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Improving Learning in India's Private Schools: How to Do It?

PRESS RELEASE

New Delhi (Tuesday, October 6, 2020): The National Council of Applied Economic Research (NCAER) and Central Square Foundation (CSF) jointly organised a webinar on the rapidly growing private school sector in India and ways of improving learning outcomes for a large section of India's school-going children. Findings from CSF and Omidyar Network India's (ONI) 'State of the Sector Report on Private Schools in India' were presented by the CSF Founder and Chairman **Ashish Dhawan**, with keynote remarks by Founding Chairman of Nexus for Good and Former Secretary of School Education, **Anil Swarup**, to contextualise the issue. A **distinguished panel** comprising **Karthik Muralidharan**, Non-resident Senior Fellow at NCAER and Professor, University of California San Diego, and **Farzana Afridi**, Associate Professor at Indian Statistical Institute, New Delhi, discussed pathways to improve learning levels in private schools in India. The webinar was moderated by NCAER Director General **Shekhar Shah**.

Nearly half of India's school-going children, some 120 million, attend private schools. While private schooling dominates urban India's pedagogical landscape, it is also making steady inroads into rural India. Contrary to popular belief, private schools don't just cater to the elite. A tsunami of demand from low- and middle-income families across the country has resulted in 45% of private school students paying less than Rs 500 in monthly fees, expecting learning outcomes in private schools to be better than their government counterparts.

However, evidence suggests that the learning gap between private and government schools is narrow. Although almost three out of four parents believe their children will attain improved learning outcomes in private schools, the Annual Status of Education Report 2018 shows that as many as 35% of Standard 5 students enrolled in rural private schools cannot read a basic, Standard 2 level text. The Coronavirus pandemic has worsened the situation, with low-fee private schools being forced to either close down or try to adapt to new teaching methods for which they are unprepared.

While presenting the results from the report, CSF Founder and Chairman Ashish Dhawan commented, "Parents from low- and middle-income backgrounds are increasingly sending their children to private schools because they believe these schools provide a better learning environment. We need to ensure that parents do not settle for anything less than

quality education by empowering them with the means to choose the best schools for their children. It's critical to institute a system that will give parents information based on key-stage assessments at Grades 3, 5, and 8, as the new National Education Policy suggests. Parents can use this information to compare school quality and make informed school choices.

Delivering his keynote address, Mr Anil Swarup said, "If we want to reap the benefits of India's demographic dividend, we need to ensure that each and every child receives quality education regardless of whether she attends a public or private school. Improved learning outcomes will help the child improve her life outcomes, and subsequently, positively impact the nation's economy."

Ratifying the inferences in the study, panellist Karthik Muralidharan pointed out that, "It is imperative for education policy in India to account for the very large prevalence of private school providers. In particular, education policy should aim to support high-quality education for every student in India regardless of whether the student is enrolled in a public or a private school. This will require a nuanced approach to regulation of private schools."

India's new National Education Policy 2020 recognises the imperative for reforming India's private schools to improve learning outcomes. CSF, in partnership with Omidyar Network India, recently released a State of the Sector Report on Private Schools in India. The report details the size of the private school sector, highlights the challenges faced by it, and outlines potential reforms to ensure improved learning outcomes for students.

Key points emerging from the presentation on CSF's State of the Sector Report on Private Schools in India

Parents invest in private school education in the hope of achieving higher learning outcomes for their children, but the absence of a standard metric makes it difficult to ascertain both the actual learning attainments of the students as well as the quality of a school vis-à-vis other schools charging similar fees. While Grade 10 and 12 board exam pass percentages are sometimes used as a school learning marker, over 60% of India's private schools end at Grades 5 or 8 and do not offer these exams. Without parents being given measures for learning, schools also become less likely to focus on learning-focused improvements, and more likely to spend on changes that may not lead to much improvement in learning—like computer labs, or marketing that proclaims English medium instruction.

At the same time, inputs for education like land, infrastructure, and salaries operate under a regulatory structure that is non-contextual. Much of this prescribes standards that are difficult to meet for low-fee and under-resourced schools.

The study recognises the challenges and delineates the following reform agenda for the private school sector:

- Create a universal learning indicator to enable parents to compare learning performance across schools and make informed decisions;
- Build system capacity for pragmatic accreditation framework factoring in constraints faced by low-fee schools while focusing on learning outcomes and child safety;
- Support creation of an independent regulatory agency for the private school sector as suggested in NEP;
- Create ways to attract private sector investment and facilitate easy access to credit for schools; and

- Review RTE Section 12(1)(c), which mandates 25% reservations for underprivileged children to ensure more robust targeting and fee structures.

About NCAER | The National Council of Applied Economic Research

Established in 1956, NCAER is India's oldest and largest independent, non-profit, economic policy research institute. NCAER's work cuts across many sectors, including growth, macro, trade, infrastructure, logistics, labour, urban, agriculture and rural development, human development, poverty, and consumers. The focus of NCAER's work is on generating and analysing empirical evidence to support and inform policy choices. It is also one of a handful of think tanks globally that combine rigorous analytical and modelling capacity with deep data collection capabilities, especially for household surveys. More on NCAER is available on www.ncaer.org.

About Central Square Foundation

Central Square Foundation (CSF) is a non-profit organization working towards ensuring quality school education for all children in India. Since 2012, CSF has partnered with the government, private sector, non-profit organizations, and other ecosystem stakeholders to improve the learning outcomes of children, especially from low-income communities. CSF is driven by its mission to enable the school education system to adopt solutions that are scalable, sustainable, and effective, so that all children get equal access to opportunities needed for leading a better life. More on CSF is available on www.centralsquarefoundation.org.

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