

Column : Reading the writing on the wall

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The debate on education reforms has been severely hampered by the lack of reliable data, particularly on learning outcomes. The government data focuses on what government does—outlays and inputs into the school system. It tells us how much money has been allocated, how many boundaries walls and toilets are built, how many teachers are hired. It does not tell us what ultimately matters—that how much real learning is happening.

In the last couple of months, two studies of learning outcomes in India—the PISA study and the Quality Education Study by Wipro and Educational Initiatives—have exposed the abysmal learning levels in our schools, including some of our best schools. The 2011 ASER report has come at an opportune moment and helps crystallise our attention on the state of outcomes in education. As the 7th annual report, the latest ASER report not only provides us with a wealth of data about the current realities but also indicates the trends in enrolment as well as learning outcomes over the past 7 years.

One of the important trends visible from the ASER reports over the years is the fact that private school enrolment has been increasing inexorably across the country. Private school enrolment of children in the 6-14 age group has increased from 18.7% in 2006 to 25.6% in 2011. In states like Uttarakhand, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Kerala, Manipur and Meghalaya, there has been an increase of over 10 percentage points in the past 5 years. In rural areas of Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, Jammu & Kashmir, Uttarakhand, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Meghalaya and Nagaland, between 30% and 50% of children are enrolled in private schools.

All across India, parents seem to have made up their mind that private schools provide better quality education than government schools. The perception that government schools are bad and private schools are better has become deep rooted. What is driving this trend? It is clear that parents care deeply about the education of their children, so much so that they are willing to eschew the free education that is provided in government schools and pay out of their pocket to send their children to private schools.

In many cases, the private schools may not be much better in terms of the quality and there is no clear way for private schools to signal the quality of education they provide. That doesn't seem to bother parents as much. What is it that attracts parents to private schools? One commonly understood reason is that private schools offer or claim to offer English medium education. And parents believe that the ticket to success is written in English. The second and more important reason in our view is that parents find private service providers more responsive to their needs and are accountable to them. More than anything else, it is this perception that is driving the increased enrolment in private schools as early as primary school. The ASER report findings indicate that as many as 70% of students in Class 1 in the state of Kerala are enrolled in private schools.

Many in the government and education establishment disapprove of this parental preference for private providers who are more responsive and accountable to them. They find this preference unjustified, unfounded, unnecessary and simply a sign of the gullibility of parents. This is at the least a very self-serving view. These are the same parents who vote and elect the government, which suspects their power of judgement when it is convenient.

The set of parents' beliefs—the responsiveness and accountability of the service provider—are socially desirable beliefs that need to be encouraged. Unless the government does something to signal to parents that the government schools will be far more responsive and accountable in the

future than they have been so far, the flight to private schools will continue.

What can the government do? Madhav Chavan, in his introduction to the ASER report, offers a couple of suggestions, especially in the context of Kerala, but equally applicable to many other states as well. Chavan proposes that we could opt for a 'government-funded locally-managed school' model with either private groups or Panchayats running the schools. By doing so, the government can signal to parents that it is willing to permit local management of the school, rather than management by the remote state-level bureaucracy.

If these schools are funded by the government but run by local groups who are rooted in the community, these groups will be far more accountable and responsive to the parents.

Chavan also wonders if Kerala, with a very high proportion of private schools, may be ready for implementing a school voucher scheme. A voucher model would provide parents the option of choosing a different school if the

schools run the Panchayats or local private groups are not responsive and accountable to parents.

The moment accountability becomes part of the state-funded education, as it is emerging in the privately-funded education, there will be social and systemic pressure on all schools to improve the quality of education they provide. It is time for the government to consider these options seriously.

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