



Is Residential Schooling the Right Fix?

The Editorial Team

For several years, State governments have used residential schools as an important intervention to expand educational opportunities and promote social mobility among disadvantaged communities. Different departments have established and managed these institutions for their respective beneficiary groups. Tribal Welfare Departments run residential schools for Scheduled Tribe students, while Social Welfare and Backward Classes Welfare Departments operate similar schools for children from Scheduled Castes and Other Backward Classes. Minority Welfare Departments have also established residential schools for students from minority communities.

More recently, Labour Welfare Departments have begun adopting this model for the children of workers in the unorganised sector, particularly construction workers. The intent behind this is not in question, especially for construction workers, who are among the most mobile and insecure workers in the informal economy, and whose children face some of the most disrupted schooling of any group in the country. The more important question, however, is whether this approach is the most effective response to the realities these children face.

Different problems with residential schools as the answer

Usually, the case for a residential school rests on one or more of these factors: a school is not available nearby, the nearby school is of poor quality or the family's migration disrupts regular schooling. Residential schools do not address these factors equally. They are generally effective at solving lack of access.

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On quality, their record is more limited than it appears. On migration, residential schooling is arguably the strongest fit as a child stays in one place while the parents move, which solves the disruption more directly. Before approving a proposal, decision makers should ask which specific problem it is designed to solve, because that is what determines whether it is the right instrument.

Who runs India's residential school models, and why

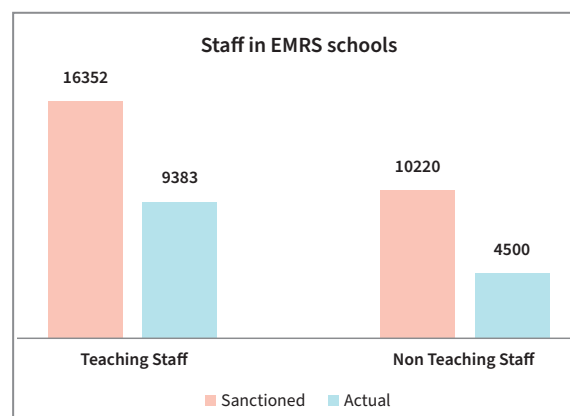
Scheme	Administering Department/ Ministry	Target group	Stated rationale
EMRS (Eklavya Model Residential Schools)	Ministry of Tribal Affairs (via NESTS)	ST/tribal students, especially in remote blocks	Access to quality education where regular schools are scattered or inaccessible; in Maoist-affected districts, explicitly framed by the Home Ministry as a way to keep tribal children away from insurgent influence.
OBC Hostel Scheme	Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment	SC and OBC students	Residential education for meritorious SC students from low-income families; hostel access for OBC students who would otherwise drop out for lack of nearby facilities.
Morarji Desai Residential Schools	State Minority Welfare Departments, funded via PMJVK (Ministry of Minority Affairs)	Students from notified minority communities	Raising enrolment, retention, and literacy in minority-concentrated, educationally backward areas.
KGBV (Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya)	Ministry of Education, via Samagra Shiksha	Girls from SC/ST/OBC/minority/BPL families in educationally backward blocks	Closing the gender gap in enrolment and retention at upper-primary/secondary level, where distance and safety keep girls out of school.
Residential schools in LWE-affected districts	Coordinated by Ministry of Home Affairs, delivered largely through EMRS (Tribal Affairs)	Tribal children in Maoist-affected blocks	Restoring access to schooling disrupted by conflict; explicitly described by government officials as a way to dissuade children from Maoist recruitment.

What this actually costs

The Eklavya Model Residential Schools (EMRS) programme, the central government's flagship residential model for tribal children, offers the clearest available benchmark, because it is the most fully costed of these networks. Each EMRS carries a one-time capital cost of roughly INR 37.8 crore in plain areas rising to INR 48 crore in hilly, northeastern, or extremism affected regions. For a school with a sanctioned capacity of 480 students, plus a recurring per-student cost that has been revised upward to roughly INR 1.47 lakh a year. An analysis ought to be made of what this money would buy if it were spent instead on teacher vacancies, transport, hostel/day boarding, or remedial support in the schools these children would otherwise attend.

Implementation bottlenecks present a second layer of concern. A 2023 parliamentary review

found only 58 percent of sanctioned EMRS schools operational, with just 73 percent of the annual budget spent. Because capital-intensive residential infrastructure is slow, expensive, and prone to underdelivery. The existing staffing of the EMRS schools are given below.



Source - <https://nests.tribal.gov.in/>

A harder question that we need to answer

Removing a child from their family and community for an entire school year, repeated across their most formative years, is a form of segregation. This breaks a child's continuity in language and culture, and takes them away from their community during the years relationships matter most.

Migration for livelihoods is an exception to this argument. Construction workers move between sites, so simply strengthening the local school doesn't work, since the family will be relocating. The workaround is a hostel timed to the family's migration cycle, where children live but continue attending the existing local school rather than a separate school built just for them. This keeps the child within the local system, in their own language and community, while solving the actual problem of not having a stable home during the school year. It is very different from building an entirely new school alongside the hostel. Approving a new school when only a hostel is needed is exactly the kind of mistake that should be avoided.

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Several States already fund construction workers' education without building separate residential schools. Delhi and Punjab's Labour Welfare Boards provide direct financial assistance to these children. Maharashtra and Gujarat's Labour Welfare Funds issue textbook, uniform, and other

allowances to keep children enrolled in their local schools instead of moving them into a new institution. If these models already keep children within the local system at a fraction of the cost, then other States need to examine why they are choosing the more expensive path.

Who should run the school?

There is a more basic problem underneath all of this. Running a school well takes specific expertise, of understanding how children learn at different ages, and training and supporting teachers to do this work well. This is the core competence of the Department of School Education and Literacy, built over decades through bodies like the SCERT and the DIETs. It is not the core competence of departments whose real expertise lies in registering workers and running welfare boards.

This shows up as fragmentation on the ground. Tribal welfare, social welfare, minority welfare, and now labour departments each run their own residential schools, with their own textbooks and their own systems for recruiting and training teachers, with no common academic standard across them. A child's quality of education ends up depending on which department happens to run the school they were placed in.

The more coherent design is a division that matches each department's actual strength. Welfare departments are well placed to identify eligible families, fund hostels and provide stipends. They are not well placed to design curriculum, train teachers, or run an academic institution. For example, Jawahar Navodaya Vidyalayas are similarly residential and serve a comparable rural intake, but sit under the Ministry of Education with a unified curriculum and teacher pipeline. They recorded a 99.3 percent Class 12 pass rate in 2025. EMRS, administered through a welfare-linked structure with fragmented board affiliation and a separate recruitment pipeline, recorded 82.8 percent in the same period, below the national government-school average. The residential model doesn't explain the gap. The administrative home of academic delivery does. Academic delivery should sit under the Department of School Education and

Literacy, using the same curriculum, textbooks, and teacher training pipeline as every other government school in the State.

None of this addresses the deeper issue driving the whole debate. Residential schools exist partly because local schools are not always safe or welcoming for every child, because of caste, community, migration, or simple neglect and moving a child to a residential campus won't fix that. The more sustainable path is to strengthen the local school system so no child needs to be separated from their family to escape a problem in the first place. Until that underlying issue is addressed directly, in classrooms, in staffrooms, and in how local schools treat the children of construction workers, Dalit families, or minority communities, residential schools will keep being used as a workaround for something the State hasn't fixed at the root.

What needs to be done?

Before a new residential school proposal for any newly defined population is cleared, four questions should be non-negotiable. Good intentions alone can't be acceptable.

1. Which problem, among access, quality or migration is this proposal actually solving? A clear answer, backed by evidence, is required.
2. What does a residential seat cost, compared with creating K-12 in panchayats or

secondary/ senior secondary schools in geographic proximity to elementary schools?

3. Is the design actually suited to the problem? A mobile population may need a seasonal hostel attached to the local school, not a full residential school modelled on institutions built for settled communities.
4. What safeguards are built in from the start? This includes oversight by parents and local bodies, instruction in the child's home language, an independent grievance mechanism, and a clear path back to a local school.

Conclusion

Across tribal welfare, backward classes, minority welfare, and now labour departments, the same pattern persists. Instead of investing in local schools and addressing why families send their children away, the response is to build new residential schools. Such schools are more visible than fixing scattered local government schools, making them administratively easier. The way forward is to be honest about what each proposal seeks to solve.

Academic delivery should rest with those who have genuine education expertise, while the root causes pushing families to send their children away must be addressed.