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Teacher truancy epidemic

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During the period 1970-2000 it was quite common to hear teachers, community workers, and government officials complain that poor and uneducated parents didn't attach much value to educating their children. The common lament was that they were unwilling to send children to school even if education was provided free of charge together with free books, uniforms, and mid-day meals. Either out of ignorance or pressing economic necessity, socio-economically disadvantaged parents felt their children were of greater value at home doing domestic chores, tending to siblings or working in farms and factories. This is no longer true. Today, the vast majority of parents have grasped the value of education and less than 5 percent of six-14-year-olds are out of school. Primary school enrolment and attendance have improved dramatically in recent years. According to government of India data, the number of out-of-school children in the age group six-14 has declined from 25 million in 2003 to 8 million in 2009. Such impressive gains in elementary school enrolment and attendance couldn't have been accomplished without the combined efforts of parents, local communities, non-government organisations, and government bodies. It takes nothing less than an entire village or community to educate children. The focus of India's primary education policy during the past several decades has been on improving access to school. Ideally access, higher enrolment, and school attendance should translate into better learning outcomes. Unfortunately, that has not been the case. While enrolment and attendance have improved, several surveys indicate that the reading, writing and math capability of primary school children, abysmally low to begin with, has remained stagnant, and in some cases, even deteriorated.

According to the Economic Survey 2009-10, during the decade after the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA, primary education for all) programme was initiated in 1999, the government has promoted 309,727 new schools, constructed 254,935 school buildings, 1.16 million new classrooms, 190,961 drinking water facilities, and 347,857 toilets. Alas, bricks and mortar are insufficient for developing the reading, writing and math skills of children. This massive initiative to provide primary education to all has failed because in many rural schools there is a severe deficiency of teachers present in classrooms and teaching

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73.7 in 2007, 69.2 percent in 2009 and 63.4 percent in 2010. Despite the now widely documented evidence of teacher absenteeism, there is little action by the education departments of state governments to curtail or eliminate the phenomenon.

Why is teacher truancy so high and rising? The simple explanation is that absenteeism doesn't cost teachers their jobs or adversely affect promotions. Teacher truancy has also proliferated because education departments, village communities and parents are indifferent to it. Perhaps, many individuals who are hired as teachers don't really like teaching or teaching in rural areas. The teachers face problems in commuting to the village or feel their salaries are too low. The local community concerned about the education of children should be able to identify the causes and address them. Studies show that when parents get involved with the management of a school, the learning outcomes of children improve automatically. The structure of India's villages is such that children become hapless victims when the education system fails to deliver. There is too much corruption in state and local education systems, with teachers' jobs often purchased by bribing local politicians. In such an environment, job retention and promotions are dependent on bribe amounts and not on the quality of education and skills development of students. Perhaps that's the reason why enrolments in private schools which levy fees are rising, since they provide better quality education. According to ASER 2010, the reading and math ability of children in private rural schools is about 20 percentage points higher than of children in government schools.

However, since less than a quarter of rural primary school-going children are in the private sector, a significant improvement in national learning outcomes will have to happen in government schools. In many countries, teacher remuneration is linked to children's learning outcomes and progress. It's high time the Union human resource development ministry introduces such policies to abate the unacceptable incidence of teacher truancy in the country's government schools.

(Dr. Neeraj Kaushal is associate professor of social work at Columbia University, USA)



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