

Evidence on Public School Outcomes in India

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Abstract

This literature review focuses on evidence on public school outcomes in India and compares them with evidence on private school outcomes. It aims to explain the current state of topic and identify gaps in existing studies for potential future research on complex education systems to support schooling outcomes, building on the literature and regional examples.

An introduction delves into the reasons behind the need to review the literature on public vs private school outcomes, which is explored as a purposeful and multidirectional change process aiming to focus a specific agenda into practice and which affects an education system on several levels.

Scholars studying schooling outcomes in India have focused on either the importance of schooling outcomes or how well private schools perform in comparison to public schools. Although, other factors, such as socioeconomic stratification, cost benefits, child background are being studied outside of India to see how they affect schooling outcomes, this field is underdeveloped and fragmented. While we have some insightful studies and theoretical perspectives to guide our interventions, we also have gaps and blind spots. Based on these evidences, the article proposes a generic framework as well as a complementary set of questions and principles for action that can help policymakers design, analyze, and implement educational research processes and policies.

Introduction: Why study evidence on public vs. private school outcomes in India

Countries all over the world prefer to invest in human capital as part of their critical national development strategy. Recent evidence suggests that what is learned at school, rather than the completion of specific levels of education, matters for both individual earnings and national economic growth (Hanushek and Woessmann, 2008). If the effectiveness of private and public schools in imparting learning differs, the choice of private or public school has implications for lifetime earnings and national growth. Thus, in India and elsewhere, the relative effectiveness of private and public schools is a significant policy issue.

Since the 1990s, India's elementary school system has grown significantly in terms of the reach of the public school system due to policies on universalization of education. Alongside, post liberalization private schools (especially low-fee private schools or affordable private schools) have mushroomed drastically (Rahul Lahoti, Rahul Mukhopadhyay, EPW 2019: 51). Especially after 1993, we can clearly see a sharp rise in enrolments in the private institutions with 34.8% while the public school's enrolment settled at 52.2%. Even so, at present the public school system remains the primary provider of education, particularly for historically marginalized populations and underserved areas.

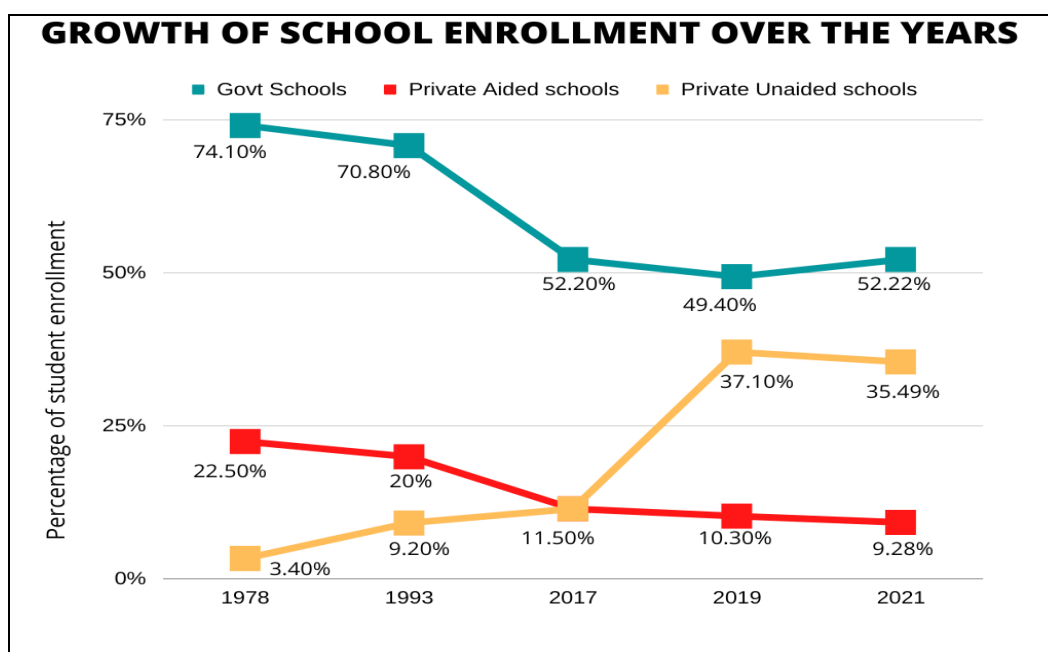
Against this backdrop has been the push for further privatization of education given the evidence on better outcomes in private schools. This has brought to the fore, the heated debate on education as a private vs public good that has now become even more pertinent.

In the attempt to universalize education, public schools have reached a majority of students. On the other hand it has been argued that there is much to be desired in access to education for vulnerable communities, particularly from resource-strapped geographies. The argument for private schools is that the state has failed in providing effective education - in its quality. The learning crisis is severe. So much so, the current policy push is to have more resource-efficient schools via school integration proposed in NEP 2020.

In this document, we examine the trend of rising share of private enrollment, understand the key motivating factors for parental choice of private schools - what are parents looking for while choosing a school for their children, and why private schools fall short in delivering what parents want- against factors underlying India's learning crisis. We present a review of literature from different sources, to synthesize a coherent view of what's happening and why. Many studies in India and abroad have elaborated on what factor is leading parents to choose private schools, how private schools are a boon to the Indian education system and so on. However, only a few studies have used them to explore evidence of schooling outcomes from public schools vs private schools. This report is a survey of previously published research on a topic. It gives a brief overview of current discourse on the topic.

Public Vs Private Schools: Trajectory of Enrollment

When examining the data on enrollment, multiple sources have analyzed the shift from public schools to private schools in India. The CSF-State of the sector report on private schools in India, (2019) states that in just 20 years the share of India's children going to government schools has dropped from 71% to 52% (CSF-State of the sector report on private schools in India, 2019). Examining a more recent time frame, Lahoti and Mukhopadhyay (EPW 2019: 51) note that between the years 2010-11 to 2014-15, an increase in the number of public schools stood at 16,376 (From 20 major states of India). Whereas, the increase of Private schools stood with a figure of 71,360 schools. Kingdon also shows that though the number of Government schools has increased, the overall enrollment has fallen by nearly 11.1 million students, meanwhile 16 million students have enrolled in Private schools in the given timeframe (Kingdon 2017).



Source: UDISE Data

Higher enrollment in private schools was known to be an urban phenomenon. But, over 73% of urban children attend private unaided schools whereas the number of rural children attending these schools has increased largely in the last two decades. In many states, more than 50% of children are in private schools but in these 6 states, the enrollment share is at its peak. (Tamil Nadu, Uttar Pradesh, Manipur, Kerala, Maharashtra, and Goa.) Overall, the enrolment share in private unaided schools has grown 33 times between the years 1978 and 2017, according to NCERT 1978 and U-DISE, 2019 (Central Square Foundation, Sector Report on Private Schools in India 2019).

It is to be noted that the current demand for private schools is not emerging because there aren't enough public schools, but instead from parents' aspirational needs. These are further examined in the document ahead. The immediate section next describes results from empirical studies on schooling outcomes.

Is the learning gain better in Private schools than in Government schools? - The myth, The truth, and The unknown.

Rather than completing different levels of education, learning gain at school is important for individual earnings and national economic growth (Hanushek and Woessmann, 2008). If there is a difference in learning gain in private or government schools, then choosing the private or government school has a significant effect on people's earnings and the nation's economy. That is why the question of better schooling outcomes is of great importance in India and elsewhere.

The choice of private education in comparison to government education suggests dissatisfaction with government schooling and the belief of superior results from private schools. There is limited understanding of the efficacy of private education in India. Parents send their children to private schools with the belief that private schools are of better quality than public schools. The important question is, 'Do these low-cost private schools produce higher learning outcomes efficiently?' 'Do the children in such schools out-perform their public school counterparts?' Let's try to have a more comprehensive discussion around the statement.

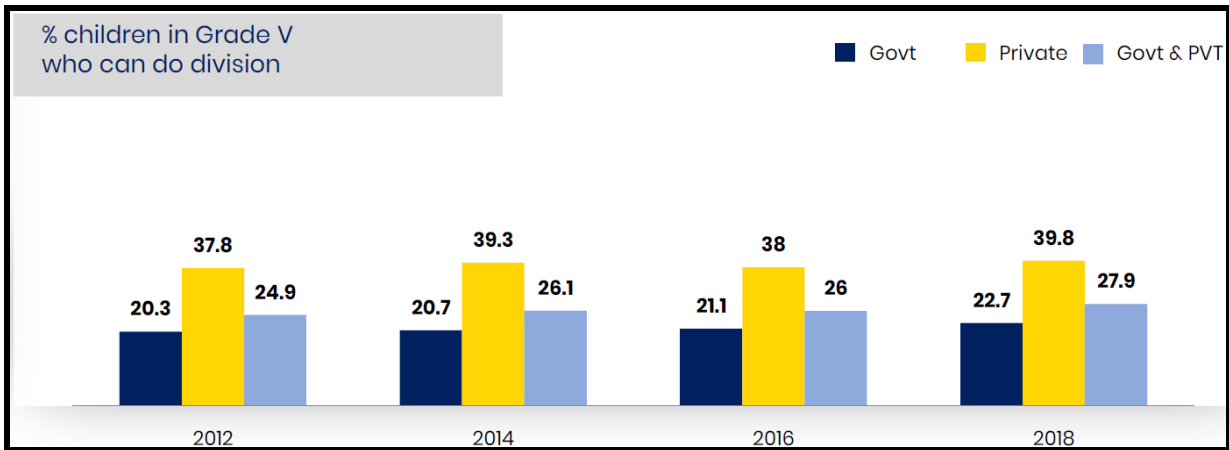
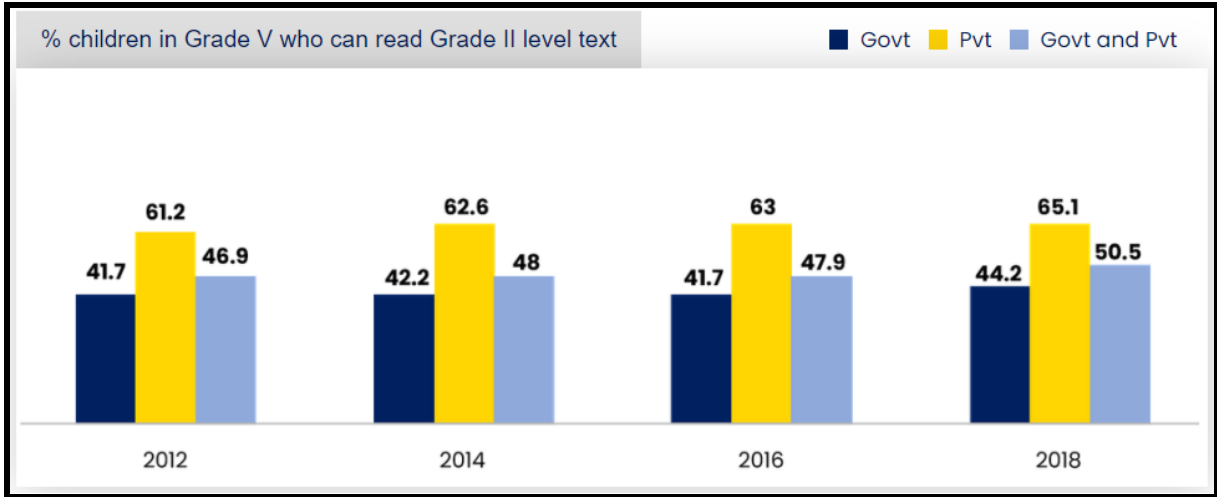
International Debate

Although the data on student learning outcomes in government and private schools has its limitations¹, a quick glance of the available data records higher performance on the part of students from private schools than from government schools. For assessment purposes, a lot of studies examine the data from the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER), National Achievement Survey (NAS), and Integrated Human Development Survey (IHDS) to comprehend different aspects of learning in private schools.

The Myth of higher performance in Private schools

ASER report suggests from 2006 to 2010, the percentage of children who could read a grade 2 level text in grade 5 in government schools fell slightly from 51.4% to 50.7%. Whereas, private schools show the percentage is rising from 60.8% to 64.2%. After 2010, Government schools further lowered 42.2% in 2014 but private schools maintained their consistency with 62.5% in 2014.

¹ Despite the prominent presence, data collection and quality of unaided private schools are questionable not just in the National Council of Educational Research and Training's (NCERT) National Achievement Surveys (NAS) of children's learning levels, but also in terms of collecting data on their teacher absence rates, salary levels, and student's fee levels (Kingdon, 2017). Most data sources of Private schools, from which the analysis and the interpretation have been made taken from the National Sample Survey Organization data for social consumption (NSSO), Unified district information system for Education (U-Dise), The Annual Status of Education Report (ASER), India Human development survey (IHDS), and the National achievement survey (NAS). Since there is no one comprehensive database on private schooling in the country (Kingdom, 2017), further research can be made on piecing together a comprehensive picture of private schooling and the reliability and comprehensiveness of the private school data.



Source: School-Education-in-India-Data-Trends-and-Policies, 2019, Central Square Foundation

In 2018, the difference between government and private schools in the proportion of children who could read a grade 2 level text in grade 5, was as high as 20.9%. The percentage of children who could do division in Grade 5, government schools showed 17% lower than Private schools. The foundational literacy level stayed stable but basic numeracy skills gradually declined over the decade. Grade 10 students of private schools scored below 50% on average in four subjects out of five in NAS assessment (NCERT 2017). So, the available ASER data records the higher performance of the students from private schools than in government schools. Similar results are shown by a study in Delhi slums (Tooley and Dixon, 2005). In another study, Tooley and Dixon (2003, 2006) discover that private school children, including those in un-recognised schools, outperform government school children in a survey conducted in urban and semi-urban areas of Hyderabad, south India. However, these studies do not fully control for the family's socioeconomic status of government and private schools.

However, in other studies, all types of schools have poor performance, but government schools with budgets are severely affected. On average, private schools, specifically Budget Private Schools (BPS) do marginally better than public schools (Rajagopalan and Agnihotri [2014](#)).

But, private schools in India generally have less qualified teachers than government schools and operate with far less capital. Private schools, on the other hand, operate in a market and thus have strong incentives to be competitive. Private schools hire teachers who do not always have a teaching certificate and pay them a fraction of what public schools do, but they hire more teachers to reduce class sizes. The heads have far greater control over teacher hiring and firing, allowing them to exercise tighter control, have higher attendance, and only retain effective teachers. (Nechyba, 2000, Peterson et al., 2003).

The advantages of private schools have been debunked in recent rounds of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and are mentioned in a World Bank report on the state of learning in school systems worldwide (OECD 2016: 126; World Bank 2018: 176) as well.

Closer examination of Data

If we consider the student's learning gain or in this context basic numeracy or literacy skill as an output, the input can be divided into child-level input, household input, and school-level input (French, R., & Kingdon, G. 2010).

1. Child's own input like a natural knack, motivation, and effort, maturity, and health contributes to their learning outcome.
2. Parents' ability and motivation towards education attainment, their income, occupation, education, and financial status of the house come under household input.
3. School quality inputs include infrastructure, resources, teacher quality, and management.

All these factors have a bearing on the child's learning outcomes. To isolate private school effects from other variables that might enable learning outcomes is challenging. For example, parents choosing private schools are usually of higher socioeconomic stature. Across the world in many countries socioeconomically advantaged students frequently enroll in schools that have greater control over the curriculum, assessments, and resource allocation, as well as more educational resources, fewer teacher shortages, better school climates, and higher academic standards (OECD 2012). While assessing the relationship between private schools and learning outcomes, these factors are measured imperfectly. Parents prioritizing their children's education will also encourage their children to work hard and complete their homework which may improve learning outcomes but cloud the private schools' effect.

The advantage of the ASER data set is the huge sample size..A total of 546,527 children in the age group 3 to 16 years were surveyed. These data sets also provide a clear picture of the quality of rural schooling. But the data set has control variables imparting on learning outcomes that might get removed from the data set. There are three such variables like (a) income data or socio-economic

status of the family, (b) data on the motivation, natural ability or prior achievement of the student, (c) the caste and religion of the child - could have been in the data set (French, R., & Kingdon, G. 2010).

With little evidence available on the private school effectiveness, ASER data have shown without accounting for any other variable private school children outperform the government school children. Few studies have been conducted to control the variables but find an advantage for private schools (e.g., Goyal & Pandey, 2009; Kingdon, 2007; Muralidharan & Kremer, 2006). The selection of a sample is also an issue in these survey data. The enrollment of children doesn't happen randomly. It reflects their parent's choices and values for education. This has an effect on the learning outcomes. Generally, the family with better income and better informed enroll their children in private schools (Goyal & Pandey, 2009).

Few studies have attempted to account for or correct the selection issue (Desai, Dubey, Vanneman, & Banerji, 2008; French & Kingdon, 2010; Goyal, 2009; Kingdon, 1996). All these studies have shown better outcomes for private schools after applying appropriate corrections for the selection issue. But the huge gap between private and government school learning outcomes has significantly reduced. All the studies leave room for improvement in terms of data, methods, and approaches.

A research study (Chudgar & Quin, 2012) used nationally representative data from rural and urban schools and investigated the relative performance of private versus public schools. They have compared children's data who are alike on several attributes to correct the selection issue. But that also comes with limitations of the available covariates. In the cost-effectiveness of private schools, the study did not make a comment since children at private schools do not perform differently than those in public schools. A possible reason for that could be that children in private schools, whose parents can afford higher fees, do better than children attending government schools. Disagreeing with most of the studies from India, Chudgar & Quin, 2012 encounter inadequate proof to claim that children in private schools outperform those in government schools.

The Unknown:

While many studies (Desai, Dubey, Vanneman, & Banerji, 2008; French & Kingdon, 2010; Goyal, 2009; Kingdon, 1996) have been done on the role of private schooling and its impact on learning outcomes, all the studies unable to control for unobservable characteristics. These characteristics may affect the learning outcomes and enrollment in private schools.

Private education gained huge popularity before substantial research can be done on the private school effect and student outcomes. Usually, parents who are sending their children to private schools are educated or prioritize education attainment. So, children performing well in private schools and its attribution to private school's quality only is challenging to prove.

It is very difficult for the parents who are prioritizing their children's learning to choose between private and government schools with insufficient information available on the school's effectiveness

on learning outcomes. In the absence of data on learning outcomes, parents rely on other proxy information like the quality of infrastructure, uniforms, discipline, or quantity of homework. Public and private schooling outcomes have consequences of socio-economic stratification between publicly and privately managed schools in India. In a few regions, the average socio-economic background of students who attend private schools is similar to that of students who attend public schools; in other regions, there is a great disparity in the socio-economic intake of public and private schools.

India's public and private schooling systems are separately second to China's size. But the standardized indicators for school quality and learning outcomes are necessary for the parents to make informed decisions. At least we hope to have a robust conversation on the benefits or limitations of privatization of education in India.

Key conditions influencing parents' schooling choice

The current demand for private schools is not emerging because there aren't enough public schools, but instead from parents' aspirational needs. Education is definitely seen as a step towards social mobility. Others have criticised the notion that parental choice would result in optimal school outcomes. However, a simplistic understanding of parental choice ignores how mechanisms of choice actually operate in the context of disadvantaged communities and, more importantly, has negative implications for educational equity in the context of an already stratified schooling system (Härmä 2011; Srivastava 2007).

The question arises here, Why and what factors are influencing parents to choose private schools over public schools? What factors do they consider to make an informed choice of the schools for their child? According to existing research, some important factors influencing parental school choice are supply (school options available), perception of educational quality, medium of instruction, affordability or cost, non-educational advantages, social barriers, the child's age and gender (Streuli et al 2011; Hill et al 2011; Härmä 2010). Furthermore, quality of education is an ambiguous category for parents, referring to various things such as school infrastructure, examination results, discipline, and, counter-intuitively, even higher pupil-teacher ratios (Hill et al 2011; Kaur 2017; Srivastava 2007).

School-admission criteria

Some schools are free to choose their own students by establishing their own admission criteria, such as students' academic level, academic and/or non-academic interests, or relationships with other family members who have previously attended or are currently attending the school. The application of these criteria may result in socioeconomic stratification unintentionally. If privately managed schools have more freedom than publicly managed schools to select their students based on academic achievement, then privately managed schools will enroll more socioeconomically advantaged students than publicly managed schools, because advantaged students perform better in all countries (OECD, 2010).

English as a Medium of Instruction

The medium of instruction—whether the school was English medium or not—did emerge as an important and valued feature, particularly for parents who sent their children to private schools. The study, however, discovers a significant disparity between parental reporting of English as the medium of instruction, the official medium of instruction as reported by schools, and the actual medium of instruction in schools. Parents reported that 39% of their children attend English medium schools. However, according to school officials, only 22% of children in private schools have English as their official medium of instruction. Furthermore, school observations revealed that only 10% of children attending private schools use English as a medium of instruction (Rahul Lahoti, Rahul Mukhopadhyay; School Choice in Rural India Perceptions and Realities in the Four States 2018).

However, it is difficult for English medium schools to keep their promises. The majority of these schools agreed that it was difficult to find qualified English teachers and, more broadly, good

teachers, and many parents send their children to tuition classes, although the schools, according to the teachers, provide a good education. (Ibid).

Characteristics of a Teacher

What motivates parents to send their children to public or private schools? What role do teacher characteristics such as educational and professional qualifications, and teaching experience in years play in parental decisions to send their children to private school or a public school? Parents believe that sending their children to a school with highly qualified teachers who have multiple years of teaching experience will help their children receive a high-quality education. But there is a mismatch between the importance parents place on teacher characteristics and the reality of teachers in schools (Rahul Lahoti, Rahul Mukhopadhyay 2018; OECD 2010). Children of parents who identify teacher characteristics as an important attribute, that is, who list it as one of the top three reasons for their school choice, do not necessarily attend schools with better teacher characteristics.

Parental Choice of Better Education and Marketing Techniques

Why do more affluent parents send their children to private schools than disadvantaged parents? One reason could be that parents believe these schools provide better education, a more conducive learning environment, more resources, and better policies and practices; and advantaged parents are more informed or aware of the differences in quality across schools. Private schools with fewer fees have a slightly higher enrolment share and as the fees start increasing the enrolments into these schools have declined to some extent. This trend is showing an inverse relationship between school fees and enrolments into these schools, which are believed to provide quality education to their children (CSF 2021).

Most importantly to attract parents to private schools, these corporate schools invest their time and money in marketing their products. They start their enrollment drives in the vicinity during the summer vacation itself. Their strategy to publicize is through Pamphlets, campaigning using public addresses, CCTVs, Early admissions, door-to-door visits, and follow-up through text messages, Sibling discounts, Computer education, Extra and co-curricular activities, weekly or daily tests, and better results in board examinations, etc.

Much of the expansion in the private school system has been driven by the proliferation of low-fee private schools, first in urban and peri-urban areas, and then in many other places, including rural India. As a result of such rapid and often inadequately regulated school expansion, parents have more options, but also inadequate quality information. Furthermore, it has been demonstrated that market-based solutions have not worked in countries such as the United States (Ravitch 2010, 2013), particularly in school systems already characterised by existing inequities (OECD 2016: 123–27).

Conclusion: Research on Public and Private Schools in India

Esther Duflo; James Berry; Shobhini Mukerji; Marc Shotland (2013) report the number of children attending primary schools has greatly expanded globally in recent decades, but learning levels have stayed obstinately low. Even while students go from one grade to the next, few of them actually achieve the required grade-level competencies. In comparison to the extensive literature in other countries, research on public and private schools in India is still in its infancy (Sonalde Desai, Amaresh Dubey, Reeve Vanneman, and Rukmini Banerji; Indian Policy Forum 2008-09). There is still little research on student performance in public and private schools, what is known indicates that kids from private schools perform better than those from public schools. Nonetheless, According to a recent report by the Central Square Foundation and the Omidyar Network, nearly half of the country's student population attends private schools. This may be due to the widespread public perception that private schools in India provide a higher quality of education than government schools. But the truth is quite different. According to the 2018 ASER Education Report, 35% of rural Indian private school students in grade five could not read a basic grade two-level paragraph. As Kingdon explains 'In India, private fee-charging schools are both loved and despised: loved in the sense that they are sought after by parents for their children's education, and despised in the sense that they are profiteering, greedy 'teaching shops'(Geeta Gandhi Kingdon 2019).

Researchers also examined the differences in learning outcomes between public and private schools. In most studies, private schools outperform public schools based solely on raw test scores. While there is a strong case to be made for reforming the public school system, it is important to note that the evidence on private schools comes mostly from studies (including this one) based on data that show correlation rather than causation between school type and outcomes. Any private school effect cannot be attributed to the school if students choose to attend. However, with lower per-student costs, private schools would still have a cost advantage (Goyal & Pandey 2009).

Any study on private education has its limitations depending on how well the choice of school is taken into account for. The ability to address this issue is dependent on the quality and nature of the data. There is a scarcity of data on developing countries; it is expensive to collect and is dependent on infrastructure that is not always prevalent.

There must be the belief that large systems can change, results can be delivered.² Overall, we need to start by believing that public systems can improve; and should improve. Education is a public good, it is the mandate of the secretary and minister as representatives of an elected govt and administration to deliver this. Also, any high performing education system in the world, is more high performing and less of private or outsourced models. Equity in society can only be ushered in through strong public education systems where regardless of one's background one can avail excellent education from

² A McKinsey report from 2007 points to three key elements: 1) getting the right people to become teachers; 2) developing them into effective instructors; and 3) ensuring that the system is able to deliver the best possible instruction for every child.

public schools. Right to a quality of life is linked to quality of education. Education is a basic higher level need that needs to be provided for by the public sector. It is central to better occupation and thus better living standards, thus impacting the quality of life of generations.

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