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EDUCATION REFORMS

How the Andhra Pradesh government is overhauling school education ecosystem

Reforms include changing the medium of instruction, revamping infrastructure, and updating curricula

SREENIVAS JANYALA
VIJAYAWADA, FEBRUARY 23

THE ANDHRA Pradesh government, under the leadership of Chief Minister Y S Jagan Mohan Reddy and Education Minister Audimulapu Suresh, is undertaking sweeping school-level education reforms in the state that are set to be unveiled on March 1.

There are several pillars to the new strategy adopted by the state government. These include changing the medium of instruction from Telugu to English (and training teachers, not just students, for this purpose), significantly changing the academic curricula in consultation with several leading international universities, reducing the monetary burden of schooling by providing free school supplies (such as books and uniforms) to students, upgrading the mid-day meal menu to make it more nutritious, revamping the school-level infrastructure such as proper classroom furniture, clean running water, toilets etc, and lastly establishment of skill development centres across the states.

The breath-takingly wide scope of reforms — changes will affect over 62,000 schools across the state, impacting over 80 lakh students — is matched by the ambition that is driving the change.

"The reforms programme aims at transforming government schools into vibrant and competitive institutions. The goal is to meet the requirement of what the fast-changing technology in the world expects from youth ten years from now," Education Minister Suresh told *The Indian Express*.

The biggest change by far is the change in the medium of education. That's because it affects not just the new students but also requires helping transition existing students to the use of the English language. Moreover, any change on this count has to start with teachers who need to be equipped first.

As such, a massive exercise to train nearly 1 lakh teachers — so that they are capable of instructing in English — is already underway. Close to 2,700 instructors are undertaking the training that is set to be completed by the end of February. This training will extend all the way down to the village-level schools.

The second and equally important aspect is to prepare existing students to adjust to


 One of the renovated government schools in Andhra Pradesh. *Express*
SWEEPING REFORMS

- Coverage includes 39,495 Primary schools, 9,597 Upper Primary schools, and 12,664 High schools
- Over 80 lakh students (including private schools) covered
- 6 Lakh students appearing for Class X board exams in 2019-20
- In 2018-19, the Pass percentage in Class X board exams was 94.88%
- 6.25 lakh students appearing for Class XII board exams in 2019-20
- In 2018-19, the Pass percentage in Class XII board exams was 72%

the English medium. To this end, starting March 1, a two-month bridge course will be held for students of classes IV and V. For students of classes I, II and III, a two-month intensive learning course will be conducted to

initiate them into English medium. The training to the students will be provided in residential schools at the Mandal level and students will be provided food and lodging during this period. Moreover, the training will be provided through digital classrooms, educational movies and videos. The idea is to acclimatise students to the English medium and ensure that students who have till now studied through Telugu medium are not left at a disadvantage.

The next big reform relates to improving and updating curricula. The officials in the state's Education Department said that they have consulted education experts in reputed international universities of Chicago, Oxford and Cambridge as well as taken assistance from educational institutions of Australia and Sri Lanka to improve the curricula and make it more suitable for the emerging realities of everyday life. As part of this change, students will be provided new textbooks and workbooks, and even parents will be involved so that they can properly guide their children.

Further, all these schools supplies (including books and uniforms) will be provided


The four pillars of change

THE MOST important shift is the medium of instruction being changed from Telugu to English; this has meant training both the existing teachers as well as the students. The second pillar is the improvement in curricula to best equip students for the emerging realities. Then there is a massive revamp of school infrastructure. Lastly, better facilities like more nutritious mid-day meals and free school supplies.

free to the students from the coming academic year. This move is not only aimed to reduce the monetary strain of education but also to transform schooling over the course of the next couple of years.

To this end, the government is also improving the existing school infrastructure. All schools will be provided with well-functioning basic amenities like furniture, clean drinking water, toilets etc. In the first phase — essentially spanning the first year — these changes will be implemented in close to 16,000 schools at the cost of Rs 3,500 crore. The next phase, spread over three years, will cover the rest of the schools in the state and it will require an expenditure of Rs 12,000 crore.

Another change, which is quite significant given India's poor record of child health, pertains to the implementation of the mid-day meal scheme. In particular, the menu is being made more nutritious. Apart from sambhar and rice, the new menu will include egg (five days a week), and a leafy vegetable curry, dal, and various other local delicacies such as *puli-hora* (tamarind rice), *khichdi*, *pongali* (rice mixed with milk and sugar) and chutney etc.

'To an extent, both supporters and critics of Aadhaar for service delivery are correct'

LAST WEEK, Karthik Muralidharan (Professor of Economics, University of California, San Diego) and two other researchers published their study on the use of Aadhaar-based biometric authentication (ABBA) in PDS delivery. Here are the edited excerpts of his replies to UDIT MISRA about the findings.

What are the main implications of the study for policy?

Overall, the results suggest that both the supporters and critics of ABBA for service delivery are correct to some extent. On the one hand leakage did fall once the government started reconciliation and used ABBA records to reduce disbursements. On the other hand, critics are also correct to worry about exclusion because 22-34% of the reduced disbursement corresponded to lower benefits and exclusion of some genuine beneficiaries.

In my opinion, it would be a mistake to imply that these results suggest that ABBA in PDS should be withdrawn for two reasons. First, leakage did fall meaningfully during reconciliation (and is also seen in the lower expected bribe to obtain a PDS license). Second, ABBA enables beneficiary-centred reforms like portability of benefits, which are increasingly important for migrant worker populations. Such a benefit would not be possible without transaction-level authentication and a back-end that can record when and where benefits have been collected. At the same time, it would be a mistake for the government to equate all reductions in disbursements or spending to a fall in leakage, since some of this led to reduced benefits and increased exclusion of highly vulnerable populations.

Given the mixed results, how would you recommend moving forward on using Aadhaar in service delivery in India?

There are three main recommendations. First, it would be better to focus on using biometric authentication technology to improve the beneficiary experience rather than fiscal savings per se. In PDS, examples include portability of benefits across the country, and potentially even a choice between receiving subsidised PDS grains and a DBT of the subsidy amount into their bank accounts. Such reforms empowering beneficiaries would not be possible without Aadhaar, and it would be


THE POLICY INTERVIEW
KARTHIK MURALIDHARAN
Professor, University of California, San Diego

both politically and ethically prudent to focus on such empowerment instead of fiscal savings per se. The fiscal savings will come over time, but focusing on these savings raises the risk of exclusion as seen in our data.

Second, it is essential to implement solutions for real-time measurement of beneficiary experiences to quickly detect problems of exclusion and address them promptly. One promising way of doing this may be to use outbound call-centres to make thousands of short calls each day. We tried this approach recently in Telangana and found that such improved measurement significantly raised the quality of service delivery.

Third, and more broadly, navigating such a complex issue requires more trust between the government and civil society. If critics are seen as wanting to shut down Aadhaar regardless of its benefits, the government may tune out legitimate concerns as being "motivated". On the other hand, the government cannot simply assert that all reduction in spending is leakage reduction, without acknowledging the possibility of exclusion. Complex policy issues require "public reasoning" based on independent and objective data to clarify facts and trade-offs. We hope that our study can contribute to such reasoning.

Full interview on indianexpress.com

West Bengal govt makes public bus services better, boosts incomes, and reduces subsidies

ATRI MITRA
KOLKATA, FEBRUARY 23

OVER THE past three financial years, the West Bengal government has been consistently reducing the subsidy payouts to the three transport corporations — namely the West Bengal Transport Corporation (WBTC), South Bengal State Transport Corporation (SBSTC) and North Bengal State Transport Corporation (NBSTC). In 2017-18, for instance, the annual subsidy (see table) bill towards these three entities was Rs 830 crore. But this bill has been coming down and in the current financial year, it is expected to fall below the Rs 700 crore level.

The trick was to reduce costs and increase the net incomes of the transport corporations. Narayan Swarup Nigam, the Principal Secretary to the Transport Department, said,


MORE INCOMES, LESS SUBSIDIES

	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20
Subsidy to transport corporations	₹830 cr	₹745 cr	<₹700 cr
No. of buses			
WBTC	1500	1675	1680
SBSTC	720	770	890
NBSTC	805	887	944

"during this economic year the price of diesel increased and the maintenance cost of the buses also increased. Despite that, we are tar-

getting to reduce the subsidy because we are now generating higher incomes". The government also plans to increase the number of buses. This, in turn, is expected to generate more revenue. In the process, the government plans to recruit at least 750 additional drivers and conductors. "The state Cabinet has already given the green signal for this," said Nigam.

A key change has been the introduction of electric buses. These reduce the overall bill as an electric bus runs at almost half the cost. As of now, around 80 electric buses are being used in and around Kolkata, and 70 other in Haldia, Asansol and Siliguri.

Another change that reduced costs and boosted incomes was the rationalise the number of workers employed per bus from over 10 to just 3.5 during the tenure of Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee.

Another decision that boosted incomes was the use of air-conditioned buses.

IN NUMBERS
STATES WITH THE HIGHEST AND LOWEST RETAIL INFLATION IN JANUARY, 2020

State	Retail Inflation Rate (in %)
Odisha	9.72
Uttar Pradesh	9.70
Telangana	9.55
West Bengal	8.81
Tamil Nadu	8.51
India Average	7.59
Karnataka	6.24
Gujarat	5.91
Bihar	5.86
Chhattisgarh	5.55
Delhi	4.69

Source: Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, Government of India

EFFECTIVE SCHEME IMPLEMENTATION

Himachal Pradesh: First to achieve 100% LPG coverage

GAGANDEEP SINGH DHILLON
SHIMLA, FEBRUARY 23

TWO YEARS ago, 38-year-old homemaker Sheela started using an LPG cylinder for cooking at her house in Garshi village near Shimla. Switching to a new fuel after years of cooking over firewood on a *chulha* (clay stove), Sheela said she was struck by the ease of use. "On a *chulha*, it sometimes took half an hour just to start the fire. Then you have to constantly manage the fire while cooking. One benefit of using LPG is that I can prepare tea instantly for my guests," she said.

Sheela is one of the two women in her village who were without an LPG connection until the government gave it to them for free.

On December 27, when the state government completed two years, it declared that Himachal Pradesh had become the first state in the country to have "100% LPG gas coverage".

"There's not a single home in the state now where firewood has to be burnt for cooking," said Union Home Minister Amit Shah while addressing a public rally in Shimla that day.

According to state residents and officials, these claims may not be entirely true, but they are not too far off the mark either. Following the implementation of the Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana, the state government launched its own Himachal Grihini Suidha Yojana in May 2018 to cover the remaining households. Except families having a pensioner, income taxpayer or any member employed with the government, board, corporation etc, all households of the state without an LPG connection were eligible.

"The first step of the programme was to promote wide publicity of the scheme," said Shiv Ram, Hamirpur District Controller, Food, Civil Supplies and Consumer Affairs (DFSC). His department was the nodal agency for the scheme's implementation.


Nirmal, a beneficiary of Himachal Grihini Suidha Yojana. *Express*

Unless there was no female member in the family, the connections were issued only to women. In many cases, officials issued kits to a cluster of villages from a focal point.

Till December 27, 2019, the department issued around 2.64 lakh such kits around the state which has a total population of 68.64 lakh (Census 2011). Some families were still left out, as is evident by a few thousand applications received after the deadline was extended. "But we managed to cover at least 99 per cent of the households. There are around 18 lakh ration cards in the state, and almost an equal number of LPG connections now," said Mandi DFSC L S Kanet.

Also, not all homemakers have completely switched to the new fuel. "Many people continue to use the *chulha* and prefer to use the cylinder occasionally or during emergencies. I myself prefer to use *chulha*," said O P Thakur, Pradhan of Kufri Gram Panchayat in Mandi. Sixty-year-old Kumja Devi of Bohag vil-

lage in Shimla, too, said that she only partially uses LPG. "*Dal-sabzi* and *chai* on the gas, and *roti* on the *chulha* — that's my usual practice. In winters, we have nearly cut-down on using LPG to save money and bask in the mud stove's warmth," she said, echoing the views of several other women who said that using the *chulha* serves the dual purpose of cooking and heating during winters.

While the "food cooked on *chulha* has a distinct flavour, LPG is time-saving, smoke-free, requires less effort," said 40-year-old Nirmala, another beneficiary from Shimla.

Department officials said that a major challenge before them was to scrutinise applications in order to sift out those applicants who already possessed a cylinder. "Many people wished to get another cylinder for using it commercially at their shops or for other reasons... We collected the Aadhaar numbers of not just the applicants but the entire family and conducted a de-duplication process," said Ram.