

# India's consensus on school education makes space for optimism

Anurag Behar 4 min read 02 Apr 2025, 12:30 PM IST



It is undeniable that we have an underlying national educational consensus now. (Mint)

## Summary

- *A remarkable convergence of views on this elementary matter of the country's social and economic well-being offers us the common ground needed to do what must be done for education. Here's what all parties largely agree on.*

When big changes happen slowly, we don't notice them. **Climate change** is a glaring example. Slow is anything that happens over a human lifetime or more. There have been massive changes in **education** over the past 25-30 years, for example, but that's such a large part of our life-span that we are mostly unaware of them. We tend to take the current state as natural and given.

One of the most important of these changes has been the development of a cross-party consensus on school education, much like the political consensus on the direction of **India's economic management** that emerged in the early 1990s. Since education is a matter in which everyone has a direct stake, most individuals have a view on it. And so, this consensus rests on an underlying societal consensus, unlike the economic management of the country, on which the average citizen may not have a well-formed view even though everyone is affected by it.

What are the key points of this consensus? Let us explore them. Some of these will seem so elementary and 'given,' that it is hard to believe there were different views, beliefs and positions on these matters just 20-30 years ago.

*First*, the most basic of all: that all children should be going to school. This includes girls and children from all castes and classes. It is hard to believe today that neither societally nor politically was this elementary must-have universally agreed upon, even in the 1980s. The near 100% enrolment of children in primary classes tells us the extent of the transformation we have gone through.

*Second*, school education sets the foundation for the overall development and well-being of the country. Again, it seems astonishing that we could have thought anything but this. But it was indeed so back in the day. School education was a side issue. Although hardly anyone would not pay lip service to it, it was rarely given system-wide importance of the kind that higher education, for example, was given. Today's budgetary outlays may not reflect this importance fully, but it would be political hara kiri for any government to deny school education its foundational role in society and the country's economic aspirations.

*Third*, along with all this has come the acceptance and agreement that special and extra efforts need to be made for children from vulnerable and disadvantaged communities and segments to go to school, for us to ensure that they do not drop out, and for the schooling system to enable their learning. Also, that children must get a nutritious meal at school. Hungry children cannot learn, in addition to all the other problems caused by inadequate nutrition and the moral affront that hungry children are for any society.

*Fourth*, that we need to do a lot to improve our school education system to get it to an acceptable level. This is both on matters of equity and quality. Specifically, this consensus comes from the recognition that our school education is failing to deliver even on the most basic of outcomes of literacy and numeracy. Which is an absolutely urgent crisis that we need to address. For accepting this failure and genuinely trying to act on it, our political culture does deserve plaudits.

*Fifth*, the curriculum in practice in our schools is very narrow. It is too focused on memorization and neither builds conceptual understanding nor develops

important human capacities such as critical thinking. This must change. Also, corporal punishment is unlawful and must not be practised.

*Sixth*, that our whole educational culture, not only in schools but in homes and society overall, is obsessed with examination success. This includes board examinations and higher-education entrance tests. This is bad. It is one of the primary causes of the narrowing of learning. It is also one of the biggest sources of psychological, social and economic stress among our children and their families. This too must be addressed.

*Seventh*, our teacher education system, comprising what are generally called 'BED colleges,' is a complete mess. This is one of the chief causes of the poor quality of our schooling system. This teacher education system demands a complete transformation.

*Eighth*, that the public education system, which we often call 'the government school system,' needs our attention and focus, as it needs to be improved significantly. Private schooling cannot substitute the public school system and cannot form the basis of good education in a democracy. Like for like, meaning when children from similar socio-economic backgrounds are taught, the outcomes of private schools are no better than those of public schools; in fact, they are often worse.

This is a remarkable shift. Just 20 years ago, 'low-cost private schools' were being touted as the panacea for India's school education woes.

This consensus does not imply that there is agreement on all aspects equally and even less that everyone agrees on the way forward. Political parties often differ on the nuances, the actual importance they assign school education in their budgets and efforts, and even more frequently in their public rhetoric.

But it is undeniable that we have an underlying national educational consensus now. It is important to highlight this in a context where media debates highlight only the controversies. It forms the common ground that allows us to keep up our public and civil-society efforts away from the headlines.

*The author is CEO of Azim Premji Foundation.*

**Source:**

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