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Learning About Learning

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Change is not only possible but is happening all the time in rural education. That is a key message in Pratham's fifth Annual Status of Education Report. For those not familiar with Pratham, it is an NGO in the field of education. Sometimes its reports highlight positive change, as in Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh year before last or Bihar and Himachal Pradesh earlier. At other times the change is negative, as in Chhattisgarh last year, where there seems to have been a loss of focus.

There are changes over time as well as variations in performance across states. These offer rich material for identifying best practices in different aspects of basic education from enhancing learning abilities and pedagogic techniques to financing arrangements for delivering quality education at minimum cost. During my years with the Asian Development Bank, I often heard officials in countries like China and India say that what they valued most was not the money ADB brought to the table but the international experience of best practices that came with it. Here is a case where best practices can be gleaned from India's own experience.

One learning test the survey applies for government schools is the ability of children in standard V to read standard II level texts, admittedly a very modest ability test. The scores vary widely from over 76% in Madhya Pradesh to as low as 20.2% in Jammu & Kashmir. The country average is 50.3%. The other high performing states (over 60%) are Himachal Pradesh, Maharashtra, Uttarakhand, Kerala, Chhattisgarh and Punjab. The worst performers (40% or less) include Assam, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, Uttar Pradesh and J&K. Unfortunately, the scores have declined by as much as 20 percentage points between 2006 and 2009 in some states like West Bengal and Assam. But there are equally sharp improvements in other states like Punjab and Karnataka.

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Another learning test the survey applies for government schools is the ability of children in standard V to solve division problems. The scores again range widely from a high of around 65% in Madhya Pradesh to a low of 12% in Tamil Nadu. The country average is about 36%. The other high performing states (over 50%) are Himachal Pradesh, Bihar and Chhattisgarh. The other low performers (25% or less) include Rajasthan, Gujarat, Assam, Karnataka, J&K and UP. Changes over time are less sharp in this case, except for a deterioration of nearly 25 percentage points in West Bengal.

The learning performance in states like Madhya Pradesh and Himachal Pradesh are by no means optimal, but they set feasible benchmarks. Their lead over low-performing states gives us a measure of the scale of improvement that is possible, not in some ideal world but under actual Indian conditions. J&K may have some special handicaps because of its geography and the difficult security situation there. But there is no reason why states like Tamil Nadu or UP cannot replicate the performance of Madhya Pradesh and Himachal. Administrators of the government school education system in the former need to learn and replicate the good practices being followed in the latter. That could potentially give us a 75% to 100% improvement in the average countrywide learning score of government schools at no extra cost. Surely that's worth thinking about.

These gains from wider dissemination of best practices within the existing government school system would still not internalise some of the advantages of private schools that currently account for about a fifth of school education. Wilima Wadhwa, the survey director, points out that the learning performance of private schools is better than government schools. Though there is only a 5% advantage for reading in a child's own language, after netting out other effects, the advantage is as much as 41% for reading in English.

Moreover, as James Tooley noted earlier in these columns, even though parents pay more, the actual cost of delivering education is significantly lower in private schools. This is mainly because most private schools are not elite schools and pay much lower salaries than government schools. On the other hand, the many risks of excessive dependence on 'for profit' private schools in delivering a basic merit service with large social benefits like primary education are quite well known.

The best way forward is perhaps to reform and strengthen the existing dual system. The learning advantages of private schools can be internalised in government schools through incentives like two-part salaries, where one part is linked to students' performance. Parallel access to private schools could be extended to economically disadvantaged children through school

vouchers provided by the government. Children and parents would then have the option to choose between schools. That competitive pressure would help to improve the performance of both government and private schools, and also reduce the average cost of school education.

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