

Response from consultation at NCERT as an input to MHRD on the “PPP in School Education” document

A consultation was held by a group comprising of educationists and civil society members on 5th November at NCERT to discuss a note from MHRD on '**Public Private Partnership in school education**'. This note provides a response from this consultation to MHRD.

The note says in many places that private sector has **inherently** superior characteristics such as managerial efficiencies and that **competition amongst private actors would reduce costs and improve quality**. On the other hand, it says government schools **inherently** suffer from poor accountability and bureaucratic rigidities. The note does not discuss any problems or limitations of private schools, nor does it discuss any positive possibilities or strengths of government schools. The note proposes models in which new schools would be setup by private sector with public funding and other models where existing government schools could be taken up by the private sector.

It is the first document from the government which thus seems to suggest that **government school system has not worked and private schools are a systemic option**. Such a **fundamental structural change** needs to be widely debated to understand its implications especially in the context of (elementary) education becoming a fundamental right reinforcing the government's obligation to provide universal education of an equitable quality and also in the **nature and purpose of education as a nation and society building activity**. The experiences of few countries that have attempted such privatized school models, as well as PPP projects within education and in infrastructural sectors need to be studied, since many of these suggest that privatization creates much bigger problems than existed and also does not provide the expected cost savings or other benefits.

The note seems to suggest that government schools cannot be reformed and are inherently inferior to private schools. Resigning to such beliefs is neither warranted (there are role model government schools such as Kendriya Vidyalayas and several state government schools) nor acceptable given the constitutional responsibility of the government to provide universal education of an equitable quality.

The note uses a few terms and concepts in an ambiguous manner. Firstly, in PPP, both in practice and Indian policy, the private party is a business entity. However education is not a business, a wisdom that is accepted in our education policy documents and acts. Also the education system has had a long and rich history of participation by the voluntary sector (Trusts, endowments, philanthropies etc have setup and run institutions). **The present policy framework uses a common term PPP both for non-profit and for-profit partners. The two kinds of partnership models are so different that even for purpose of analysis we need to use different terms for each – like, 'PPP' and 'government-civil society partnership'**. This is especially required since the proposed policy framework indicates a very strong structural shift from using government funds only to support some not-for-profit non-governmental schools to supporting for-profit schools, actually advocating their for-profit nature as a 'guarantee' for quality. In this context using the same term PPP for both models is confusing and misleading.

The note conflates non core processes like construction of school buildings and providing school equipment and pedagogical processes like teaching-learning and teacher education on the same spectrum, as possible 'candidates' for incentives based provision by private players. These need to be separated. While non core activities can be outsourced on PPP or normal contractual bases to business

entities, core pedagogical processes cannot be given to business entities, since these are not and cannot be commercial activities. Even in seeking the support of civil society entities in the pedagogical processes, government needs to have well defined rules and criteria to select the entity, which should include their credibility, experience, stated vision/perspectives etc. The future of our children, many of them from vulnerable backgrounds, is at stake and this matter needs careful consideration.

This note appears to violate existing accepted educational legal-policy frameworks including the Right to Education, National Curricular Framework, PRI Act. It needs to proceed from the principles and guarantees including the basic one of 'universal education of equitable quality' in these and other accepted laws and policies. Education is not a mere 'service' to be delivered, but perhaps the most important social instrument to build a stronger society and country and educational policy needs to be firmly based on educational perspectives and be driven by those having deep experience working in the Indian education system. Indian education policy increasingly mandates a strong role for community monitoring. But the proposed policy framework seems to ignore community 'participation'. It is not clear how such existing policy directions can be ignored and we move in completely new direction without the required political mandate. The Right to Education Act also emphasizes such community participation and 'supervision'.

The note makes unsubstantiated assumption regarding the superiority of private schools based on their efficiencies in lowering costs, improving quality, higher accountability etc arising from (monetary) incentives/disincentives and competition. There is evidence to disprove these assumptions and these practices can greatly harm the school system, especially with regard to equity, by creating a more stratified and inequitable school system. Since education is an important social instrument to build an egalitarian society, a stratified school system can cause enormous social injustice and aggravate inequity.

The new proposed PPP framework is premised on a very efficient public education regulatory system in India. This assumption does not seem to hold in the face of the fact that a lot of the problems of Indian public education system may lie in its management/ supervisory system and not just at the school end. It is widely recognized that PPPs with poor regulatory systems would tend to hugely increase corruption and this would be the most likely consequence of the proposed model. High degree of blatant corruption in the education system, the primary socialization space for the children, has far-reaching societal implication. Failure of regulation of private schools is quite evident even in the capital city, in case of private schools which took free government land in exchange of promises of providing free education to some students. Even active judicial action triggered monitoring of these promises is not helping in enforcing rules accepted by these schools when they got land from the government.

One of the main argument often given to support PPP model in education is resource constraint. It is a known fact that universalisation of education was achieved in all developed countries through public funds, and there is nothing to prove that it can be done otherwise in developing countries in the present context. Often an argument of temporary dip in resources due to the present economic recession is also cited for going for such a PPP model. However, the question that begs examination is whether an argument of temporary resource shortfall can justify far-reaching and largely irreversible structural changes in India's education system.

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List of participants at the consultation

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