

Collective concerns about the World Bank funded Strengthening Teaching Learning and Results for States (STARS) project

To
Hartwig Schafer
Vice President, South Asia Region
World Bank

Dear Hartwig Schafer,

Subject: Postponement of World Bank loan to MHRD for STARS Project

The **Strengthening Teaching Learning and Results for States (STARS)** initiative comes at a critical juncture as India considers a new education policy against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic that has revealed the fault lines in India's education system. We the undersigned have deep concerns that **systemic inequities in India's education, as underscored by the pandemic, are not being addressed in the STARS Project**. There is an excessive focus on assessments and use of technology, ignoring many of the severe challenges faced by project states to strengthen the government school system and implement its statutory obligations under the Right to Education (RTE) Act. An **unsustainable reliance on non-state entities** to improve governance systems seems particularly misplaced as an approach to build state capacity. Instead, we suggest **measures that help to build a self-reliant, empowered equitable and innovative public education system**.

We strongly feel that the consultation with independent civil society has been inadequate. Our specific concerns can be clustered into two broad areas **(1) involvement of private entities paid for by taxpayer's funds** and **(2) measures within the government school system**.

Problematic involvement of private entities

1. **Similar interventions in the past have failed**. Global evidence of the [impact of school vouchers](#) or evaluation of specific interventions like the Liberia PSL Pilot (marred by increased dropout, exploitation of contract loopholes and less than optimum learning outcomes, as well as an international scandal of sexual abuse of minors by one of the operators), and the School Excellence programme' implemented by the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (shut down after failing to improve learning outcomes), are proof of such failures. These were cited as examples of success in a past version of the Project Information Document.
2. **The project conflates all forms of non-state actors into a single category and fails to provide safeguards for engagement of the private sector**. Participation must be not for-profit, in both theory and practice, particularly in view of the recent decision by [the International Finance Corporation to freeze investment in for-profit education](#).
3. It ignores evidence of large scale, independent assessments such as Annual Status of Education Report ([ASER](#)) or the World Bank's [WDR 2018](#) and [Baum \(2018\)](#) that clearly show that **private schools and Public-private partnerships (PPPs)** do not provide a better quality of education, but **benefit from sorting-effects**. Private schools are exclusionary for children with disability and from marginalized communities, as well as girls.

Problematic strategies aimed at improving government schools

1. While the **case for the project is based on the need to address poverty, discrimination, and inequality in India** it fails to spell out any pro-equity measures to address intergenerational social and economic barriers or the continued problem of out of school children. A clear strategy to address segregation, exclusion and inequality between various forms of schools in India, between social groups and along gender lines would be critical.

2. **Excessive focus on standardized assessments.** There is no lack of awareness among all concerned stakeholders that learning in India leaves room for improvement. Spending on expanding standardized testing in India, especially the engagement with PISA, will not change the quality of learning, while running the danger of ‘teaching to the test’.
3. **Assumptions underpinning ICT strategies are not supported by the evidence.** According to Government of India’s (UDISE) data, in 2016-17, 35.6% of India’s elementary schools lacked an electricity connection; only 36.8% secondary schools had a functional computer. Unless the project aims to massively invest in required infrastructure to address the digital divide, use of ICT for teacher training or in classrooms will be ineffective and exclusionary as has been starkly evident during the [COVID lockdown](#).

Suggestions:

The World Bank management and the Government of India, in consultation with the state governments, should **postpone the finalization of the loan and refocus the project** to address the urgent concerns above and incorporate the following suggestions:

- a) **Develop concrete plans for equity through ensuring universal secondary completion** (including out of school, child labourers, girls and migrant children) and **support inequality reducing measures** such as multi-lingual education, addressing caste based discrimination, promoting gender transformative and inclusive education and redressing the digital divide.
- b) **Reconsider the proposal for partnerships with non-state actors**, especially handing over of government schools, school vouchers, engagement of management firms and outsourcing of core education functions. If non-state actors are to be involved, ensure **state regulatory capacity to enforce compliance with adequate legal provisions and increase transparency as preconditions for any involvement**.
- c) **Adequately resource all schools to levels of Kendriya Vidyalayas and Navodaya Vidyalayas** to promote equity and social justice.
- d) **Prioritize the development of State capacity, for example strengthening DIETs and other academic bodies at the district and block levels.** Classroom-based assessment that directly benefits students should be strengthened, rather than funding India’s preparation for PISA. ICT-based teacher training has already been rolled out nationwide. Instead of building additional platforms, ensure that DIETs, BRCs and CRCs get the required infrastructure and resources, especially human resources, including qualified and motivated faculty.
- e) **Establish cross-level cooperation and foster mutual trust within the bureaucracy.** Some of the ideas in the project document are not amenable to the building of trust within the bureaucracy. For instance, if CRCs are meant to act as academic support structures, they cannot be simultaneously assigned the task of judging performance in an Ofsted-like manner, as suggested.
- f) **Empower, enable and trust teachers** to make autonomous pedagogic decisions and develop their own assessments instead of merely implementing externally “approved learning enhancement programs based on identified learning outcomes”.
- g) Build state and federal software ecosystems that use free and open-source software and avoid unsustainable reliance on tender-based “software products”. Reduce redundancies in data-gathering efforts through creative use of ICT to **free up time in schools so the teachers and administration can focus on the core task of improving education quality and equity**.
- h) Focus on **social accountability and social audits for transparency. Provide extensive training and outreach to strengthen the voice** of parents, School Management Committees and local self-governance structures (particularly in areas in the Schedule V of Indian constitution).

Given the seriousness of the concerns raised above, we the undersigned request you to postpone the decision and have a wider public consultation before finalizing the terms of the project in the best interest of children and teachers of India.

Copy to

Jaime Saavedra Chanduvi - Global Director (Education), World Bank

Junaid Kamal Ahmad- Country Director, World Bank, India

Ramesh Pokhriyal 'Nishank'- MHRD Minister

Anita Karwal- Secretary, Department of School Education & Literacy

Naveen Patnaik- Chief Minister, Odisha

Jai Ram Thakur- Chief Minister, Himachal Pradesh

Ashok Ghelot- Chief Minister, Rajasthan

Uddhav Thackeray- Chief Minister, Maharashtra

Pinarayi Vijayan - Chief Minister, Kerala

Shivraj Singh Chouhan- Chief Minister, Madhya Pradesh