

OPINION

Relevant for: Health, Education & Human Resources | Topic: Education and related issues

In terms of scale, the network and vision established by India's Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) is admirable. Launched in 1974, ICDS has expanded from just 33 UNICEF-funded programmes to a network of almost 1.4 million *anganwadi* centres providing a package of health and pre-school services to 10 crore beneficiaries. This network is by far the largest in the world. But it lacks quality of service delivery, especially with respect to early childhood care and education (ECCE).

India's quality of ECCE lags behind the rest of the world, ranking last among 45 countries in the Economist Intelligence Unit's 2012 survey of ECCE quality. Unlike countries such as Brazil and South Africa, India doesn't guarantee early childhood care and education to children under the age of six. While Article 45 of the Constitution directed the state to provide free education to all children up to the age of 14, the 86th Constitutional Amendment Act (2002)—and, subsequently, the Right to Education Act—caused a shift by defining education as a right for children between the ages of six and 14. This effectively released the state from its obligation to provide quality education at the early childhood (0-6 years) level.

Extensive research points to the importance of ECCE. Economist James Heckman has demonstrated that pre-school education yields greater returns than any other form of education. Some Indian states are becoming more cognizant of this. For instance, Rajasthan's state vision on ECCE states, "The first six years of a child's life are globally acknowledged to be the most critical years for lifelong development... Pre-School Education derives its importance from this rationale." As India seeks to develop the full potential of its network of *anganwadis* to improve the quality of ECCE, Rajasthan's recent experiences of integrating *anganwadis* with its school system illustrate a workable model.

In Rajasthan, as in several parts of India, *anganwadis* typically operate in single rooms with a three-person staff—an *anganwadi* worker, an *anganwadi* helper, and an ASHA or community health worker. Staff are generally underpaid and lack the necessary skills and motivation to excel at their jobs. Supervision is also severely limited because of staffing vacancies, with a 30% vacancy rate for supervisors and a 60% vacancy rate for project officers. In practical terms, this means that each *anganwadi* is supervised for only one or two hours each month, as each supervisor has to cover between 30 and 40 *anganwadis*.

In terms of infrastructure, while the ICDS mission calls for *anganwadis* to be at least 600 sq feet and include a kitchen, store room, and outdoor play areas, ICDS only provides 750 per month for rent in rural areas and 3,000 in urban areas—and many *anganwadis* do not receive even that full amount.

In recent years, Rajasthan has taken proactive steps to address this web of problems by integrating or co-locating *anganwadis* with local government schools. Through this initiative, government schools across the state will integrate a nearby *anganwadi* as part of the school itself. The goal is to provide more consistent and continuous supervision to *anganwadis* and facilitate continuity to quality public schools. Over 18,000 *anganwadis*—a quarter of all *anganwadis* in Rajasthan—have already been shifted onto the campuses of government schools. Most of these *anganwadis* were previously running in rented rooms, with limited enrolment and infrastructure. By giving them a proper room and ensuring that they function on a defined daily schedule, integration is a win-win for both the *anganwadi* and the government school.

In an additional 19,000 schools in Rajasthan, local public schools have designated mentor teachers to help supervise and support workers in nearby *anganwadis*. These mentor teachers are primary school teachers who are trained to provide support from an academic perspective, facilitate parental engagement, and ensure the smooth daily functioning of the *anganwadi*.

It is crucial to note that for integration to work, schools must have the ability to support and nurture *anganwadis*. In Rajasthan's case, a large-scale systems-transformation effort led by the department of education has made this possible by establishing model elementary and secondary schools in every gram panchayat across the state. The impact of these interventions is visible in the shift in enrolment from private to public schools over the past two years and also in improvements in learning outcomes—measured both by board examination results and the national achievement survey, according to which, Rajasthan emerged as the top-performing state in 2018. The integration of *anganwadis* is then a part of a larger effort to improve education quality.

Just as the education department considered a range of factors—infrastructure, curriculum, school leadership, teacher training—while creating model schools, its new *anganwadi* quality framework considers a variety of input and outcome-related attributes. While much needs to be done in terms of improving *anganwadis* along all of these lines, preliminary results from the integration process have been promising. Average enrolment in integrated *anganwadis* exceeds that of unintegrated *anganwadis* by 62.5%. Integrated *anganwadis* also have greater access to clean drinking water, toilets, and other infrastructure. The next steps in the process include defining the roles of mentor teachers and building their capacities, engaging parents and communities, and ultimately, improving the school readiness of children.

Drawing on synergies between *anganwadis* and government schools can serve as a model for other states seeking to improve ECCE delivery in a cost-effective and sustainable manner. It not only allows *anganwadis* to share the physical and human resources of government schools, but also fosters a more profound integration across the education system, ensuring that the state assumes the responsibility of providing quality education to all children.

Kyle Bardman and Rohan Sandhu are, respectively, former project associate and associate director at the International Innovation Corps.

END

Downloaded from crackIAS.com

© **Zuccess App** by crackIAS.com

