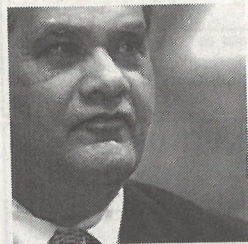


A systemic approach to reforming education

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Despite enormous and well-meaning efforts, we have not delivered quality learning outcomes to Indian children. Concerted efforts like the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, and initiatives like mid-day meals have ensured that we have solved the problem of access to school education for our children. With gross enrolment crossing 100%, the focus has appropriately shifted to improving learning outcomes. Assessments by the ministry of human resources development and the Union government, such as the National Achievement Survey (NAS), are designed to strengthen this focus. But these, and other studies like Annual Status of Education Report (Aser), show that sustained quality has eluded us.

Taking cognisance of this, there has been a major shift in the thinking of policymakers from tracking educational inputs, such as school infrastructure, teachers, books, uniforms, etc., to tracking overall outcomes of the system. States are undertaking various initiatives to revamp the quality of school

education, often bringing on board the services of non-state actors to support interventions like improving classroom pedagogy, teacher training, and tech-enabled learning. While well intentioned, these interventions have often ended up being a series of parallel, disparate and disconnected initiatives. Their impact has been limited when compared to the magnitude of the challenges confronted. Also, the confusion resulting from such competing efforts have sometimes had the unintended consequence of putting more pressure on an already stretched system, and has led to user fatigue among principal participants, such as teachers and field officials.

Learning from these experiences, a new systemic approach to reforming education is now emerging in Andhra Pradesh, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha and Rajasthan. This approach recognizes that piecemeal initiatives, mainly academic in nature, are unlikely to improve student learning in any meaningful way, unless accompanied with administrative reforms that create an enabling environment for these new practices to take root. This systemic approach adopted by these states involves aligning all stakeholders and orienting their collective efforts towards following

a single and “comprehensive transformation road map” towards better learning outcomes. Results of these efforts have been encouraging so far. For example, Haryana has already seen significant progress in its learning outcomes, with grade-level competence seeing an increase from 40% in 2014, to approximately 80% currently, as per the ongoing third-party assessments. Likewise, systemic changes have led to Rajasthan’s steady rise among states to the top of the education chart in NAS in 2017. Such changes are also reinstating parents’ faith in the public education system, with states like Himachal Pradesh witnessing a reverse migration of students from private schools to government schools, as learning levels of government and private schools begin to converge.

So, what are these states doing right? At the heart of this systemic transformation lie academic interventions, such as the adoption of grade competence framework instead of just syllabus completion, as well as

other initiatives like effective delivery of remedial education for weaker students. Unlike earlier stand-alone interventions, these are supported by administrative reforms that enable and incentivize teachers to perform better through data-driven insights, training, and recognition. Together

with human enablement, a seamless ecosystem or a system enabler (often a tech platform) is also set up. This streamlines communication and saves teachers’ valuable time that they might have otherwise spent on administrative tasks, such as leave applications, allowance claims, transfers and service book updates. Together, these interventions ensure that teachers have more time available in

the classrooms and are empowered to tailor their content to the learning needs of their students, resulting in improved quality of “in-classroom transactions”.

However, having these systemic and human enablers in place is not enough. It is also important to track the performance of

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the schooling system on a regular basis to course correct where needed. Therefore, a robust accountability system is required wherein there is a clear articulation of the roles and responsibilities of all relevant stakeholders, and the administration is empowered to act where necessary. This involves frequent real-time, data-enabled review meetings at the block, district, and state levels. These states have also developed user-friendly dashboards that assist education officials and the state leadership in decision-making. Finally, momentum is built through a public campaign centred around quality education. Such state-wide campaigns, driven by the state’s political and bureaucratic leadership, re-energize parents and the community at large, and channel the attention of all stakeholders towards better learning outcomes.

While the benefits of a systemic approach in education may seem obvious, there are still many detractors in every state, given its inherent complexity, and the time taken to get all the elements in place. However, it is clear that only when we align incentives of all stakeholders, and enable them while holding them accountable, can we shorten the distance between the nation’s current state of education and its aspirations.