy has already shown success; districts that were ranked low in baseline surveys, such as Virudhunagar (Tamil Nadu), Nuapada (Odisha), Gumla (Jharkhand), Siddharthnagar (Uttar Pradesh), and Vizianagaram (Andhra Pradesh), have shown remarkable progress in subsequent rounds of assessment.

The fact that this programme has huge support and buy-in from the Prime Minister personally ensures that all stakeholders are spurred into action and energised to achieve the stated goals. Given the success of these initiatives, it is abundantly clear that the right incentive structures for stakeholders lead to administrative efficiency, which then improves the quality of service delivery. States therefore need to induce competition and give a boost to put all key actors in education in the driver's seat to improve their learning levels.

The successes that we are already witnessing in India with the systemic approach to transforming education are inspiring. Improvement in learning outcomes is an immediate goal for India to fulfil its aspirations of playing a greater role in the global economy and a systemic transformation is the best solution that we have so far.

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