

“Public Private Partnership in School Education” - Feedback from a consultation held at TISS, Mumbai.

Background

MHRD has released a note on 'Public Private Partnerships in School education' which discusses the need and possibilities for involving the private sector in school education and has sought feedback by 9th November.

The note was discussed in a consultation called at the **Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), Mumbai on the 22nd October**. The participants include people working in academic institutions, media and NGOs across the country. The deliberations in the consultation have been collated into this note. The list of participants who have endorsed the note is provided at the end.

Overall feedback

The MHRD PPP note seeks to make fundamental structural changes in the Indian public education system. It makes several assumptions about the functioning of the public and private sectors as well as the aims of education. There is a need to look at these assumptions and what these imply. The critical issue of reforming and rejuvenating the public school system is an important one. The PPP note appears to bypass this critical need.

The detailed feedback on the MHRD note is structured as follows – the first section points out the lack of clarity on terminologies in this note, the second section challenges some of the assumptions made in this note, the third section points out some serious omissions and the final section provides a concluding response to this note.

Inadequate Clarity

1. The note, by proposing one single PPP policy for School Education, seems to conflate the issues of elementary, secondary and higher secondary school education. While most of references on examples used in the note are for Secondary education schools it is not clear if such PPP models are proposed for elementary education also (indeed the secondary schools setup may include primary sections as well). This confusion is further exacerbated with the conflict that this note appears to have with the recently passed RTE legislation which places the responsibility (financial, operational and regulatory) solely on the government for the provisioning of elementary education.
2. There is confusion created through a broad categorization of not-for-profit NGOs, community based organizations and market oriented business organizations as private sector. The intentions and modus operandi of each of these types of organizations are very different and they cannot be clubbed under one umbrella of PPP. **The term PPP should not be used, since in this term, Private refers to business entities** and education is accepted as a not for profit activity. Instead a term that suggests the participation of the voluntary sector should be used.
3. While the note proposes different models of PPP it is completely unclear where each of these

models would be appropriate and what problems they are addressing. The document does not have any section on the context in which this note has been prepared, or the requirements or priorities it seeks to address, linkages to policy frameworks, all of which are the necessary in any policy document. In the absence of any discussion on the context or the requirements/priorities, the note seems to suggest PPP as a general panacea for educational issues.

Assumptions not substantiated

4. Financial Constraints – The note quotes the Rs. 1.45 lakh crores that the Planning Commission has estimated as the financial requirements for meeting the objective of 65% enrollment in Secondary Education in the Eleventh Plan period. It then makes a statement that “is not possible to provide such a large amount from the government alone in a short period of time”. **What were the various avenues of finance that were considered before coming to this conclusion? Has the Finance Commission exhausted all possibilities of budgetary allocation for Secondary Education? Without any justified arguments, a simple assertion that “it is not possible” cannot make financial constraints a rationale for PPP.**
5. Lack of accountability of the government school system - **The note seems to admit that it is impossible to deliver quality education through government school system.** This sends a contradictory message to the large scale efforts of the central and state governments over the last few decades to improve quality of education in government run schools. Does the note imply that the SSA program has not been worthwhile? The recent surveys done Tamil Nadu (the SchoolScape study) shows more than 25% improvement in learner achievement through a government intervention program (ABL). It is not only too premature but also incorrect to assume that all government programs in the field of school education are failing. There are numerous researches and case studies which show that the government school system has been quite effective in many cases. This is also largely true of the public school systems in many countries of Western Europe. It is hence important to study these systems. **Also the Indian education system is a few decades old, and it is quite premature, specially given the nature of Indian society, to declare it a failed system, as the document seems to imply.**
6. Faith in private sector to delivery quality – In contrast to the low self-perception of the government system the note reposes huge and unjustified faith in the private sector to deliver quality education. A detailed study on the long running Milwaukee School Voucher Program found that the schools in the voucher program were performing no better than the regular government schools [School choice and the question of accountability – Emily Van Dunk, Anneliese M. Dickman, Yale University Press, 2004]. Several studies in India to have failed to establish that private schools offer superior learning processes and outcomes, after adjusting for context related factors. **There is little evidence to justify the faith in incentive based private schooling that the document suggests.**
7. The “Whole School Management” model proposes full autonomy for setting the service conditions of the teachers to the private school management. Without any reference to norms and regulation set by the government this proposal could lead to serious disparities between teachers working conditions and result in exploitation of teachers. **This move would also result in dilution of the accountability of the government,** specially in the context of the right to education legislation. **The document which doubts government capacities at running**

schools, has high faith in government regulatory capacities. If, as the document implies, the supervisory structures of the school system have failed to ensure government schools function, how would these same structures be able to regulate private school functioning, is a question not addressed.

Omissions

8. Equity - The note, while acknowledging the existence of private sector in secondary education has not acknowledged the current inequitable access to secondary education. There is worrisome ignorance of constitutional principles of equity and egalitarianism in this note. There is no mention of clear exit guidelines for private sector participants in school education. How would the government tackle the issues of access if the private management decides to withdraw? The inability of the market to address equity requirements is well understood. **Given that education is itself perhaps the most important social system that can provide mechanisms to address inequities, making it a market driven model can have dangerous implications for not only the school system, but for society at large.**
9. Quality – The note mentions incentives and disincentives for private partners as a mechanism for continuously improving quality. The basic dimensions of quality has been failed to get a mention in this note. If it is just going to be examination results and if that performance is going to create an existential threat to private schools the proposal should take into consideration possibility of distortions in quality assessment mechanisms. This narrow notion of quality also is quite in contrast to the discussions on quality and on assessment in the National Curriculum Framework 2005 document. The NCLB (No Child Left Behind) program of the USA provides evidence that large scale external assessments not only is extremely expensive, but also has negative pedagogical consequences, including teaching to the tests and exclusion of children who do not fare well in such standardised tests.

Conclusion

10. The School education system in India faces complex challenges. If the concept of Public Private Partnership (MHRD Note) in School Education is indeed seen as one plausible solution for improving the quality of the education system, one must look at the proposal in great detail and think thoroughly through every detail. **After scrutinizing the document we find that there is a lack of clarity in purpose of this proposal and that it is based on assumptions that are ambiguous. We also find that serious considerations like equity in access and quality of education have not been considered. While the challenge of universalization of secondary education is real, this proposal is in danger of failure because it is trying at a systemic level, to adopt an untested path with inadequacy in detail. The future of the children of this country should not be experimented.**
11. It is even more important to look at mechanisms for the reform of the public system. The note discusses issues of autonomy of schools, need for greater flexibility in decision making at school and teacher levels and need for funding. These are issues that need to be addressed within the public school system.

Place - Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai,

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Signed By

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(All endorsements are individual and not do not necessarily represent that of their organization's)