

12 FINANCIAL EXPRESS

WWW.FINANCIAL

Education

MONDAY, OCTOBER 9, 2017



TW

World Econ
@wef
This is the t
and Mark Z
http://wef.

TOWARDS A LITERATE INDIA

New models in early-stage education

While we have had substantive improvements in enrolment rates due to the many schemes and spends on public infrastructure, we still continue to have major issues on the qualitative side of education delivery



Jaivir Singh

AS AN INDIAN who figures in the demographic often spoken of, it pains me deeply that my countrymen still make up a large number of the global population that's not literate. As per a UNESCO report, a staggering 258 million Indians still don't have the ability to read or write. As an independent nation for seven decades, our responsibility, as a collective, to provide education to the masses and access to primary healthcare services has trapped us in a cycle of substandard socioeconomic growth. The reasons are many.

While the intent of the governments at the Centre, over the last couple of decades, has been to achieve universal education, we still have miles to go. We have seen a significant jump (over six times) in literacy rates since the British Raj, but there is always scope for improvement. As per fairly recent data, 74% literacy had been achieved by the year 2011. However, population growth has continued to play a spoiler as the delivery mechanisms of the government and other like-minded institutions to reach out to the ever-expanding base of adolescents and young school goers has not seen positive action and results at the pace required.

While we have had substantive improve-

ments in enrolment rates due to the many schemes and spends on public infrastructure, we still face major issues on the qualitative side of education delivery. A pointer on this was exhibited by ASER, noting that over 52% of children studying in the fifth grade lacked the reading skills of the second grade.

The fact that education as a sector is a central government and state government responsibility provides its own compulsions and complications, even though at both levels laws have been enacted to make early-stage education mandatory and free. The last two decades have seen positive movement around enrolment rates, but denting this progress are the dropout figures of 35% at the primary level, a cause for concern as per the Planning Commission report of 2008.

The Right to Education Act (RTE 2010) has aided in formalising the need for more investment into the education space. Investments in bettering school infrastructure may have seen an uptake, but lack of accountability and ownership by many educational institutions showcases substantive inefficiencies in the delivery model. This lack of accountability is clear and visible, considering low quality of research, teacher absenteeism, substandard teaching training facilities, inadequate availability, and the usage of technological resources and dearth of innovative methods of teaching.

A game-changer has been active participation of parents in the formation of school management committees to bring more accountability and transparency in school operations. While this is a big plus and a step in the right direction, we have been unable to adequately address the needs of poorer families, whose involvement in such committees has an adverse effect on their ability to generate income as a consequence of the time

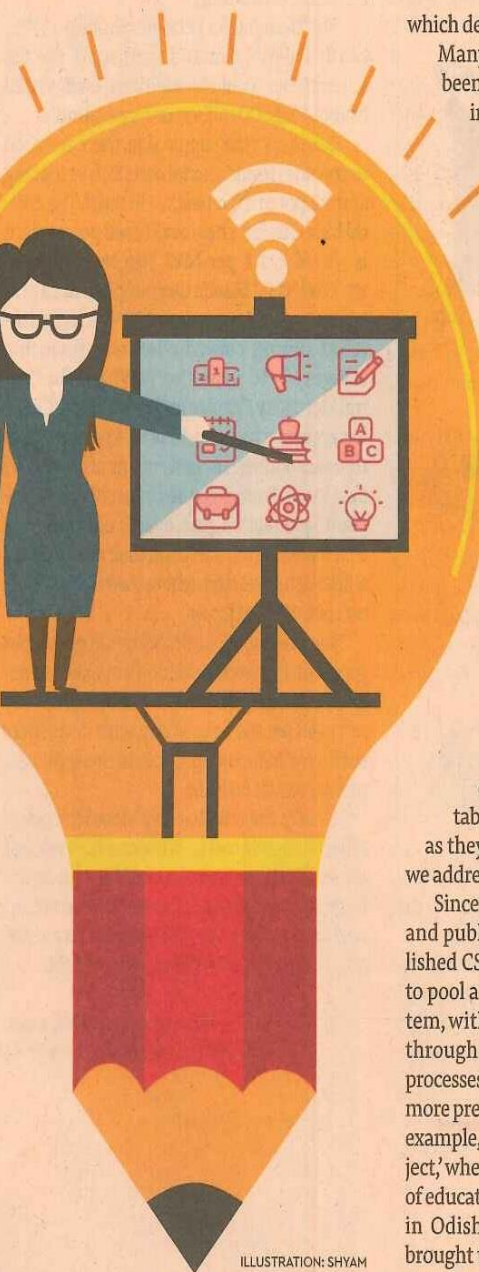


ILLUSTRATION: SHYAM

spent in providing oversight to such committees. A study of 200 government schools at the primary level showed that, at any given time, 25% of teachers were missing during school hours and, of those present, more than half were not involved in teaching activities. Thus, a robust disciplinary oversight and process needs to be laid out without

which delivery will remain ineffective.

Many civil society organisations have been addressing some of these issues by imparting localised, need-based education to children, which are aimed at improving the retention rate and bettering learning outcomes. While the success rate these NGOs display is encouraging, their own limitations in terms of lack of consistent funding leads to their inability to retain quality trainers and teachers, leading to a domino effect in terms of imparting good quality education to a larger section of the population. The need to scale these interventions requires government backing as well as private sector players to explore new partnership models that bring the competencies of different institutions to the table to discuss and address the needs as they exist today, as also to ensure that we address the needs of the future.

Since the 2% rule was mandated, private and public limited companies have established CSR programmes and are beginning to pool a CSR funds into the education system, with the hope of bettering outcomes through the use of technology, and better processes and efficiencies that are somewhat more prevalent in for-profit institutions. For example, Tata Steel's 'Thousand Schools Project,' where its goal is to improve the quality of education in government primary schools in Odisha; or Wipro's initiative that has brought together 1,000 schools, 10,000 educators and 30 social organisations across 17 states to create complete reform in the field of education; or Satya Bharti Schools of the Bharti Group which is a great example of how monetary and other assistance from a world-class company can be used to further the agenda of the education sector.

These efforts alone can't fuel the dream to achieve a literate India—PPP interventions

involving support from civil society, corporate and government functionaries is crucial. Instead of duplicating these efforts, we must first decentralise the delivery dynamic and identify appropriate practices that work in a specific geographical and cultural context, followed by finding ways to scale it with best practices that have been learnt in other regions and communities. Second, innovative learning models must be encouraged where corporates bring in the value of building the capacity of the government and/or civil society organisations by introducing assessment protocols that are driven by quality of outcomes rather than volume alone.

Private sector employees must be encouraged to work at the ground level in different capacities, client-facing teams should offer their services on *pro bono* or *low bono* basis that can build soft infrastructure for schools, NGOs, trainers and children, creating the right environment to encourage individual volunteerism. Building capacity of school management committees is another area where corporates can play a helping hand, to have the right monitoring systems set-up and increase their confidence as well as skills needed for appropriate oversight.

Special initiatives must be encouraged among children studying in government and private schools to run basic literacy classes for the support staff of companies, schools and women; it could even be the building security guard or house help. Empowering people with the capacity to read and write not only helps bridge the gap dividing the rich and poor, but also addresses caste and gender issues plaguing our country.

In the absence of addressing the needs at primary and secondary levels, it would be hard for India to achieve a base of youth who are prepared for the future, where the skill-sets needed for employment are vastly different from those that were needed in post-Industrial Revolution era. The key is in being able to bring the right players to the drawing board, create workable models that can deliver, and monitor and course correct as needs change in an ever-changing world.

The author is vice-chair, PwC India Foundation. Views are personal