

A few good actions may actually be enough to improve education

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Indian school education has serious challenges, but the picture is not uniformly bad. In every part of India, you can find good teachers and schools. Also, states have systematic differences driven by specific actions they have taken, not just due to their overall governance culture. Many of these actions do not need to worry about constraints. First, they do not require large incremental financial commitments; in a few cases, 1-2% of the existing education budget of the state or even less would suffice. Second, they do not require sustained battle with widely distributed and politically influential groups resisting change. Third, partly as a function of the first two, these actions do not demand substantial political capital and will from the state-level leadership. Here are some important actions.

First, states need to have robust institutions for academic work in the school education system. This includes curriculum and syllabus development, textbook development, examination and assessment improvements, professional development of teachers and school leaders. These institutions include the State Council for Education Research and Training (SCERT) at the state level, the District Institute of Education and Training (DIETs) at the district level, and then block-level and cluster-level resource centres (BRCs and CRCs).

While all states have SCERTs and DIETs, all states do not have BRCs and CRCs. Given the size of most of India's districts, a single institution like DIET does not have the reach to support all the schools and teachers spread across the area. Which is why BRCs and CRCs matter. Some states have adopted other mechanisms for cluster-level support, for example by grouping together all schools in a Panchayat, and these methods can also be effective.

Unfortunately, though, too many SCERTs and most DIETs are dysfunctional. Many competent administrators find them beyond retrieval. Given that the kind of academic work listed earlier is central to the quality of education, the only option is to revive these institutions and make them at least somewhat effective. Getting these institutions out of their death spiral is not easy. But it can be done. And some states have done so. This requires empowering SCERTs and DIETS to perform their roles as independent institutions, not as an adjunct or subsidiary organs to the directorate of education, appointing competent leaders interested in that kind of work, staffing them adequately with a thought-through process that will attract at least a few good people. And finally, giving these institutions public recognition for their roles is critical. Similar methods can strengthen CRCs and BRCs.

Second, the administrative structure on the ground should be simple and clear. There are often too many chains of command at the district level. These are not well-designed 'matrix structures', but almost ad-hoc mechanisms constructed on-the-fly, driven, for example, by some programme funding. Lack of ownership and accountability are the direct outcomes of such tangled administrative webs.

Third, teacher training and support can and must be done well. Teacher professional development (or 'teacher training') is too often treated in a cavalier manner. It is, however, perhaps one of the most important levers to improve the quality of education. If it has to improve, teachers have to teach better, and their training and support at the school level is the best path for that. A teacher's role demands and infuses a work ethic. If they know how to do their jobs better and get a supportive environment, they would do it.

Fourth, high-quality textbooks must be developed for all classes. Our system is overdependent on textbooks—we must change that. But so long as this is the case (and even after), high-quality textbooks do make a big difference to teacher effectiveness and students' interest and learning. Since developing textbooks is a project undertaken only once in a few years, the state must put together the best possible team from within the schooling system and outside, give it a clear mandate, empower it, and give it enough time. A good and empowered team for textbooks will likely pay the richest dividends.

Fifth, there must be investment in the professional development of school leaders, and block as well as district level leaders. Many of these people can lead change and improvement. Those who do not must at least not resist it.

Sixth, all board examinations should be improved. We must end testing for memorization and mere facts. These exams should instead assess conceptual understanding, application, critical thinking, and other fundamental capacities. Stakes of board examinations must be lowered to ease pressure on students; this can be done, for example, by conducting multiple rounds of exams in the same academic year.

None of these six actions requires big money or significant political capital. What they need is a synchronization of understanding and priorities between the political and administrative leaderships of the state. And then a tenacious focus on the nitty-gritty of execution, which many bureaucrats excel at. All states can and must take these actions; they can learn from those which have already acted.

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