'OPEN' SCHOOL DATA: A TOOL FOR ENSURING ACCOUNTABILITY IN PUBLIC EDUCATION

ACCOUNTABILITY INITIATIVE

Accountability is critical to secure quality and efficiency in any public service delivery system. Maintaining accountability broadly requires two things to work in conjunction: a system of institutions designed in a manner that makes accountability possible, and an informed citizenry which can ask for the reasons behind lapses in service delivery and demand efficiency from service providers. India's public education system envisages such a model - where the public actively participates on accountability. 'Open' school data or official data on schools which is easily available to the public is one tool through which the public can be aware about the status and functioning of schools. We explain what 'open' school data means, how it can help make the public education system more accountable in India, and why it is not used frequently.

Why is data important for accountability?

For a public education system to be accountable towards citizen needs, there are some essential conditions that need to prevail. These include: the existence of legal mandates that encourage accountability, enforcement of these legal mandates, regular and relevant information or data on schools that can be easily accessed by the public, and a formal mechanism for grievance redressal in case of lapses. India's present public education system enables only some of these conditions.

Data or information is key in this situation because it can provide concrete evidence of how well the system is functioning and where it is weak. It can be used in several ways, and by different stakeholders in the education system for corrective action. One nature of usage of data by citizens, for instance, is to have an overall understanding of resources available in schools, profile of teachers, attendance rates etc. and then making school choices for their children based on that. The other kind of usage is when data or information acts as evidence for parents to make accountability demands to government authorities in case they observe poor quality learning outcomes or non-compliance of legal mandates by schools.
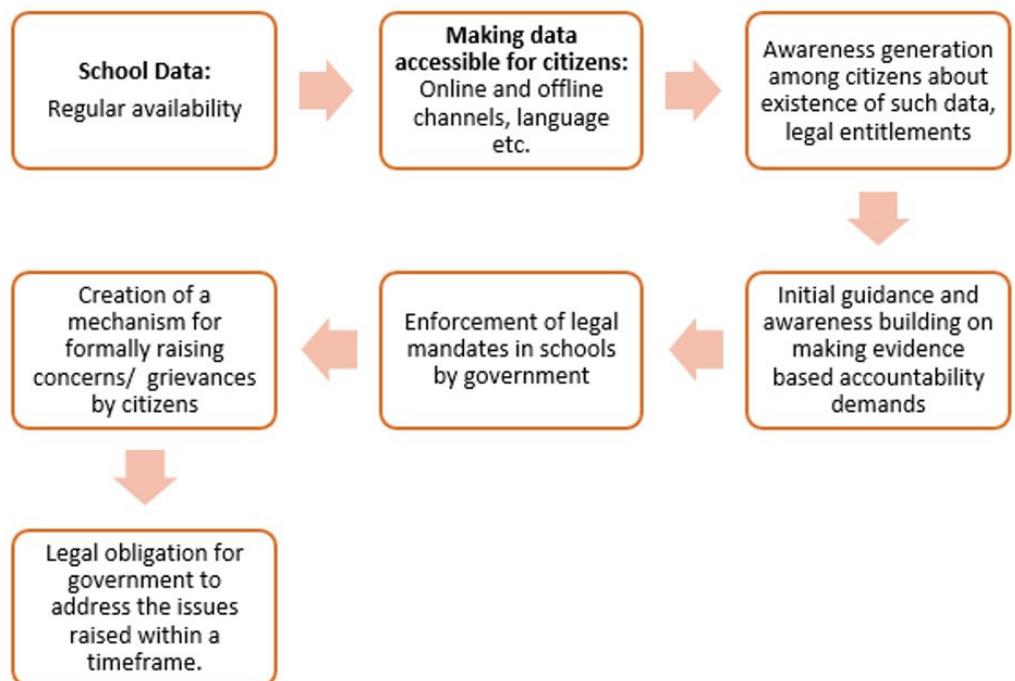

Figure 1: Essential Conditions for Effective Use of 'Open' School Data to Ensure Accountability in Public Education

School Data: Regular availability → Making data accessible for citizens: Online and offline channels, language etc. → Awareness generation among citizens about existence of such data, legal entitlements → Initial guidance and awareness building on making evidence based accountability demands → Enforcement of legal mandates in schools by government → Creation of a mechanism for formally raising concerns/ grievances by citizens → Legal obligation for government to address the issues raised within a timeframe.

What kind of 'open' school data is available in India?

In India, the only source of 'open' data on schools available is what is popularly known as U-DISE or 'Unified-District Information System of Education'. U-DISE is an electronic Management Information System (EMIS) that has information about all types of schools in the country. U-DISE has been designed and developed by the National Institute for Educational Planning and Administration (NIEPA) – a premier government institution tasked with capacity building and research in planning and management of education – under the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD). Under U-DISE, detailed information is collected from every school in India annually. **Some key indicators include school enrollment, teacher qualifications, available infrastructure facilities, incentives received by students, and expenditure of funds received by schools.**

Once the data is collected, and verified, a brief profile is generated for every school, known as the School Report Card (SRC). **A citizen can go to the U-DISE portal and access an SRC by just clicking on the relevant school name.** The other way of accessing school data is to put an online request and access information for all schools in database format. Apart from this, aggregated school level information is also available for individual districts, states and for the country as a whole, which can be easily downloaded from the portal.

Current usage of 'open' school data in India

U-DISE started in the early 1990s with the objective of assisting the government in education planning as an information database which could be updated annually. Since then it has been extensively used by the government at both national and sub-national levels in annual financial planning as well as to track the status of schools. **However, neither the government nor other stakeholders such as parents, community members, teachers and students currently use open school data as a tool for the purpose of ensuring accountability.**

For instance, parents are at the core of the government schooling system's accountability structure. Every elementary school in India is supposed to have a school management committee (SMC) consisting of parents, teachers and community members. The accountability of the school system is designed to be directly responsive to the SMC. **U-DISE data is envisioned to act as the foundation of any school-level decision making by the SMC.** In order to improve transparency and strengthen the reach of data, NIEPA sends out instructions to every state in India so that U-DISE school report cards are put up on school notice boards for public view. In addition, states are also instructed that SRCs are read out to local communities during SMC meetings. **Yet, due to the absence of many essential conditions on the ground and related challenges, usage of data in general and for making accountability demands, in particular by parents or general citizens, is extremely limited.**

Challenges in usage of 'open' school data by citizens

Some of the major challenges that impact the role of 'open' school data as a tool for ensuring accountability in India are described below.

- **Limited modes of access and language leads to limited reach:** Is 'open' school data really open to all? Even though the government puts U-DISE school data online for the public, it is not easy for a large section of parents or citizens to access this. More than 3/4th of government schools are still situated in rural areas with low internet penetration. Offline availability of SRCs is not always a reality in schools. Another challenge is that SRCs are available online only in English. This excludes parents who cannot comprehend information in English from accessing such data. This is in spite of a Right to Information Act, 2005 (RTI) mandate that data must be displayed at the local level, and be presented in local languages for it to be accessible to the public at large. Thus, school data cannot be considered 'open' in the true sense.

- **Lack of awareness about existence and potential usage of school data:** During a recent study conducted by the Accountability Initiative among parents of children attending government schools across three states, it was observed that more than 90% of them were not aware about U-DISE data. **Even among those who were aware, an understanding on its usefulness was missing.** Interviews with community members and parents also revealed that their knowledge about entitlements pertaining to Right to Education Act mandates for basic school facilities, rights and responsibilities of SMC members as per guidelines, and the right to access public information through the RTI Act, is considerably low. The government is yet to make concerted efforts on generating awareness among citizens on 'open' school data and its usage.

- **Issues related to the design of 'School Report Cards':** The present format of U-DISE SRCs caters to the government as the primary target audience. Currently, SRCs are extremely data heavy and loaded with indicators that are difficult to grasp for a citizen or parent. Thus, if a parent has to use this data, then the relevant information presented in a way that is understandable to them is missing. Incorporating visual representations in terms of graphs and pictures and presenting them in a simplified manner are desirable approaches. Also, as per the set format, data in an SRC is presented for a single year and it is not possible to review how the school has performed over the years from that report card. Getting this data requires extensive collation effort on the part of parents.

- **Lack of collective action:** A big challenge in using data for demanding accountability is the absence of collective voices, especially in rural areas, to demand corrective action. While the SMC platform exists, generally apart from the SMC chairperson, it has been observed that most parent members are not active participants in the SMC meetings. This means they are mostly uninvolved in decisions being taken about the school. As a result, the process of collective decision making or opinions being aggregated for a collective voice is rare.

- **Absence of a formal grievance redressal mechanism:** For school data to be used effectively by citizens for accountability, another related requirement is the capacity to get their voices heard. This is possible when a formal mechanism for raising such issues of concern with authorities who can decide on change exists. However, at present, a bottom-up grievance redressal mechanism is absent. In India, a large section of parents, especially in rural India, also require 'hand-holding' and guidance on how and what information can be used to demand better accountability at the local level, from school authorities. Usually there are no dedicated resource persons for dissemination of such knowledge. Thus, the accountability process breaks at each step- from implementation to policy decisions.

- **Absence of information on learning levels:** A school is accountable for pedagogical aspects and can be held responsible for students' skills, knowledge, behaviour, performance, and learning levels. However, U-DISE does not include indicators that reflect the learning levels of students. For instance, U-DISE can only shed light on school performance with the help of indicators such as drop-out rates, pass percentages, but not whether the student has properly learnt concepts and can apply them. Thus, it cannot be used as an information base to assess learning outcomes and thereby, to demand pedagogical accountability. This limitation affects the relevance of the data for parents and its uptake since the quality of teaching and learning in a school is a major concern for them.

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