

# Issue

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# Brief

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# Public Perceptions on Education Provision: The Case for Reforming India's Unequal School System

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## Abstract

According to the *2020/21 Global Education Monitoring Report*, India has the weakest public perception of the government as the primary provider of school education.<sup>a</sup> This issue brief analyses what such low public support for government education provision indicates and discusses the implications in terms of educational equity. It highlights how the hierarchical Indian education system, in which a family's ability to pay decides the course of a child's educational pathway, is in violation of the Right to Education Act, 2009. As such, the brief argues for disintegrating the divided schooling system, and the necessity of reaffirming the government as the primary provider of school education.

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<sup>a</sup> The figure on public perception is based on a survey conducted in 35 countries. The wider report is more global in nature covering over 160 countries.

The 2021/2 *Global Education Monitoring Report: Non-state Actors in Education: Who Chooses? Who Loses?* (hereafter, the GEM report), published by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, focuses on the role of a wide range of private, non-governmental providers and funders of education, and related support services (such as textbook publications, school lunches, transport and technology).<sup>1</sup> The report highlights the expansion of non-state actors—private corporations, philanthropic foundations, NGOs, civil society, and faith-based organisations—as they increasingly participate in and influence nearly all aspects of education. This comprehensive report is particularly pertinent to India, which has a substantial number of non-state actors in its education sector and about 40 percent of students in private schools.<sup>2</sup> Analysing the GEM report in the context of India’s education sector offers key insights amid the country’s continued efforts to provide high quality, equitable education to millions of children. This issue brief assesses one specific data point from the report pertaining to the public perception of the responsibility to provide school education, and what this implies for the state of education in India.

The GEM report main committee appoints several sub-committees to provide background information in the preparation of the study. One such sub-committee was assigned the task of analysing the 2016 International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) from its ‘role of government’ module, which maintains a global database on public attitudes towards education policy.<sup>3</sup> The objective of this particular sub-committee was to provide global insights on the levels of support for public education. To achieve this objective, sub-committee members utilised ISSP data that was collected and analysed from 48,720 respondents across 35 countries, which also consisted of 10 middle-income countries (including India). Each participating country was stipulated to provide data through questionnaires and interviews with at least 1,000 respondents from a random sample of the adult population. The exact question on education provision posed to these participants was: ‘Who do you think should primarily provide for school education of children?’ The respondents were presented with six options to choose from: (1) government; (2) private companies/for-profit organisations; (3) non-profit organisations/charities/cooperatives; (4) Religious organisations; (5) family, relatives, or friends; and (6) ‘can’t choose,’ which was treated as a missing value. The values assigned by the respondents to this question were calculated statistically to assess public perception on school education provision.

Overall, 89 percent of adult respondents answered that the primary responsibility for providing school education rested with governments. A mere 6 percent chose the ‘family, relatives, or friends’ option, with the remaining 5 percent choosing one of the other options. As such, the survey suggested that, overall, the participants believed that education provision is the government’s responsibility.

However, this was not the case in India, where data was collected from 1,508 adult respondents across various states.<sup>4</sup> Their educational background varied from those without any formal education to professionals with postgraduate degrees. The respondents’ monthly incomes ranged from less than INR 3,000 to INR 100,000 per month, with almost 57 percent earning in the range of INR 6,000 to INR 20,000 every month. Only 46.7 percent of the Indian respondents chose ‘government’ in response to the question on who should primarily provide school education for children, making India the country with the lowest support for this option—and the only nation with support below 50 percent among the 35 countries surveyed on this option. Overall, 40 percent of the Indian respondents chose non-governmental providers, comprising private companies/for-profit organisations (19.6 percent), non-profit organisations (15.1 percent), and religious organisations (5 percent). The support for ‘private companies/for-profit organisations’ was the highest among the 35 countries. The remaining 13.6 percent chose ‘family, relatives, or friends,’ which can also be considered as a private form of education provision.

With educational challenges pertaining to quality and equity proving persistently difficult to overcome, several studies are exploring the role of social and cultural beliefs and ideologies as barriers to progress.<sup>5</sup> Such studies have shown how perceptions based on beliefs, opinions, attitudes, values, norms, and other such ideological factors shape stakeholders’ actions and the resulting outcomes. As such, it is pertinent to unpack the perception Indian respondents have for the public provision of school education. Such explorations could provide opportunities to deliberate on and discuss the linkages (or the lack thereof) between data and their wider implications. For example, figures in the Annual Status of Education Reports (ASER) on learning levels have helped explore educational quality challenges despite increasing rates of student enrolment.<sup>6</sup> National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) figures on private tutoring have helped investigate why these rates differ across states and how they implicate mainstream education.<sup>7</sup>

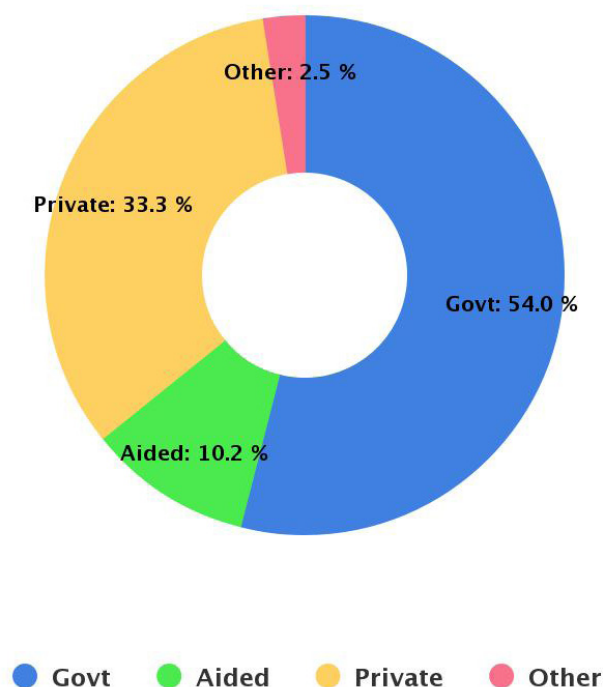
Although the number of respondents opting for the government as the primary education provider in the GEM report is just one numerical output (unlike the comprehensive ASER and NSSO reports), exploring it could provide useful insights on why India ranked the lowest among the 35 countries sampled on the public perception of the government as the primary provider of school education. The cross-national, comparative nature of this numerical output provides a useful reference point for a more contextualised discussion about India. Therefore, with the primary objective of understanding the reasons for the low support for government-provided school education in the country, this issue brief seeks to answer the most fundamental questions: What does the low support for public provision of education indicate, and what does this translate to in terms of providing children with equitable, quality education?

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# The Indian School Education Context

The contextual exploration of the questions on the low support for public provision of education necessitates a thorough understanding of the key characteristics of the Indian school education system. School education in India is a massive enterprise. As of 2021–22, India has a school student population of about 265 million.<sup>8</sup> There are nearly 1.5 million schools, of which 74 percent are in the government and government-aided category, and 26 percent are in the private sector.<sup>9</sup> However, a disproportionately higher number of students (35 percent) are enrolled in educational institutions in the private sector (see Figure 1).<sup>10</sup> In urban regions, more than half of the student population in the compulsory years of schooling (up to Class 8) are in private schools. The overall percentage of student enrolments in private schools grew exponentially from 3.4 percent in 1978 to 34.8 percent in 2017.<sup>11</sup>

**Figure 1: Student Enrolments in Government, Private, and Aided Schools**



Source: UDISE (2022) dashboard<sup>12</sup>

# The Indian School Education Context

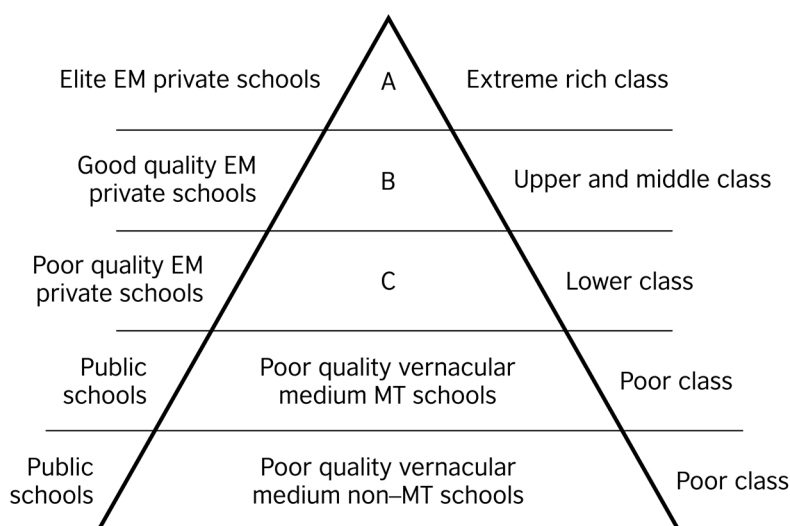
## **A sharply divided schooling system**

The problematic aspect of the high percentage of students enrolled in private schools is that it translates to ‘private’ (meaning personal) funding of a child’s schooling. There are a wide range of private schools providing schooling to children from various income groups. This diverse spectrum of private schools, ranging from high fee-paying to low fee-paying ones, leads to a highly divided private school sector. Towards the bottom end of this spectrum are schools that charge a monthly fee of around or below INR 500, while at the higher end are elite private schools that charge around INR 100,000.<sup>13</sup> In between these two ends, are a wide range of private schools with varying fee structures.

The government school sector is also diverse and includes schools run either by the central or state governments or by other government bodies, such as municipal corporations or village councils. Furthermore, there are also hybrid government-aided schools, which are privately managed but are partially funded by the government. While this is an oversimplified classification of schools and disguises other complexities and aspects of categorisation (such as the medium of instruction, examination boards, and sub-categories of school management), it serves the purpose of this brief to discuss the equity implications of the diversity in school education provision.

Research over the decades has highlighted that the diversity in school education is associated with a hierarchical division of schools.<sup>14</sup> While there are several ways to diagrammatically depict this division in schools, scholar Ajit Mohanty’s<sup>15</sup> representation (see Figure 2) is based on students’ socioeconomic status and is insightful of India’s unequal schooling system.

**Figure 2: Hierarchical Division of Schools**



*Note: EM stands for English medium schools, MT stands for ‘mother tongue’ schools.*

*Source: Mohanty<sup>16</sup>*

Such divisions lead to a corresponding fragmentation in the student population. The household’s affordability decides the child’s position within the hierarchical schooling structure. This position—or in other words, the type of schooling provision—has been proven to have a direct bearing on the quality of education a child in India receives.<sup>17</sup> As such, the child’s socioeconomic status ends up being a decisive factor in determining their educational experiences, and is likely to impact the child’s higher education and employment outcomes as well. A hierarchical, unequal schooling structure does not provide students with a level playing field and potentially leads to unequal educational and employment outcomes for the segmented student population.



## **The proliferation of low-fee private schools**

The associations between household income, type of school, education quality, and the resultant impact on a child's future necessitate a closer look at the low-fee private schools that have proliferated since the early 1990s.<sup>18</sup> Forty percent of students enrolled in private-sector schools study in low-fee schools, which are also called 'budget schools' because of their low monthly fees (usually below or around INR 500).<sup>19</sup> These students predominantly hail from low-income families, and would have otherwise accessed government schools.<sup>20</sup> The extant academic literature on low-fee private schools evinces no consensus on the advantages or disadvantages of this category of schools<sup>21</sup>—proponents of such schools note its benefits, while opponents highlight its demerits and marginal benefits, if any.<sup>22</sup>

Despite these polarised views and the lack of concrete evidence of benefits outweighing the disadvantages, parental demand appears to favour enrolling their children in such schools.<sup>23</sup> This demand can be attributed to parents' perception that private schools, even low-fee ones, are more advantageous than the available government school options.<sup>24</sup> This suggests that these parents did not consider the government as the sole provider of school education for their children, even though there is little information on the long-term advantages of attending low-fee private schools in terms of higher education and employment opportunities for the children.

Many in the middle-income groups and most of those from the affluent, high-income sections have already switched to private schools, indicating that these population sections also do not rely on the government as the primary provider of school education for their children.<sup>25</sup>

The reduced role of the government as the main provider of school education in India is in stark contrast with most of the other countries that comprised the data set of the 2016 ISSP. In the case of India, the widespread existence and operation of various schooling options could be considered as tacit acceptance of private entities and organisations as providers of schooling. A corollary of this statement is that there is fundamental acceptance of the government as not being the main provider of school education.

# Towards Reforming India's Unequal Schooling System

India's divided schooling system and the proliferation of low-fee private schools is the context under which the low support for the public provision of education must be considered, discussed, and examined further. The most pertinent point of discussion is the fact that the school a child attends depend on their family's socioeconomic status. Arguably, this fact per se may not be a problem if the overall education system is not hierarchically structured. If a child has access to quality education that gives them a fair chance to a life of dignity irrespective of the school they attend, societal inequalities—indeed one of the reasons for the inequalities in the education system—may not be perpetuated. However, as more types of schools continue to come into existence, there will likely be a further increase in the divisions in the education system.

Such a hierarchical education system and the resulting segmented student population imply that not all children receive equal treatment. This is in direct violation of a child's constitutional rights. It also violates the 2009 Right to Education Act, which guarantees every child the right to education and stipulates that the education must be of a satisfactory and equitable quality.<sup>26</sup> However, in reality, millions of children fail to get what they rightfully deserve—access to quality education. Furthermore, when parents choose schooling alternatives that require drawing from their family's limited or scarce resources, they are essentially seeking recourse from the private sector rather than holding the government accountable for not providing quality education to their children. The accountability that they can then expect or seek in return is likely to depend on the fees they pay. In other words, the quality of education children receive is contingent on their family's ability to pay. Why this is the case—especially when the constitution has established a child's socioeconomic status should not be a determining factor in their access to education—requires addressing important questions about educational and wider societal inequalities. However, such questions are rarely asked, let alone addressed, arguably because of Indians' sociocultural acceptance of inequalities of all kinds. The concomitant acceptance of educational inequalities is accompanied by the acceptance of the growth and expansion of private, for-profit organisations in the provision of a public good such as education.

Against this scenario and in the context of the unequal education system, the low support for government provision of school education, as evidenced in the background paper for the current GEM report, presents an opportunity to deliberate on the ways in which deep-rooted beliefs about inequalities can


# Towards Reforming India's Unequal Schooling System

be uncovered, challenged, and changed. While it may be idealistic—and even unrealistic—to aim for an equal education system, it should not impact the ability and goal of providing children with an equal educational opportunity. With educational inequalities now making inroads in countries with strong and equitable education systems (for example, the UK, Netherlands, Belgium, Spain) due to the emergence of private providers,<sup>27</sup> India will require a whole-of-system approach to tackle this issue. This translates to policy-level transformations with specific measures to plan, finance, and implement systems to ensure that the school education that a child receives is truly meaningful in terms of achieving the stipulated learning outcomes.

Quality education should not be predominantly the prerogative of those who can afford it. While parents who can afford to send their children to high-fee schools may continue to do so, the children of those who lack the ability to do so should not be deprived of meaningful opportunities. In other words, while the upper bar may continue to rise, the lower bar should not get lower. It is crucial that more concentrated efforts are made to raise the lower bar, well above the mere focus on basic literacy and numeracy, to provide a more meaningful education. Such an education will enable students to develop into adults that can earn a decent income and provide opportunities to facilitate a rise out of poverty. Furthermore, it will help develop critical thinking abilities such that they may begin to recognise and fight any kind of inequality. A truly equitable education system will ensure that no matter how high the upper bar gets, there will be a minimum threshold below which the lower bar does not fall, thus enabling every child to a life of dignity.

“If a child has access to quality education that gives them a fair chance to a life of dignity irrespective of the school they attend, societal inequalities—indeed one of the reasons for the inequalities in the education system—may not be perpetuated.”

# Conclusion

Irrespective of the diversity in school education provision, the education that a child receives needs to fulfil the humanistic, social, and economic aims of education. This alone can ensure that both individual and social benefits of education are realised to their fullest potential. In addition to policy action, this will require an ideological shift that challenges the notions of inequalities deeply inscribed in the common psyche of Indians. Such a shift should both begin with and result in critical questions around why Indian children are not treated equally. This may bring about a change in public perceptions that if all children are to be treated equally, the way forward is to entrust the government as the primary provider of school education. 

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