Accountability and governance in the public school system

A case for education leadership in India

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Introduction

Funding for primary education in India has seen a consistent rise in the past few decades. With growing understanding that primary schooling provides an important means of reducing poverty (Colclough, 1982), the government and donor agencies alike have been investing more money to provide education for all. The government is implementing Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan – its flagship programme for achieving universal elementary education – and the Right to Education Act of 2009, and its total expenditure on education as a percentage of gross domestic product (GDP) has risen to 3.85 per cent (UIS, 2011). Well over half of this is channelled into provision for primary education. Additionally, there are a number of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) as well as corporate foundations running diverse programmes for education in the country, indicating a significant availability of aid and resources in this area.

Much has been achieved through proactive intervention by the government and development organisations. Overall statistics indicate that gross enrolment ratios across all social categories have increased to nearly 95 per cent, drop-out rates at primary level have declined and transition from primary to upper primary stage has improved. On the other hand, concentrated focus on issues of enrolment and drop-out has led to neglect of quality learning measures. While more children are now enrolled in schools, student learning outcomes remain abysmal. For instance, 110 million school-aged children are illiterate and cannot read a paragraph of text in their mother tongue, and 52.8 per cent of children studying in 5th Grade lack the reading skills expected at 2nd Grade (ASER, 2009). An alarming 46 per cent of children, largely girls and scheduled caste and scheduled tribes children, drop out before completing the elementary stage of education. Clearly, the country's expectations in respect of overall coverage, equitable distribution and quality of education have largely remained unfulfilled (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2010).

How should the education crisis be tackled?

Despite intervention from various quarters, there is a clear gap between the expected and actual on-ground impact of education. Currently, while some experts stress the need for the elusive 6 per cent of GDP for education, others emphasise the need for accountability instead, citing instances of faulty implementation and ineffective utilisation of resources. In support of the latter

perspective, a report on utilisation of Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan funds stated that at an all-India level, 25 per cent of the approved outlays remained unspent (CBGA and UNICEF India, 2011). The same report, examining the kind of activities against which expenditures are incurred, found that a significant proportion of funds in the programme is set aside for paying salaries and financing infrastructure, leaving little room for financing training, innovation or administrative activities such as monitoring (ibid.). This imbalance in the pattern of expenditure implies a lack of focus on activities directly related to the core objective of education: increasing student achievement.

It seems clear that the immediate need is not to increase financial aid but rather to introduce grass roots interventions aimed at increasing the absorptive capacity of the system by ensuring the formulation of proper plans and schemes and setting up mechanisms for spending the resources efficiently (Tilak, 2006). Efforts for systemic change through policy decisions must now be accompanied by accountability and better governance at the school level. In other words, system thinking needs to be replaced by system action or intervention at all levels.

While there is little evidence to suggest a linear relationship between school change and system change, many studies on school reform agree that proactive work at the grass roots must accompany the top-down intervention of policy-makers if the pace of improvement in the system is to be accelerated. In addition to policies and programmes at a larger level, reform in the public schooling system requires active involvement and ownership by the key stakeholders on the ground. Explaining the need for strong school-level leadership, Leithwood and Jantzi (2004) stated that local leaders must be able to help their colleagues understand how externally initiated reform might be integrated into local improvement efforts, provide the necessary supports for those whose practices must change, and win the co-operation and support of parents and others in the local community. Thus, effective school leadership is critical to school reform.

Education leadership: the way forward

There is a strong case for investing resources in developing the leadership capacity of head teachers to facilitate school reform in India. Heads play a critical role within the school and as a result have the authority and ability to significantly influence change in the school environment. As recognised leaders in the school community, they also have the opportunity to influence change beyond the classroom. Finally, they are the link between schools

and the larger bureaucratic education system and also the pipeline for new administrators.

In view of the above, it may be said that school heads sit at the centre of a web of relationships and as such are able to influence change to improve the quality of education. However, the salience of this relationship between head teachers' leadership and school reform is yet to be recognised by reformist efforts in India. Despite the head teacher's role and responsibilities as well as international research demonstrating that, after the class teacher, heads have the most influence on improving a child's learning outcomes, head teachers in India are not well supported. They receive little or no training to develop their skills and abilities to transition from teachers to heads and to continue to develop and grow in the role. On the other hand, it has been found that when head teachers are given the right opportunities and support, they are able to articulate their vision as school leaders, set time-bound goals for improving school processes and take decisions directed towards the core objective of the institution: better learning outcomes. Thus, in essence, better leadership is linked to better governance and accountability. There is the need, then, to introduce leadership-oriented programmes that build head teachers' capacity to be effective leaders in the domains crucial to their functioning as school leaders.

Principal Leadership Development Programme

The Principal Leadership Development Programme (PLDP), run by the Kaivalya Education Foundation, is one such programme and the first effort in the country to provide leadership training and support to public school heads. Its overall governing principle draws from the work of Michael Fullan, an expert on education leadership (see, for example, Fullan et al., 2004). Fullan's theory of change is that school change driven by individual change can create systemic change when all individuals within that system begin to understand and act within their own sphere of influence, while retaining an awareness of the bigger picture, and consequently contribute to broader change within the educational system. With the understanding that turning around the most problem-ridden schools requires head teachers to work efficiently at various levels, the programme is designed around four cornerstones of school leadership:

1. **Personal leadership:** focuses on developing intrinsic motivation, self-awareness and ability to critically analyse experiences and shift own mindsets. In emphasising reflective practice, proactive problem-solving and goal-directed planning, it acts as the stepping stone towards the other three dimensions of leadership.

2. **Instructional leadership:** focuses on improving teaching and learning processes and encouraging the adoption of child-centred, activity-based teaching and learning. It inculcates the skills in heads to mentor their teachers to adopt the required attitude and skills for making their teaching more effective and result-oriented for the student, and it helps them to strategically allocate available resources for teaching processes to enhance student learning.

3. **Institutional leadership:** focuses on the school as a system and incorporates working with teachers and improving administration processes, relationships with government officials, etc. The head teacher is expected to design and

implement processes to enable peer learning and collaboration among staff, engage families and the community, and manage the organisation by strategically allocating resources and support. Thus, the head is able to effectively engage various stakeholders in the functioning of the school and develop and implement a strategic school development plan.

4. **Social leadership:** focuses on getting parents and the community involved in the education of their children, encouraging enrolment and ongoing participation within the education system and addressing barriers that inhibit the former. It encourages the head teacher to involve the community at various levels in planning, administration, implementation, financing, monitoring and supervision of the working of the school by mobilising and collaborating with systems that already exist such as School Development Committees or Village Education Committees.

Conclusion: creating school CEOs

Policy decisions in the last few decades have emphasised decentralised planning and administration but virtually neglected the preparedness and capacity of on-ground implementers to effectively carry out these responsibilities. If there is to be a sustainable change in the Indian education system, school leaders need to be equipped to successfully implement actions in accordance with these policies. Self-regulation and strategic decision-making at the grass roots can help ensure accountability at the school level by encouraging responsible and competent governance. Efforts to prepare head teachers to efficiently incorporate and follow evolving guidelines of the Indian education system need to move towards training for transformative action and leadership. The need of the hour is to convert school administrators into CEOs for long-term, sustainable change.

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