

*ASER suggests it's time to relook government school concept*

The fact that learning outcomes have fallen dramatically—the national figure for the proportion of children in Standard V able to read Standard II level texts fell from 53.7% in 2010 to 48.2% in 2011—is the standout result of the latest Annual Status of Education Report (ASER). What has caused this is even more stunning—with Census 2011 pulling out teachers from schools, overall attendance levels are down, as are the levels of teaching. The fact that the BPL and caste census are yet to happen makes you worry a bit about future learning outcomes. Given the higher levels of teaching in private schools, the proportion of kids in private schools in rural areas rose from 18.7% in 2006 to 25.6% in 2011—only 22.6% of Standard III students in government schools in Rajasthan could read a Standard I text (down from 27.2% last year) compared to 53.2% for private schools (up from 50.3% in 2010). States like Tamil Nadu saw a 11.6 percentage point hike in the proportion of kids going to private schools between 2007 and 2011 while in Uttar Pradesh, 45.4% of rural kids went to private schools, up from 39.3% the year before.

Within the government school system, there is a big difference between kids who have tutors and those that don't. The proportion of Standard V kids who can read a Standard II text is 33.1% in government schools in Jharkhand where students don't have private tuition but 52.9% in the same schools for kids who have tutors. All of which makes you think about the efficacy of the existing model of government schools. Kerala, which has the highest learning outcomes of all states also has the highest proportion of kids in private schools (60.8%). Yet, in overall terms, Kerala households don't spend that much more on education—while 3.8% of all household expenses in rural Kerala are on education, the comparable figure for all-India is 2.9%; in urban areas, however, Kerala spends 4.4% according to the 2009-10 NSS survey versus 5.2% for all-India. The reason for this is that most private schools in Kerala are publicly funded.

Education-economist Lant Pritchett points out the rise in learning is very low. Instead of looking at learning levels for each year, Pritchett looks at them over a period of time—does a kid who can't read in Standard II learn to read by Standard V? Three out of four kids who came to Standard IV without knowing how to read progressed on to Standard V without learning how to read, he points out. Given how just 40% of private schools meet RTE norms for teacher-pupils and just 16-17% for availability of drinking water, Pratham calculates this means 40 million rural

kids could be out of school once RTE norms kick in—given the government will have to spend large sums to accommodate these kids, why not spend money to upgrade private schools? Perhaps even fund new private schools to replace government schools.