

Learning outcome an important goal

Building an outcomes-focused delivery system is a particular challenge in India



The Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) guidelines mandate the preparation of district-level annual plans. This process is rarely taken seriously. Photo: Mint

For once, I am optimistic about elementary education in India. Not because we have witnessed improvements in learning levels. In fact, the opposite is true. The latest Annual Status of Education Report highlights the deepening crisis of poor learning levels. In 2008, just under 50% of standard III students could read a standard I text. In 2012, this dropped to nearly 30%. My optimism stems from the outcomes problem finally getting recognized by the government. The 12th Plan explicitly states that the overarching goal in elementary education is to improve learning outcomes.

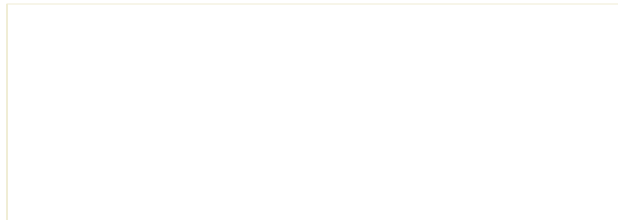
This is the first time such a policy goal has been formally stated, and an important step forward. Now the focus must shift to implementation. Building an outcomes-focused delivery system is a particular challenge in India because of the rule-bound, guideline-driven bureaucratic culture that invariably reduces the most complex problems into easily identifiable input-driven solutions—more text books, more teachers, more training—none of which are sufficient to improve outcomes.

How does one break the input trap? There is now a substantial body of evidence that offers useful starting points for designing an outcome-based education system. One important reform measure emerging from this evidence (mentioned in the 12th Plan) is to tailor pedagogy and teaching methods to children's learning levels rather than to their grade-level expectation. In other words, if a standard III child can read only a standard I textbook, teaching ought to be adjusted so that the child first acquires basic skills rather than teaching the standard III textbook in the expectation that she will "catch up".

In 2008, researchers from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab studied the effects of a summer learning camp implemented by the government of Bihar and the NGO Pratham. These camps were run by government school teachers with the intention of teaching children in standard III to V basic reading and maths. Students were organized according to learning levels while teaching methods and materials were designed to allow teachers to innovate with pedagogical strategies appropriate to the child. The result: a significant gain in reading and maths, which lasted two years. But the more startling finding was that the very same teachers who taught with success in the learning camps failed to make similar gains during the school year, highlighting that the current system is not geared toward delivering outcomes.

The Bihar experience points to four essential ingredients of an outcomes-focused approach missing in the current government framework: setting clear basic learning goals, measuring progress, building evidence on what works, and promoting pedagogical practices appropriate to the level of the child. Clear, measurable goals can serve to motivate teachers, as they did in Bihar. To meet these goals, learning levels need to be monitored so teachers can assess children's ability and different pedagogical strategies can be evaluated to identify what works. Finally, administrators and teachers need to be empowered to take decisions and adjust teaching techniques based on learning needs.

Mixing these ingredients into the government framework requires significant investment at the frontline. First, the district, which is the key implementing arm of the administration, ought to be given greater discretion to ensure that resources, staff and materials are aligned to learning needs in schools.



The Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) guidelines mandate the preparation of district-level annual plans. This process is rarely taken seriously. Districts have little discretion over budgets and most activities are determined by state and Central government guidelines. So, plans are made because the guidelines require them, but with little attention to the district's needs. Rather than prescribing what districts should do, state governments ought to set goals, build district capacity to articulate their learning needs and leave

districts to plan and budget according to these needs.

Investments also need to be made in building the capability of frontline staff to mentor and support schools.

This is crucial for enabling teachers to identify school-specific learning needs and experiment with teaching strategies. SSA has created posts for block and cluster coordinators meant specifically to provide such support to schools. But vacancies for these posts are high and the few officers in place are neither accustomed to nor equipped for the job. Most have no first-hand experience with effective teaching techniques and, once on the job, they receive no exposure or training to alternative organizational and pedagogical strategies. Unsurprisingly, they spend most of their time performing administrative tasks. But, experience from recent experiments led by district governments in Bihar and Haryana shows that when these officers are trained and made responsible for supporting and mentoring teachers, the gains can be significant.

Integrating these strategies into the current government framework requires a substantial rethink of the SSA's financing structure. In 2011-12, 75% of the SSA budget was allocated to infrastructure and teacher salaries, leaving little by way of financial resources for other activities.

The two quality related line items—learning enhancement programmes and innovation—accounted for 2% of the budget. The emphasis on infrastructure and teacher salaries is mandated by the Right to Education Act that has set clear standards for schools and since most schools are still to meet these standards, it is unlikely that these expenditures will decrease in the near future. Therefore, additional sources of financing will be needed to meet the outcomes objective.

The 12th Plan offers India an important opportunity to transform education delivery systems. But this will require the government to think outside its guideline-driven bureaucratic mindset and invest in frontline staff. Let us hope that the government is up to the task it has set out for itself.

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