

Uphill battle ahead as outcomes go downhill...

Madhav Chavan, CEO-President, Pratham Education Foundation

Many years ago, before we amended our Constitution, it was common to say that political will was needed to give India's children their fundamental right to education. The Constitutional amendment in 2002, imposition of education cess in 2004 leading to increasing financial allocation for elementary education, and finally the passage and enforcement of the Right to Education Act after a long wait were all step-wise demonstrations of increasing political desire, although not quite the will. For a country that is undergoing huge economic, social, and demographic changes, education requires a much more resolute political direction. As Carol Bellamy, former Executive Director of Unicef 1995-2005 said in Doha recently, "...education is too important to be left to educationalists". It is important for political leaders to realize that education has been in a deep crisis. We are chasing ideals while practical realities limit what is possible on the ground. As often happens, the best is turning out to be the enemy of the good as we pour in more and more money without deciding or focusing on what needs to be achieved.

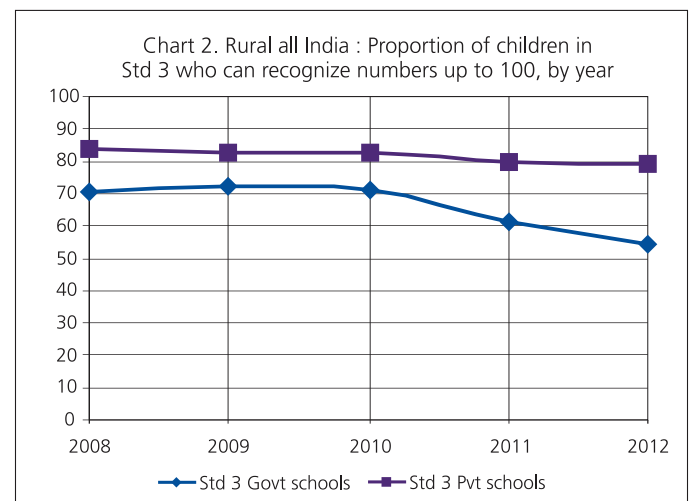
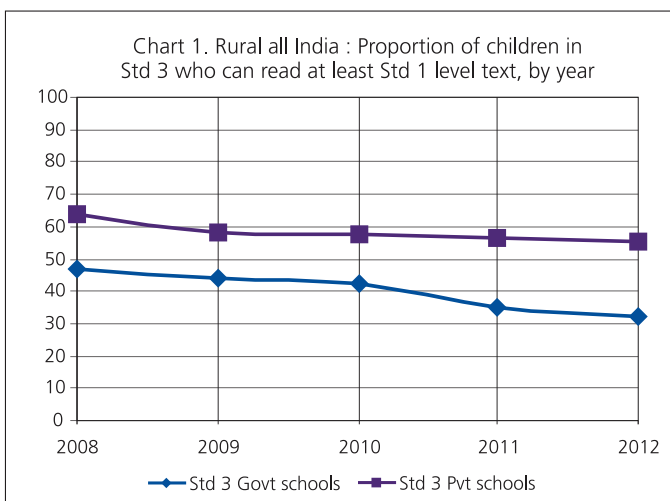
In some ways, the Planning Commission has already taken a step in the right direction by emphasizing goal-setting and achievement of learning outcomes by states in its 12th Plan document now ratified by the National Development Council. This is a welcome change at a time when learning levels in government schools are declining and private school enrollment is rising at almost 10% per year. It remains to be seen how seriously the Department of School Education, SSA, and the states align with this change in policy direction to change practice in schools. The crisis in mass education is far deeper at every level than most people imagine. Officials often confide that the situation is grimmer than the picture ASER paints but we do not as yet see energy leading to action that comes from a sense of urgency.

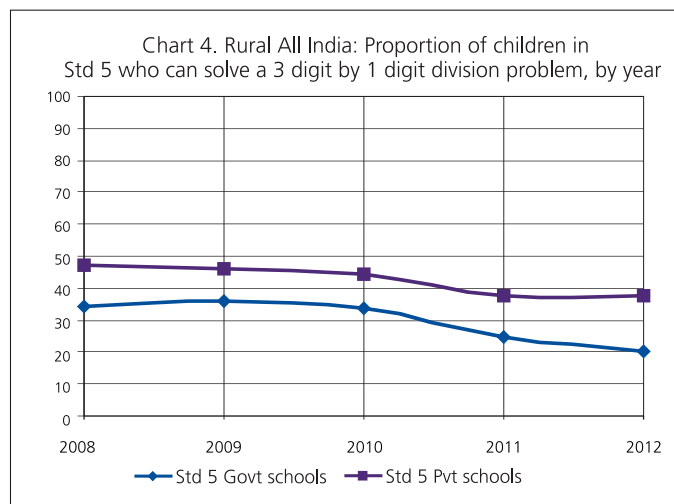
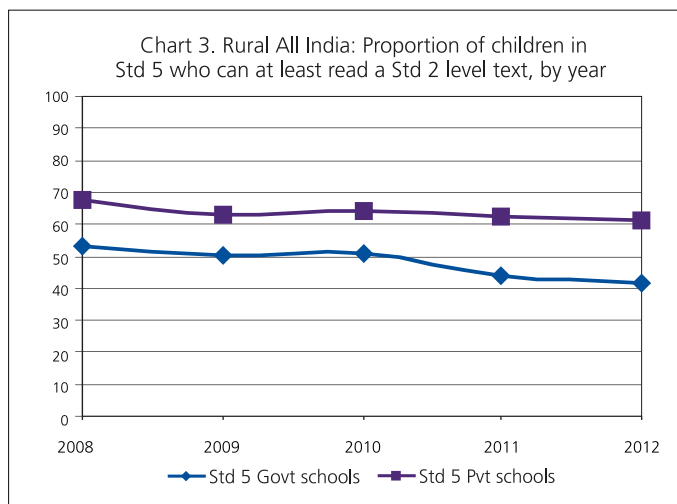
Like previous years, ASER2012 has a lot of compelling information to persuade people that we are looking at a deepening crisis in education that is like an unseen and quiet killer disease.

Learning levels started dropping in many states since RTE came into effect. Coincidence? Correlation? Or, causation?

We noted for the first time in ASER2011 that levels of reading and math at every level were not only poor but declining in many states. With one more year of data, this observation is strengthened.

The charts below tell the story. Fewer and fewer children in successive batches reaching 3rd and 5th standard are learning basics of reading and math. Unless someone can show that children are learning something else better, this indicates an alarming degeneration. In 2008, the proportion of children in Std 3 who could read a Std 1 text was under 50%, which has dipped about 16 percentage points to nearly 30%. A child in Std 3 has to learn to do two digit subtraction, but the proportion of children in government schools who can even recognize numbers up to 100 correctly has dropped from 70% to near 50% over the last four years with the real downward turn distinctly visible after 2010, the year RTE came into force. These downward trends are also reflected in Std 5 where a child would be expected to be able to at least read a Std 2 text and solve a division sum. Private schools are relatively unaffected by this decline but a downturn is noticeable, especially in math beyond number recognition.





There has been a feeling that RTE may have led to relaxation of classroom teaching since all exams and assessments are scrapped and no child is to be kept back. Continuous Comprehensive Evaluation is now a part of the law and several states are attempting to implement some form of CCE as they understand it. Does CCE catch this decline? Are teachers equipped to take corrective action as the law prescribes? Is corrective action going to be taken? Given the magnitude of the problem, it will be a good idea to focus just on basics at every standard and not treat it as a "remedial" measure. At this stage, teaching-learning of basic foundational skills should be the main agenda for primary education in India.

One of the problems of governmental systems is that the individual teacher feels that he has to wait for the highest authority to say what is to be done. If stage-wise achievement of goals of basic learning of listening, speaking, reading, writing, and problem solving become a part of state policy and not just another "program", the school calendar and teaching plans can be altered accordingly without the teacher having to look for instructions from higher ups. Focus on learning of basic skills can be applied to private schools as well - although these seem to be relatively better off. It is important for all to adhere to a policy of achieving basic learning outcomes rather than "completing the syllabus" as the RTE Act says. In fact, this is one modification that is definitely required in the RTE Act.

The states' contribution to the overall decline in learning levels is not uniform either for government or for private schools. In some states, the situation is unchanged or steady, which may be good news under the circumstances. The reasons for deterioration of learning outcomes in other states need to be explored by leaders and officials of each state. Whatever the cause, this trend has to be reversed urgently.

The big states where the learning levels are low and unchanged but DO NOT contribute significantly to the overall decline in government schools, are Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh. There are three other states that have high learning levels on the ASER scale and are largely steady. These are Himachal, Punjab, and Kerala. Other big states contribute heavily to the overall declining learning levels. However, the contrast between government and private school performance is easily visible in every state and can be seen in the state pages of this report. It should be stated again that private school education is not great and socio-economic-educational background of children's families, parental aspirations and additional support for learning contribute majorly to their better performance. Yet, fact remains that the learning gap between government and private school children is widening. This widening gap may make the private schools look better, but in an absolute sense it is important to note that less than 40% of Std 5 children in private schools could solve a simple division sum in 2012.

It must be acknowledged that there is a national crisis in learning that permeates all schools. So, it is critical to improve the performance not only of government schools but also of private schools, because those children deserve better education for the money their parents spend. Governments must ensure this through regulation and not through control.

Decline is cumulative

Learning declines do not happen in one year. They are the result of a cumulative effect of neglect over the years. If we follow three cohorts that started Std 1 in 2006, 2007, and 2008 respectively this should become clear as they grow to reach Std 5 in 2010, 2011, and 2012. Their "rate of learning" declines after 2010. The dotted lines in Charts 5-8 represent the cohort that entered Std 1 in 2008. In 2010 this cohort is in Std 3, by which time it is slightly lower than the previous two cohorts in government schools. By the time it is in Std 4 in 2011, significantly fewer percent children have learned to read or solve math in this cohort than the previous two did in Std 4. The subsequent cohorts entering Std 1 in 2009 and 2010 are even lower than the 2008 cohort, even in Std 3. Unless something is done immediately to improve the learning of these cohorts, it is predictable that their learning levels in Std 5 and beyond will not exceed the 2008 cohort and more likely will be worse. The cohorts of children who entered Std 1 the year RTE was passed and in the year it was enforced respectively, will be much worse off than children before them.

While the learning outcomes in government schools in many states decline rapidly, the private school performance in most states has remained steady as Charts 5 to 8 indicate. A decline in learning of basic math in private schools, as indicated in Chart 8 is visible but the basic reading levels (Chart 6) seem to remain largely steady. In Maharashtra, where a large majority of private schools are not only aided but largely controlled by the state government, there is a big decline as compared to states of the North where the private schools are mostly unaided and not under government control.

Chart 5: Rural All India GOVT schools: Change in ability to read AT LEAST Std 1 text for SUCCESSIVE COHORTS starting in '06.'07.'08, '09, '10

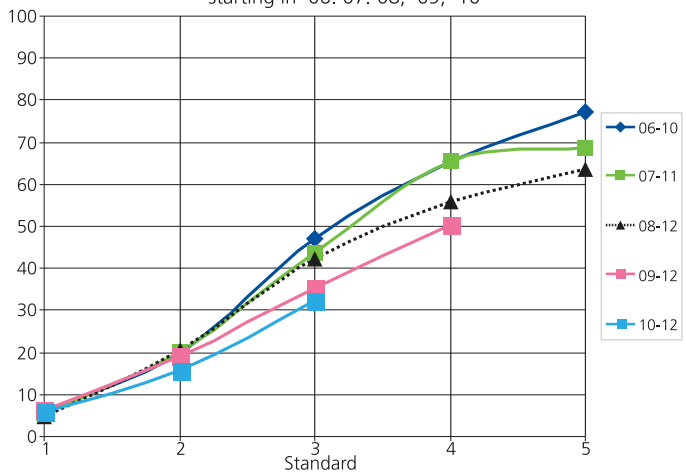


Chart 6: Rural All India PRIVATE schools: Change in ability to read AT LEAST Std 1 text for SUCCESSIVE COHORTS starting in '06.'07.'08, '09, '10

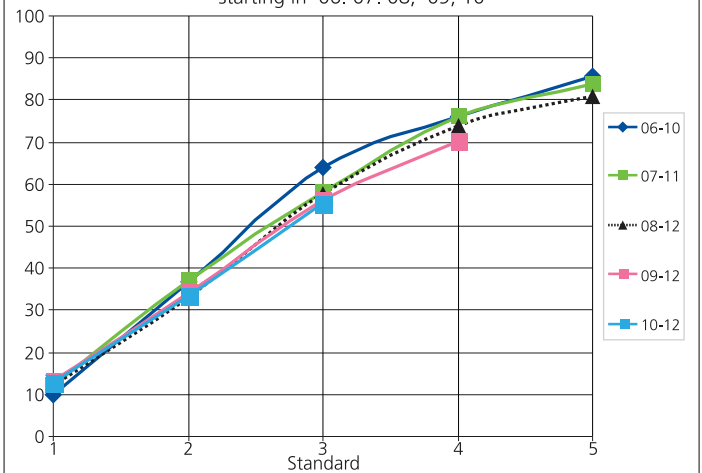


Chart 7: Rural All India GOVT schools: Change in ability to SOLVE SUBTRACTION OR MORE for SUCCESSIVE COHORTS starting in '06.'07.'08, '09, '10

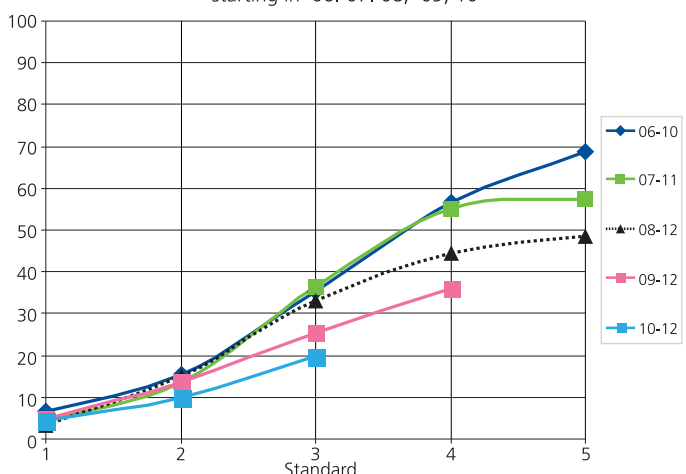
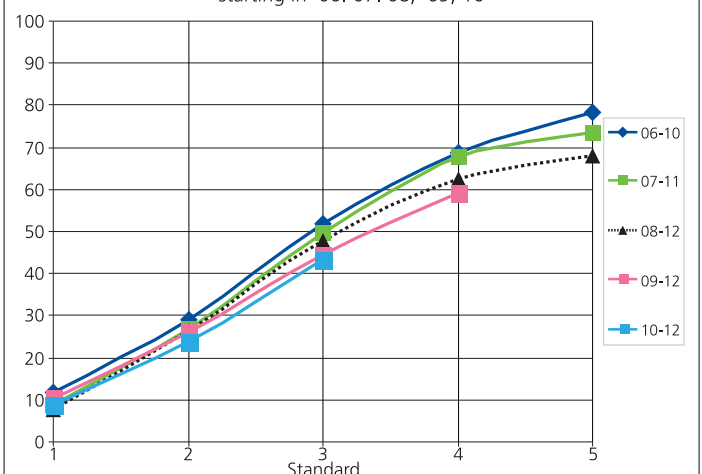


Chart 8: Rural All India PRIVATE schools: Change in ability to SOLVE SUBTRACTION OR MORE for SUCCESSIVE COHORTS starting in '06.'07.'08, '09, '10



People are aware of the difference between government and private schools, with or without assessment. It drives the demand for private schools and results in an exodus from government schools. Like it or not.

Of course, all this is about very basic indicators and education is much more than just basic skills. At the same time, if we can get these basics right, much more can be done, but not without them. Government and private, both types of schools have a long way to go. In the mean time, private school enrollment is growing rapidly at the primary stage.

In a country of 1.4 billion, over 50% children will pay for their PRIMARY education by 2020?

Recently, a friend said at a seminar that government schools provide education to 80% of India's children. This friend who has been in the middle of the RTE implementation machinery should have checked the government's own District Information System of Education (DISE) statistics published in 2012. It is time to wake up and take note of the rapidly changing situation. We have believed for a long time -and this is the logic of RTE- that governments will *provide* or *provide for* education of a large majority of children. This premise is likely not to be valid ten years from now.

DISE indicates that 29.8% of India's children in Std I-V (urban and rural) attended private schools in 2010-11. As shown in Table 1, ASER 2010 estimated two years ago, that 22.56% of rural children in Std I-V attended private schools and ASER2012 says that the proportion has risen to 28.39% over two years. An increase of 5.8 percentage points in just two years after RTE came into force is astonishing to say the least. Looking at these trends, It is therefore reasonable to assume that in 2012 about 35% or more of India's primary school children in both urban and rural areas are attending private schools.

The trend is unmistakable. Private school enrollment in rural India is increasing at about 10% every year or about 3 percentage points per year. In the election year of 2014, about 41% of all of India's primary age children will be in private schools, and by the time 2019 elections come around, private sector will be the clear major formal education provider in India. Some say that RTE will take a decade to show its impact. Perhaps so. By that time, if all goes well (?), a further 25% of private school enrollment will be supported by governments through the quota for economically weaker sections and only the remaining poorest (by all measures) will send their children to government-run schools.

In the early days of this third millennium, shanty "affordable" schools started coming up in rural and urban areas. Gradually investors have done their math and gauged the demand for education. It appears that big "international" schools are coming up in rural areas that bus children from distant villages for economic viability. This model will probably start to dominate rural landscapes as India's wealth increases. On the urban side, the Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai came up with a proposal to hand over management of at least some of its schools to private education providers and a few other governments seem to be considering similar approaches. Such ideas known as PPP are opposed on purely ideological grounds by some, while schools run by governments in many states (especially in urban areas) are emptying out.

The best example of this may be Tamil Nadu, which is now 48% urbanized according to Census 2011. DISE reports that in 2010-11, 59.4% of all (urban and rural) children in Std I-V attended private schools in Tamil Nadu. Only a third of these were in aided private schools. ASER 2010 estimated that the rural private enrollment in Std I-V in the same state was around 28.5%, and is up to 34.8% in 2012. A simple back of the envelope estimation says that anywhere between 80 and 100% children in Std I-V in urban Tamil Nadu are in private schools and less than a fifth of these are government aided.

A glance at the DISE 2010-11 private school enrollment figures in Table 1 will show that in the southern part of India- Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Puducherry, and Goa have 60% or more private school enrollment in primary schools. Andhra, Maharashtra, and Karnataka are all above 40% and moving up. All these states are highly urbanized and urbanizing further. Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat are at around 30%. Rajasthan, Haryana, Punjab, J&K and Uttarakhand are between 40 and 50%. Uttar Pradesh rural is already at about 50% and it is quite likely that urban Uttar Pradesh is not far behind. Of the North-Eastern states, Tripura has low private school enrollment but nearly 70% of government primary school children go to tutors. Assam and Arunachal are at about 25% private enrollment and Meghalaya, Mizoram, Manipur, and Nagaland are between 30 and 50%. Of the most rural states, Bihar and West Bengal have low private school enrollment but 40% and 60% government school

Table 1: Comparison of DISE 10-11 (rural+urban), Rural ASER 2010, and Rural ASER 2012 for enrollment in private schools

State	Urban + Rural, ALL Pvt schools 2010 Std I-V	Rural ASER 2010 Std I-V	Rural ASER 2012 Std I-V	State	Urban + Rural, ALL Pvt schools 2010 Std I-V	Rural ASER 2010 Std I-V	Rural ASER 2012 Std I-V
Andhra Pradesh	45.47	40.08	39.26	Maharashtra	42.9	12.4	19.97
Arunachal Pradesh	18.58	15.18	24.42	Manipur	56.21	65.01	66.53
Assam	24.63	14.72	17.36	Meghalaya	45.58	49.17	50.59
Bihar	0.39	5.37	7.09	Mizoram	34.54	10.25	23.98
Chandigarh	29.95			Nagaland	50.37	32.19	36.9
Chhattisgarh	18.16	10.79	16.23	Odisha	10.16	5.37	6.99
Delhi	39.26			Puducherry	66.94	43.9	46.11
Goa	64.55	28.67	46.11	Punjab	46.43	38.08	47.61
Gujarat	26.47	8.87	9.8	Rajasthan	38.4	35.82	43.81
Haryana	38.71	43.07	52.16	Sikkim	19.93	21.13	28.94
Himachal Pradesh	31.52	29.78	33.08	Tamil Nadu	59.43	28.51	34.77
Jammu & Kashmir	40.31		46.75	Tripura	8.98	2.77	3.5
Jharkhand	16.23	8.18	15.94	Uttar Pradesh	35.64	37.36	50.05
Karnataka	40.49	19.95	22.01	Uttarakhand	41.73	31.24	40.17
Kerala	68.17	57.95	61.82	West Bengal	8.9	7.02	9.43
Madhya Pradesh	29.74	16.11	19.9	All States	29.82	22.56	28.39

children in Std. I-V respectively go to tutors. That leaves the highly rural Odisha and somewhat urban Chhattisgarh among the bigger states which have low private school enrollment of about 10% and 20%.

It appears that no matter who is in power, private school enrollment will go on increasing till it hits family budget constraints. As this happens, unless the quality of government schools improves substantially, the gap between children who attend one and the other will create a big divide in every aspect of life and opportunity.

Much of our developmental planning is rural focused and in education the tendency in government is to think of government-run schools as 'our' schools. It is time to start looking at private schooling more carefully and understand problems of urban education planning as also to regulate private schooling without taking away the essential strengths of the private school. Government funded and regulated, but not controlled, private schools- like the aided or "charter schools" - replacing government-run schools seems to be the way of the future. RTE has already introduced the concept of funding private schools on a per child cost basis. There is no reason why this cannot be extended further. Aided schools exist in large numbers in Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, Goa, and Meghalaya. Existing practices can be looked into to create new governance mechanisms so that there is a right balance of freedom and accountability.

In short, big changes are happening in education and they are happening rapidly. Any long term plans of building or strengthening institutions must take these changes into account or else we will end up creating more dysfunctional white elephants all over the country that are not suitable for the next half a century and longer. There is a need to keep a close watch and have a vision of the future with feet firmly planted on the ground today.