**EQUALITY OF EDUCATION FUNDING**

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Millions of India’s youth today can barely read and write with fluency, leave alone contribute to the advancement of human knowledge. Yet another generation’s potential has been wasted. The blame for this must go to government school system which has failed in most parts of the country.

The system is almost totally corrupt – from the top downwards – with teacher posts and transfers being sold. Many government school teachers are inevitably incompetent as a result and a good number of them do not even attend schools, particularly in villages and remote areas. School quality is pathetic: Himachal Pradesh and Tamil Nadu children undertook the PISA test in 2009 and came out at the bottom of the world.

The government also has a heavily skewed and iniquitous school funding model. It massively subsidises a few chosen high-quality schools in big cities but funding is meagre for the majority of the schools – with most of it being siphoned off on the way. Government school infrastructure is therefore in shambles. And there is absolutely no government funding for such low-cost schools – the poor are entirely on their own, which defeats the entire point of having government involvement in education.

The poorest parents are therefore most affected. Fortunately, India’s private sector has been running a superb rear-guard action to educate our children. Hundreds of thousands of entrepreneurs have created a network of low-cost for-profit schools in villages, towns and cities. Parents, particularly from the poorest strata of society, send their children to these schools since the government system is not up to the mark.

As a result, the poor parents have switched en-masse to private for-profit schools where fees are often as low as Rs 200 per month. An example is the Presidency School in Ulubari, Guwahati. Presidency is located in a ramshackle four-storeyed building with narrow, dark stairs and tiny rooms that are divided into multiple classrooms by flimsy wooden partitions. Close by is the government’s Ulubari Higher Secondary School with its large buildings, playground and free education. But many parents are choosing to spend Rs.600 per month in fees to send their children to the Presidency, instead.

These parents are not stupid. They know that each day their child misses out on good education, its future becomes more bleak. Education is a truly urgent matter for these parents and they pick the best that India has to offer, namely these ramshackle private schools. Proudly written in chalk on a blackboard behind the principal's desk are the Presidency School’s HSLC board exam results. All 56 students who appeared since 2013 have passed – over 90 per cent of them in the first division, many with “letter” marks.

The fact is that instead of supporting these for-profit schools, government functionaries demand bribes from the schools. Data are clear that students in such low cost for-profit private schools achieve, on average, higher educational outcomes than students in comparable government schools. The owners of these schools are focused on delivering high quality results so they can retain the custom of parents who will shift their child in the blink of an eye to a competing school if they find any reasons to be dissatisfied.

Around a third of India’s children now attend such schools. This is a huge success story that must be celebrated. Just imagine the wonders such schools could achieve if, instead of demanding bribes from them and harassing them every day, the government actually funded them.

Sadly, some ivory tower opponents of private enterprise in education claim that such schools “exploit” poor parents. That is absurd. No one can possibly become rich with such low fees. The fact is that government schools cost taxpayers up to twenty times what these low-cost private schools charge. And much of the government education expenditure is stolen by its Ministers and functionaries.

**On behalf of these parents** from the lowest strata of society, we demand the following from the Modi government:

First, that the government formally recognise the immense work these for-profit schools have put into the education sector and the proposed policy to stop such schools be scrapped.

Second, we demand that the government financially support the children who are attending these schools. We would like vouchers to be issued to parents based on their income level, so they can choose to send their child to any school of their choice. For this to be made operational, all schools including government schools must charge the true fee that reflects full costs including cost of land and infrastructure. Thereafter, poor parents would use these vouchers as part of the fee. When poor parents are funded to choose their child’s school and schools compete for this funding through better delivery of outcomes, a virtuous cycle will arise in which school quality keeps improving.