

EQUITABLE SCHOOLS

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Building a schooling system for every child is a challenge but it is attainable in an era of robust economic growth. A robust school system is an essential prerequisite for achieving inclusive and sustainable growth. As India celebrates Children's Day, it is time to reiterate what needs to be done to ensure that India's schools deliver quality, equitable and safe education for all. Doing so is critical at a time when the Central government takes the first steps in planning and budgeting for education in 2018.

The challenges of India's education system are endemic and require systemic solutions. The Indian State must consciously focus on equity and inclusion. India is a grossly unequal country — a land of billionaires where starvation deaths still happen. If India's education system must be a tool to overcome social inequalities, it must remove barriers to education of India's marginalised communities, especially Dalits and Adivasis. This includes more investment in teacher awareness on equity, mother tongue language intervention programmes, disability-specific accommodation and other interventions needed to level the playing field. However, it is important to focus on equity not just in relation to access but quality: poor or underserved areas require specific strategies to ensure the best quality of teaching and learning. At the very least, further closure of schools in remote Dalit and Adivasi locations as part of "rationalisation" must stop until the policy's impact on the continuity of education of learners from marginalised communities has been investigated.

Recognise and plan for those that remain out of school. The 2011 census data revealed about 38 million children (in the 6 to 13 year age group) remained out of school. While the figures might have since changed, clearer strategies to identify, bridge and enroll children in age appropriate grade are necessary. These strategies need to be



planned and funded commensurate with the scale of the problem.

Focus on holistic quality. Poor learning outcomes are symptoms of deeper problems in the education sector. Multiple studies have demonstrated that teachers — and the level of teacher knowledge about the learners — are critical determinants of education quality and learning outcomes. India must invest to ensure that there are sufficient teachers, they are trained and qualified, have good working con-

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ditions and address diversity and equity in recruitment and deployment. In contrast, one in six teaching positions in government schools in India is vacant, a collective shortage of a million teachers. Another million odd are untrained. Teachers are routinely pulled into non-teaching work. CARE India has worked with teachers in India's educationally lagging states like UP and Odisha and our experience suggests that an enabling mechanism for teachers to provide mentoring, support and friendly advice

is critical to improvement of quality education. Stronger investments in teacher support mechanisms, including the strengthening of the Cluster Resource Centre, are critical to bring quality education. Teachers must be having necessary tools like quality curricula, learning materials and frameworks for appropriate, formative assessment. While rich school libraries are critical to building reading habits among children, even school textbooks rarely reach schools on time. A more concerted focus on Early Grades is critical.

Strong public systems and governance. Legislations, policies and implementation frameworks must be backed by stronger accountability mechanisms to ensure that they have the necessary impact. Capacities of middle level administration officials must be strengthened. Given the growth of private schools, steps must be taken to regulate and enforce regulation of private schools.

Financing. While money alone does not guarantee successful education outcomes, adequate and well-allocated finances are essential. India has historically not invested enough. In 2015-16, India's spending on education was less than other BRICS countries — India spent 3 per cent of its gross domestic product (GDP) on education, compared to 3.8 per cent in Russia, 4.2 per cent in China, 5.2 per cent in Brazil, and 6.9 per cent in South Africa, according to 2016 data from India's Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation. Allocations to education must be enhanced to six per cent GDP in line with the government's own national commitments and international benchmarks.

As the government enters into the processes of annual Plans and Budgets, we hope that these aspects will be taken on board. After all, India's government cannot afford to continue failing its children.

(The author is the Director, Education, CARE India)