

Politics trumps economics

 livemint.com/Opinion/vU72z3OEL1mE7aer4NhYRM/Politics-trumps-economics.html

February 19, 2014



On 3 February, Mint's main editorial suggested that "school vouchers" will help solve India's problems in school education. To use a distinction that Mint often makes, this is Mint's politics trumping its economics. The reality is that school vouchers will make things worse, both in terms of quality and equity in the Indian education system.

A mere Web-search on research evidence on the effectiveness of school vouchers, will tell you that this is perhaps one of the most investigated issues in education in the past 20-odd years. There are many studies from Chile, which started a voucher system in 1980, from the US where some kind of voucher system has been used in three places from the 1990s, and from some other countries. You will see that a large number of these conclude that vouchers are ineffective in improving learning outcomes (quality), and that they increase inequality in the education system. You will also find studies that will say that vouchers are effective.

It will also be apparent that most studies that conclude that vouchers are ineffective do so unambiguously. Most studies that conclude that vouchers are effective do so with caveats, and under special conditions. To make sense out of this maze one could actually look at some reports that survey the overall status on this matter. A recent comprehensive one is published by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, as a part of its detailed reports on Programme for International Student Assessment 2012.

You could look at volume 4 particularly. Let me quote from its conclusion: "the prevalence of private schools and competition for students, have no discernible relationship with student performance, at least at the system level...(T)hus, after socio-economic status is accounted for, private schools do not perform better than public schools; and schools that compete with other schools for students do not perform better than schools that don't compete." This is on the basis of evidence from 63 countries, and with the background of decades of research. The central assumption of vouchers is that private schools and competition among schools improve educational quality, which is flawed.

With this kind of global experience, why then would someone root for school vouchers?

Let's briefly look at some related issues in India, which emphasize that school vouchers would not merely be ineffective in India, but lethal to any hopes of improving education.

First, the (now) much misquoted study that we conducted in Andhra Pradesh, and which has partly been the basis for what Mint called the “lively debate” on this issue. This six-year-long study uses the holy grail of (many) economists, a randomized control trial, as its method. The conclusions of the study are unambiguous: the learning outcomes in private schools are the same as in government schools, i.e., providing vouchers has not improved quality. Even the hint that “private schools do slightly better” is a misreading of the research. Private schools do slightly better only if scores on Hindi are added to compare performances across the two kinds of schools; and this cannot be done because Hindi is not taught in government schools (which are in the research sample).

But this is only one research study (though it may well be one of very few in India, directly investigating school vouchers, with rigour); let’s look at something broader, simpler and with even more direct implications.

The Annual Status of Education Report, published by the non-profit Pratham, has its critics, and it has its limitations, but it has done stellar work in the past 10 years on bringing the issue of school education quality to the public eye. The 2013 report was published last month. Here is what it says: as the number of children going to private schools has sharply increased in India in the past 5 years, the learning levels have steadily declined. That’s worth repeating: learning levels have declined as private school enrolments have increased. And by the way, we have by far the largest percentage of children in private schools in the world, not counting failed states.

Here are some details: from 2009 to 2013, private school enrolments have increased from about 20% of total school-going children to about 30%. In the same period learning levels in math have declined in both private and government schools, and in reading have declined in government schools and stagnated in private schools. Just to remind ourselves, the absolute levels of learning in both reading and math, across both kinds of schools are at disastrously low levels.

So how can school vouchers be the solution, which will only send children from one set of poorly performing schools to another set, with both having a steadily declining performance?

We need to work on the fundamental issues in school education instead of focusing on such superficial, counter-evidential, and misleading ideas. Some of these fundamental issues are: grounds-up reform of our teacher education, cultural changes in the system—including empowerment of schools and teachers, examination and text-book reforms, etc.

The only sustainable solution for India, as for any other society, is a good public education system—and politico-ideological rhetoric won’t change that reality.

Anurag Behar is CEO of Azim Premji Foundation and also leads sustainability initiatives for Wipro Ltd. He writes every fortnight on issues of ecology and education. Comments are welcome at othersphere@livemint.com. To read Anurag Behar’s previous columns, go to www.livemint.com/othersphere-

Catch all the [Business News](#), [Market News](#), [Breaking News](#) Events and [Latest News](#) Updates on Live Mint. Download The [Mint News App](#) to get Daily Market Updates.

[More](#)

Topics

There is more to the story

To continue reading, subscribe to Mint Premium at **25% discount**

[Claim offer now](#)