

## **Teach First Ensure Instruction in Schools before Innovation**

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Schools, as most of us understand, are places where teachers teach and children learn. The most important school-related factors that determine what children learn in our elementary schools are the amount and quality of instruction. This is especially so in our government schools.

Many parents who send their children to these schools are often poor, semi-literate or illiterate and cannot tutor, or afford tutors, to compensate for deficiencies in their children's schooling. Unfortunately it is in these schools, where systematic good-quality instruction is most required, that our children receive little or no systematic teaching.

Consider the number of school days per year. Though government schools are meant to function for around 200 days in the year, they invariably function for fewer – about 150 days or even far less. Schools are closed at the drop of a hat, for local festivals, preparation for national celebrations, and other official and unofficial reasons. In the nation's capital, municipal schools were closed in honour of a local married politician, who was murdered by his mistress for paying attention to another woman!

Typically, the prescribed duration of a school day is 5-6 hours. Most elementary schools, especially in rural areas, routinely start late and end early – some schools do not remain open after lunch. In municipal corporation schools, where students attend the morning or afternoon shift, actual instruction time is limited to about 2-3 hours.

Shorter academic years, taken together with shorter school days, effectively reduce the total prescribed hours of instruction almost by half. The more serious problem is that poor children attend schools where teachers are either absent, or present but not teaching systematically.

An international study of teacher absence in seven low and middle income countries, indicated that 25% of all government primary school teachers in India were absent on a typical school day, exceeded only by Uganda (27%). Teacher absentee rates varied from 15% in Gujarat to 39% in Bihar.

Teacher absenteeism affects teaching and learning across the school. Students have to sit in unsupervised classrooms or verandahs, or are herded into one common classroom. In such chaotic situations, even devoted teachers – a vanishing minority - find it difficult to teach properly.

What about teachers who do attend? How many teach systematically? The PROBE survey of schools in North India indicated that only about 50% of the activities engaged in by teachers, present in school, could be classified as teaching. Observers have noted that other activities include maintaining discipline, administrative work, talking to other teachers, sleeping, and getting students to massage them.

Shorter academic years and school hours, absentee teachers, irregular and poor quality teaching have had a disastrous effect on the education of the majority of poor children attending government schools. When teachers are chronically absent, many children simply stop attending school. Many complete Class 5 but remain virtually illiterate. Some do not even know the letters of the alphabet by Class 7.

No innovation attempting to improve teaching and learning can succeed in our government schools unless teachers teach regularly. But there have been no lack of well- publicised claims, made by state governments, international agencies, funding bodies and NGOs about innovative schemes, teaching methods and learning materials that have worked. These claims are rarely based on properly measured, significant and sustained changes in teaching styles and children's learning, when innovations are scaled up in a large number of mainstream government schools.

Innovations, like better textbooks and better teacher training, will continue to be important and necessary. But their contribution to significant improvement in children's learning will be limited, when so little teaching goes on. When teachers do attend school, one estimate notes that the average teaching time a group of rural students may get could be as low as 25 minutes a day!

Is there is any hope for change? The good news, for example, is that amongst other measures, the present government, has reconstituted the CABE and committed itself to significantly increasing the elementary education budget.

But we must be clear that even exponentially increased funding for our non-functioning government schools will not prevent them from collapsing. Despairing of the quality of education in these schools, large numbers of poor parents are now sending their children, especially boys, to private schools that they can ill-afford. To disregard this is to continue to abdicate the state's responsibility of providing free and compulsory elementary education of good quality for all children.

What can be done to improve the quantity and quality of teaching and learning in our government schools? Every state must ensure that all schools are open for the prescribed number of days and hours of instruction. During school hours, no teacher should be expected to attend meetings, training courses or help in health and cattle censuses. All possible measures should drive home the message that the fundamental duty of all teachers is to be present, and teaching, in school.

We must simultaneously look at other issues, which impinge on making schools more attractive and effective places for teaching and learning. These include articulating the requirements for a school, and the training, recruitment and transfer of teachers. The CABE in collaboration with the NCERT and the NCTE could take the lead role for initiating national and state level discussions on these and other related issues.

If significant improvements in teaching and learning have to take place, then the entire educational system will have to become more transparent and accountable. This is easier said than done, since powerful political and bureaucratic interests will not easily give up the illegal income and power they get from the recruitment and transfer of teachers, and construction of schools. Significant educational reform is long overdue and will not be easy; but without it we will continue to deny millions of children a better future.

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