

Reforms require teachers to play a central role

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The late evening drizzle did not dampen the spirit of the teachers. There were 45 of them, from public (government) schools around Chamba in Uttarakhand, gathered for a dialogue on the draft National Education Policy 2019 (NEP) at our Teacher Learning Centre. At 7pm, no one seemed in a mood to end the session, having started at 5, though many of them had a long ride ahead back home along the winding mountain roads.

During those two hours, the group discussed the NEP, often expressing how its aspects were resonant with their aspirations and hopes. Their worry was how much of it will get implemented. Most of them did mention that given the size and expansive nature of the NEP document, they had read only those topics that were of interest to them. Their one peeve seemed to be that with the introduction of breakfast at school for all students, in addition to the currently available "midday meal", they may have to spend more time supervising the kitchen—though they did acknowledge that breakfast was much needed for their students. Over the past two and a half months, while the NEP has been up for public comment, I have met many groups of public-school teachers across India. Most reactions have been very similar to the group at Chamba. A few peeves, but an overall sense of satisfaction with the NEP. Why are public school teachers reacting in this way? The answer is quite straightforward. The NEP gives the teacher the importance that she or he deserves in education. One key underlying principle of the policy is that education is a social-human process and, therefore, good education requires high-capacity, engaged teachers. This principle manifests itself in specific policy actions on every front; let me list a few of these.

First, how can we expect teachers to remain engaged and motivated if the most basic physical working conditions are inadequate to appalling? If they don't have access to functioning toilets and running water, electricity supply is disrupted, and not even a small working space to themselves? If we respect the profes-

sion of teachers, they must be allowed to focus on their teaching and on their students. Teachers will not be pulled out for other kinds of work such as surveys, distribution of public services, local elections, etc. Repetitious data demands on the teacher from the system will be eliminated by intelligent use of information technology.

Fourth, an adequate number of teachers will be appointed. Today, an estimated 2 million teaching jobs are vacant across the country, while we altogether have 9 million teachers. That's a large deficit. Teachers are handling more students than they can, across multiple grades, and often teaching subjects that they have themselves not studied. This will be addressed immediately.

Fifth, teachers must not face discriminatory service conditions. Lakhs of "para-teachers" across the country perform the same role as other teachers in their schools, but get paid half to one-fourth. All such cadres of teachers will be regularized—given service conditions and compensation equivalent to other teachers, after going through the relevant qualifications where required. Also, compensation and service conditions will be equalized across primary to high school.

Sixth, teachers will be provided support for professional development and growth. This will be based on their own needs and not driven by some centralized, impersonal system. This will entail providing sustained high-quality education and opportunities for peer learning. It will also mean objective assessment of their work and recognition for good work, enabled by development-oriented supervision. This in turn will be enabled by appropriate capacity development of school leaders and other leaders of the education system.

Seventh, the culture of the education system—including in schools—will be based on trust, and will empower and enable teachers. It will foster creativity and initiative, and curricular innovation. Teachers will be treated as valued professionals, not as the bottom-most rung in the vast government hierarchy. This will reflect in the daily behaviour of the education system.