

Public education in Indian states offers a massive reform opportunity

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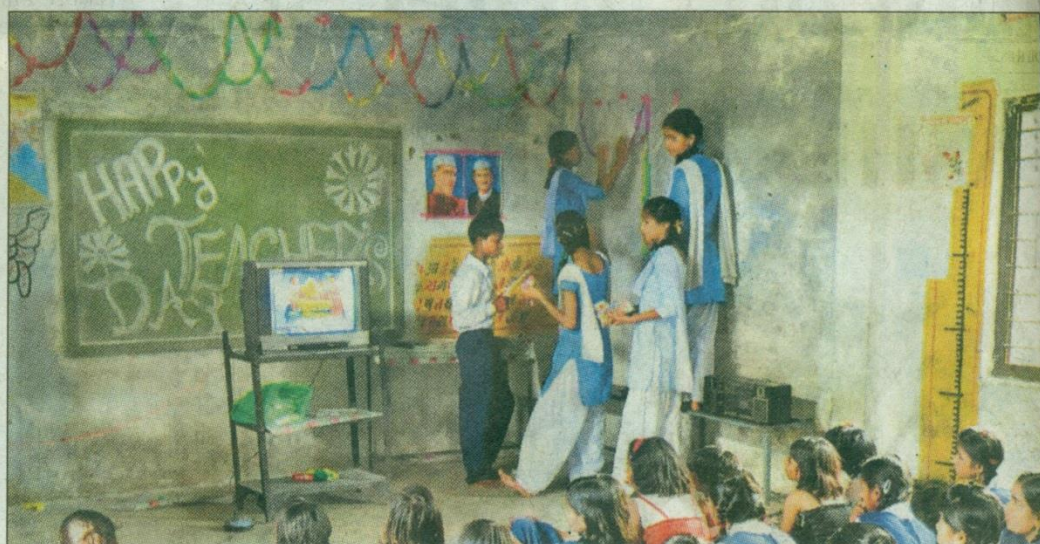
Education is often seen as a panacea for lifting people out of poverty in developing countries. Apart from the evidence on its role in increasing social inclusion, education as a cause resonates with most decision makers and socially minded people, owing to its visible impact in the lives of individuals. Therefore, it is no wonder that corporate social responsibility (CSR) and philanthropic efforts in India have long been overwhelmingly tilted towards educational interventions. A research suggests that as of 2014, 78 of the top 100 companies in Indian CSR had at least one program to address educational needs¹. With more than 50% of school education in India being provided by way of government schooling, it is hardly surprising that government schools are the largest beneficiaries of such funds. Despite this, the results in our public-school education have been far from encouraging, with many states continuing to show poor learning outcomes as the years go by.

One of the reasons for this could be the lack of consensus on the best path to achieve better learning outcomes. While most stakeholders align on the need to improve quality of education, this alignment doesn't extend to the solutions to this problem. This lack of consensus has led to a patchwork of initiatives in many states ranging from introduction of technology in classrooms to enhancement in curriculum design, provision of additional teaching resources, etc. While well intentioned, these initiatives have had a limited impact as they are usually not designed for scale, often working only in small sanitized environments.

In some cases where the solutions are actually designed for scale, they still fall short of being truly transformative as they end up overwhelming an already under-resourced and under equipped government education system.

Given these experiences it is amply clear that the problems plaguing the Indian public education system cannot be seen in silos; these in fact require a systems thinking approach that confronts multiple challenges that pose barriers to the delivery of quality public education simultaneously. So, what are these challenges?

For one, majority of the students in our education system have been left behind in the *learning curve* over the years, resulting now in classrooms where students of starkly different abilities are bunched up



■ An absence of accountability in the system with respect to learning outcomes is a concern

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together. This makes it extremely difficult for teachers to get everyone up to speed. Compounding this problem is the poor or sub-optimal allocation of resources, particularly human resources. Public schools suffer from non-availability of teachers, and existing teachers in schools spend an inordinate amount of time on non-academic administrative activities, thereby minimizing their teaching-time.

This is further aggravated by an absence of accountability in the system with respect to learning outcomes, because most stakeholders within the system are held responsible for administrative and infrastructure upkeep, which may not always be central to the delivery of quality education. The disinterest of parents, the community and the political leadership to constructively engage with the education system only further adds to the problem.

To confront all these challenges, several states including Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Rajasthan, Andhra Pradesh, Jharkhand, Odisha and Madhya Pradesh are making concerted efforts to alter their education ecosystem by moving away from piecemeal strategies to comprehensive, state-wide systemic transformations.

These transformations are a combination of governance reforms on one side and academic interventions on the other, with the overall objective of improving learning outcomes for students.

Amongst these states, Haryana has been on this journey the longest, having begun their first phase of reforms in 2014, by initiating structural changes that would establish the foundation for systemic transformation. As part of this, efforts were taken to institute periodic standardized assessments to generate regular data on learning levels. A remedial learning programme was then designed and piloted to

impart foundational skills and competencies prerequisite to a particular grade, based on the insights drawn from this assessment data of students. In parallel, teacher transfers were also streamlined using online mechanisms, thereby ending the patronage network that had existed for decades.

The ambitious second phase of systemic transformation called 'Saksham Haryana' began in April 2017, on the back of earlier reforms. Efforts were made to drive accountability for learning outcomes at all levels of the state machinery, driven

by the Chief Minister himself. Academic monitoring of schools was instituted across the state, and combined with assessment data, to mandate data-backed reviews focussed on learning outcomes.

As a part of this, the mainstream administrative officers including Deputy Commissioners were pulled in, to build ownership of the initiatives on the ground.

They were supported by the Chief Minister's Good Governance Associates (CMGGAs) who spent a large part of their time on Saksham Haryana. The remedial learning programme - a core pilot initiative of the previous phase - got rolled-out across the state. Last, but not the least, the state made efforts to make this process participative, by engaging the teachers, parents, and the community at large through multiple initiatives.

While efforts continued to drive the Saksham Haryana initiatives, the concept of 'Saksham Ghoshna' was introduced to galvanise all stakeholders towards the goal of achieving 80% grade level competence across the state using a competitive framework. Under this gamification approach, education blocks in the state are incentivized to attain grade level competence through the various systemic initiatives etc.

When block officials feel that

more than 80% of students in their block have achieved grade level competence, they nominate the block for 'Saksham Ghoshna'. Post this, a third-party assessment is conducted in the block, and if the claims are found to be correct, the said block is declared as a 'Saksham Block'. The block officials of the 'Saksham' blocks are also recognised for their work and are encouraged to share their practices with officials of other blocks. Once all blocks in a district become 'Saksham', the district is declared as a 'Saksham District'. As per the latest assessments, 94 out of the total 119 blocks have been declared 'Saksham'. There has also been a tremendous jump in average grade competence in the state. It is currently being reported at 80% as per on-going third-party assessments as compared to 40% in 2014.

While all states in India suffer from their unique challenges in education, the core principals of systemic transformation that have worked for Haryana are replicable everywhere. With Modi Government 2.0 in place, the Center is in position to prod states to undertake these much-needed reforms while encouraging them adapt the same to their unique needs.

States, in turn must use this opportunity to undertake a thorough diagnosis of all issues that are holding them back from achieving better learning outcomes and attack them through a combination of governance reforms and academic interventions. A new government at the centre is a great time for policy-makers to re-calibrate their efforts and priorities. Reforming public education must take the centre stage for Modi Government 2.0.

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