

Can privatisation help?

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With the Right to Education Bill, we will have a need for more schools. We can't leave it to the private sector to meet this demand.

Well funded, functional government schools are critical to the successful implementation of the RTE Bill...

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Benchmark: Government schools determine the quality of available education in rural India.

With the Right to Education Bill now awaiting only the signature of the President to become law, children between the ages of six and 14 are about to be guaranteed access to a neighbourhood school. This is good news indeed! But as with all visionary Bills, the question of who will pay for and provide the new schools remains. Those working in the area of educational policy have long debated how to best provide quality education for India's children. There are many who argue that the State alone cannot provide adequate schools and that private providers must be allowed to contribute. Some argue that private providers not only relieve pressure on the State but that they also deliver a higher quality of education than that offered at government schools. The private provision of education is well established in India's cities and towns, though less well established in her villages.

Critical role

A field survey was done in 2006 to capture changes in the primary school experience in the previous decade by revisiting villages covered by the PROBE study in the low-literacy States of Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh. Between 1996 and 2006, we found that total enrolment rates for 6-12 years olds have increased from 80 per cent to 95 per cent. In the same period, we found that there has been a large increase in the number of new government and private schools, and the proportion of government to private schools has shifted from 83:17 to 75:25. But even with private schools making up an increased proportion of schools in the villages surveyed, government schools still educate 8 out of every 10 enrolled children. This figure has remained stable over the decade. Nevertheless there is a view that private schools are superior to government schools. This discourse is well established in the cities, but is fast catching on in the rural areas too. But is this perception true? Are private schools able to provide high quality education to children across India? Our research shows there are problems of access and quality.

First, we found that private schools are most likely to be established in places where there is already a government school. This does little to improve overall access for children, and mostly acts as a

catalyst for the redistribution of students away from government schools. Wealthier and high caste households tend to opt for private education because it appears to offer a superior good — more teaching activity, beginning right from pre-primary level, the inclusion of English as a subject, with visible add-ons such as furniture in classrooms and children dressed in uniforms with ties, belts, and shoes. Private education is very much seen as a status symbol. With the cost of private schooling, as reported by rural households, increasing by almost 50 per cent (Grades 1-5) over the survey period (while costs associated with government schooling in real terms have declined), the choice of private schooling is not an option for most low caste and poor households. The difference in the costs associated with government and private education is therefore a key determinant of schooling choice and promotes the reproduction of social disadvantage as high caste children come to dominate private schools and low caste children dominate government schools. Private schools thrive on building on this base of better nourished children from more educated families. They appear to have less inclination and capacity to cater to children whose families are poor and illiterate, and for whom expected returns from schooling are low and uncertain.

For those children who do access private education, is the quality of the schooling experience superior to that at the local government school? Our research shows that the quality of private schooling is highly variable. It is greatly influenced by the type of private school we are assessing — low-fee or high fee. Our research shows that in low-fee private schools the quality of education tends to be low. This is primarily due to the economics of low-fee schools: low fees deliver only small amounts of funds available to be spent on teacher salaries and infrastructure. In rural areas in the low-literacy States in our 2006 study, there was a limit to the number of households who could sustain regular fee payments, particularly if the fees were anything more than modest. There was also a scarcity of educated persons overall, and qualified teachers in particular, who were available and willing to work for very low rates. In contrast, in Himachal Pradesh, the 2006 study found that the private schools charged high fees to students and had more funds to employ trained teachers and provide good infrastructure. The quality of private school education was higher than in the low-literacy States.

Setting the standard

The quality of a private school is also in large part influenced by the quality of the local government school. This is to be expected in an open market where government and private schools compete for students. Government schools set the standard that the private schools only need to surpass in part in order to be able to attract students. In our 1999 study on low-fee private schools in Haryana, UP and Rajasthan, we found that in a district in Haryana where the government schools were more functional, the local private schools also functioned reasonably well and were able to attract students. However, in places where the government schools were largely dysfunctional, such as in a district in UP, the quality of the local private schools was also extremely low. Government schools therefore set the benchmark against which private schools must compete for students. Similarly, in Himachal Pradesh, our 2006 study found the existence of a more functional government school sector compared to the low-literacy States, which appeared to play some role in pushing up the quality of private schools available in Himachal Pradesh.

Considering the goals of the Right to Education Bill, our research findings on private and government education over the past decade suggest two things. Firstly, while private providers may contribute to an expanded school market place, they cannot be expected to provide universal access for 6-14 year olds in the same way as government schools can. The cost of private schooling imposes a limit on accessibility and has negative implications for the breadth and depth of school accessibility across socio-economic groups. Only government schools can be expected to provide universal education, but they must be adequately funded and monitored to provide a quality service to the majority of Indian children. Secondly, in order to ensure that private schools have better

quality, government schools must themselves be functioning at a certain standard. Under the SSA, government schools have received funding to improve school infrastructure. Our 2006 revisit of “PROBE villages” shows that this has significantly improved the quality of the schooling experience for students and the satisfaction of parents. If private providers are to contribute to fulfilling the goals of the Right to Education Bill, then once again, government schools must be adequately funded and supported by the State. A well equipped and functioning government school sector will encourage a quality private school sector. No matter which way the debate turns, well funded, functional government schools are critical to the successful implementation of the RTE Bill and a positive schooling experience for all Indian school children.

The authors are with Collaborative Research and Dissemination, New Delhi. They wish to acknowledge the valuable contribution of Elizabeth Hill and Claire Noronha.

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