

Shift the focus of education systems

We need greater decentralisation, capacity building and performance-oriented compliance

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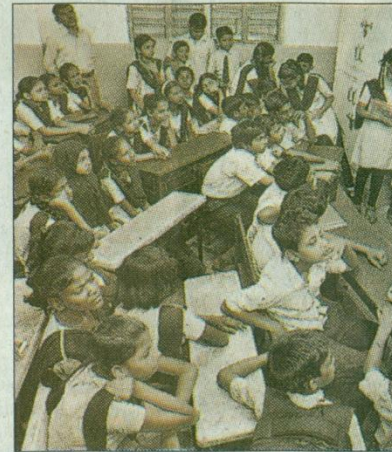
In January, the NCERT released results from the 2017 National Achievement Survey (NAS). The report marks a significant departure from the past. This is the first time that NAS has reported on learning achievements at the district level. Second, learning achievement was measured against competencies acquired by students rather than with reference to the syllabus. This is an important step in orienting the classroom away from syllabus completion to focusing on what students actually learn. Third, survey data was analysed and made public in record time. The survey was conducted in November and the district report cards were ready in January. Given the scale of the survey – 25 lakh students; 1,20,000 schools; across 701 districts – this is no small achievement. States and the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) are negotiating their annual plans and budgets over the next two months. That 2017 NAS data is available makes the possibility of developing a result oriented, learning plan a reality.

The availability of district data on learning outcomes is also a reflection of just how far elementary education policy has travelled in

the last decade. Even as recently as 2009, when Parliament passed the Right to Education Act, education policy was focused exclusively on increasing education inputs: infrastructure, enrollment, pupil teacher ratios. This input-focused system regularly collected district data, but for school inputs such as access, infrastructure, teacher qualifications. The shift to learning outcomes data is a clear signal that education policy makers are breaking out of this input trap to focus on the learning challenge. After all, what gets measured gets done.

While this focus on measurement must be celebrated, attention is also needed on the greater challenge of translating measurement to action. Data is only useful if used as a diagnostic tool to develop and implement solutions. The MHRD has emphasised the critical role that NAS data can play in designing learning-focused classroom reforms. The NCERT has also published a report detailing communication activities to raise ground level awareness about NAS findings. But for change to be truly effective, the education system will have to undertake two critical system focused reforms.

First, the financing system needs to be decentralised. In its current design, the district is recognised as a key unit for education planning and administration. This is why district level NAS data is so important. In practice, however, districts have little financial flexibility as plans have to be aligned to centrally and state determined priorities. Moreover, planning capacity is weak. If NAS data



Classrooms need to turn from syllabus completion to learning BHUSHAN KOYANDE/HT

is to be used effectively, the financing architecture has to change. Pratham's Rukmini Banerji has proposed an important reform: the creation of a learning improvement fund at the Centre and state level that districts can bid for. But to implement this, a mission mode planning campaign at the district level is essential. An interesting parallel is the 1996 Kerala People's Plan campaign in which the state planning board launched a yearlong mission with the Panchayati Raj system to develop the first ever decentralized participatory plan. A key outcome was to permanently build planning capacity at the panchayat level. This is what the education system sorely needs.

The second reform is a far greater chal-

lenge: re-hauling the organisation culture and incentive system of the education bureaucracy. My research into the education administration highlights that frontline administrators function in a culture so steeped in hierarchy that it has cast them as passive rule followers rather than active agents of change. In this culture, data is not a tool for problem solving but a compliance imposition from the top. Moreover, officers are so busy collecting data and responding to orders that there is no time or incentive for deliberation and learning. Consequently, when the focus shifts to learning, the system flounders. This is best illustrated through our research on cluster and block officials tasked with offering "academic support" to teachers. These officers simply lack the tools and time to observe classrooms, track students' learning trajectories and apply this data to provide instructional support. Hierarchy is thus the default option and "support" is limited to asserting authority and ticking off the compliance checklist.

Using learning outcomes data to design genuine, locally relevant solutions is going to require a deep shift in institutional behaviour and capability at the frontlines. Administrators will have to be recast as problem solvers. It is a challenge that can only be met through greater decentralisation, capacity building and designing a performance focused compliance system. This will require long-term investments in the frontline administration.

Monitoring learning outcomes is a first step. But are we ready for the harder and much more systemic challenge of building a responsive, problem solving education administration?

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The views expressed are personal