Right to Education: A bill to avoid

The recent Right to Education Bill starts from the laudable premise that it would make sense to harness the private sector in the project of making sure every Indian has access to a free education of reasonable quality. However, as designed, it could become an instrument for protecting failing government schools from competition from better private sector alternatives, and as such, may indeed end up hurting the poor. Here is why.

The bill reserves seats for the weaker sections of society in all private schools, which, we feel, may well be the most effective part of the bill. If the government does pay anywhere close to government school costs for these seats, this will be a tax only on the better schools, the ones that mainly cater to the middle classes or the rich. We say “tax” because the parents of the other students will be taxed with higher fees to make up for the lost revenues on government seats. However, the tax may be worth paying if it furthers the cause of broader access to quality education and to social justice. These schools, not least because they have parents that are able and willing to demand quality, offer a kind of education that the poor, mostly, have no access to. For the relatively small fraction of the poor children who will get into these schools (we hope that the seats will be allocated based on a free and fair lottery) this could represent an opportunity of a lifetime. However it would be important to be pro-active in making sure that the poor actually benefit from such schools—in particular given that poor children lack many of the advantages that their peers have (such as parental help and tutoring at home), they may end up as second class citizens in the schools. For that reason, instead of paying the schools a flat amount, it might make sense to base a large part of the compensation on the performance of these children in standardized tests, so that the school has an incentive to pay attention to them.

There are, however, an enormous number of private schools that are small, underequipped, and cater only to the poor. The bill requires all these private schools meet a certain set of infrastructure and teacher qualifications norms. They are unlikely to be able to meet them without help – which means they will either be shut down or have to pay hefty bribes to stay in business, making them much less affordable.

The fact that the poor are willing to pay to send their children to private schools that have worse infrastructure and less qualified teachers, is telling us something important about the disastrous performance of government schools. A number of careful evaluations have now found that low performing children learn more from a couple of hours a day with college students who have been given a week’s training by the NGO Pratham over a period of two months or so, than government teachers manage to teach them in a year.

If we had to take a guess, the problem with government schools is motivation---the World Absenteeism Survey found government teachers teaching less than 50% of the time they are meant to be teaching---and yet the entire bill has nothing to say about failing government schools. While the 2005 version of the bill talked about giving school management committees (which involve parents) control over salary payment to teachers, the current bill is silent on this. The current version talks about monitoring of schools by parents, but not about how to give the committee enough leverage that the teachers take the monitoring seriously.

The problem of private schools with inadequate facilities, and government schools with inadequate motivation, need to be dealt with jointly so that the poor can benefit from the resulting competition. Is there some way that schools with high verifiable performance that charge fees that are low enough to be generally affordable could be rewarded with better government-supported facilities regardless of
whether they are private or government? And in reverse, could poorly performing government schools be starved of promotions, salary increments, and capital funds until they shape up, and shut down if they fail to do so? Could well-performing private schools be allowed to avail of the facilities of government schools that do not attract students?

All of these rewards for performance, however, would be beside the point, if the abolition of all testing, as mooted in the bill, is implemented. We will simply not know which schools are doing their job well. While the idea of limiting testing in primary schools has its merits, the idea of eliminating all testing, and offering all students a social pass is a disastrous idea, that only avant-garde education theorists and under-performing teachers welcome. How will we know if teachers are doing their job? How will they identify the deficiencies in a child’s education before it is too late? This step is retrograde, to put it mildly, and is taking India through experiments the West abandoned long ago.

Moreover given that there will be greater reliance on private schools throughout the system, how are parents—who are often illiterate or semi-literate--supposed to find out whether these private schools are actually doing what they say they will do? Recent evidence from Pakistan (specifically Punjab) suggests that parents find it difficult to distinguish between good and bad private schools. When they were provided information about the performance of their child's schools (and that of other schools around) there was a substantial shake up in the market for private schools, with a number of the worst private schools shutting down.

The problem with testing, it is worth underscoring, is that it is often used punitively against children, both by the school and by parents. The response therefore needs to be to make testing less threatening, more about helping the child identify his or her own broad deficiencies and then fixing them, than about that dreaded report card day at the end of each term. Children and parents need to be persuaded that if a substantial fraction of the class fails to learn basic skills, the school deserves a significant part of the blame, and if the school does not respond, there will be consequences. The Right to Education Bill is an opportunity to broaden access to quality primary education in this country, but we have to act fast, and make the bill what it needs to be.