

# A blueprint for transparency in school education

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Opening and running a school in Karnataka can be challenging. Ask anyone who runs one, and you will understand the requirements of establishing the schools, securing recognition and affiliation to different boards can be complicated. Getting these for a school used to be an exercise in endurance and, too often, depended on the connections or the institutions' deep pockets. Recent regulatory changes could usher in a sea change over time.

Today, there are varying compliance requirements to open a school, often necessitating multiple trips to the Block, district, and state-level offices. The process starts with establishing a Trust or Society, fulfilling the various norms on infrastructure and other facilities, hiring qualified teachers, demonstrating financial viability, and most importantly, meeting the safety requirements of children. Once the permission is granted, the school must apply for recognition with the Department of Education again. Schools seeking affiliation from other Boards will need a no-objection certificate from the state government. Some permissions had close to 26 levels where the files had to move along with a lot of paperwork and multiple interactions at different levels. Most people spent much time shuttling between officials to get their files cleared. All this made the processes ripe for unscrupulous use of authority for personal gains.

Over the years, there has been an increasing acknowledgment of a need for change to streamline the process. Unfortunately, such issues are rarely tackled head-on in our country. But the Karnataka Education department seems to have done this. The Department has overhauled the processes of registering a new school, simplified the existing school's renewal process, and drastically reduced the steps to require permission to start another syllabus. The rules are now clearer than ever, and will nearly eliminate the discretion that officials in the system once had to speed up or slow down the process.

The new process is standardized and automated. The new norms of registration and affiliation under the new system involve uploading relevant documents to the Department of Education website. A key addition is the Geofenced pictures and videos of the school facilities for public perusal. The district office is now expected to verify documents within a specific period. The inspection of schools is then based on computerised sampling with no human intervention. Finally, a certificate is issued if all requirements are met, and the school can start functioning.

A key change is the movement of all the processes online on the Student Achievement Tracking System (SATS) Website. Most importantly, this allows for transparency. It also means that those wanting to open schools and existing school managements seeking

renewal will have access to all information with reduced timelines for processing the application. In addition, many other changes have been made at the level of detail that matters. All this would directly lead to improved outcomes. Schools can now receive permission to start operations in less than four weeks, compared with delays stretching into months under the earlier system. The Education Department has empowered the district authorities to grant permissions, thus reducing multiple layers, leading to inordinate delays. And finally, parents, for example, can now find out if the school has the promised facilities and lodge a complaint if it does not. This can usher in greater transparency empowering the parents and ensuring that the quality of schools is under check. This is a critical point: such improved processes make functioning easier for good schools and are effective in controlling and regulating those schools that have little commitment to good education. The earlier excruciatingly tiring process often rewarded the dishonest at the cost of the honest school managements.

Before embarking on these reforms, the department conducted detailed interactive sessions to understand the real issues faced by the schools. During these meetings, participants highlighted the opaque processes, lack of transparency and the discretionary powers enjoyed by the field functionaries. Armed with detailed feedback and an internal assessment, the department launched a systematic and rigorous exercise by mapping its existing process, removing unnecessary layers, standardizing procedures for varied requests from schools and automating some steps.

The political and administrative leadership must be commended. It is unlikely that this regulatory overhaul would have been possible without their support. Implementing the initiative through the digital platform and the proposed regulatory changes will take time and will likely be fraught with opposition and challenges. However, it must be noted this effort to bring transparency and simplification puts Karnataka ahead of all states when it comes to streamlining the processes for school regulations. It could serve as a blueprint to be replicated by other states. This is a shining example of the National Education Policy 2020's approach to implementing regulations – 'light but tight' – implying that regulation should encourage and enable good institutions while rooting out commercialization and corruption.