

AN UNREALISED
OPPORTUNITY:
**OPEN SCHOOL
DATA FOR
ACCOUNTABILITY IN
PUBLIC EDUCATION**

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POLICY BRIEF



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KEY MESSAGES

- External and internal accountability mechanisms in India's government schooling system are limited at present. This means opportunities for weeding out inefficiencies in the system and in the process enhancing the quality of education, are also restricted.
- Public data on schools have immense potential as an accountability tool for India's elementary education system. The largest school-level database currently available in India is through Unified District Information on School Education (U-DISE), recently renamed as U-DISE Plus or U-DISE+.
- While school data is actively used by government for annual education planning, budgeting and policy purposes, it is still not used to its full potential. Open school data can also be utilised by parents and communities to make informed decisions about schools and to demand accountability.
- Even though parents and local communities seek knowledge related to school performance and quality, most are unaware of the existence of U-DISE database or are finding it difficult to access this information. Lack of awareness regarding their entitlements and absence of a formal grievance redressal mechanism further adds to limited usage of such information.

BOX 1

THE FINDINGS ARE BASED ON:

- A review of relevant laws related to the right to access information in India (Right to Information Act), including legislation specific to school education; analysis of various education data produced and disseminated by government authorities and also through large-scale civil society initiatives.
- A series of semi-structured interviews with key informants (people in charge of the implementation of the Right to Information legislation, education sector managers, actors from civil society organisations, and representatives from the media).
- A survey of 250 school-level actors—parents, teachers and School Management Committee (SMC) members—across 22 government schools, selected using a multi-stage stratified sampling method to illustrate the diversity of perspectives and perceptions about the usefulness of open education data, considering socio-economic, educational, and geographical factors.

KEY FACTS ABOUT THE STUDY

INDIA: USING OPEN SCHOOL DATA TO IMPROVE TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

AVAILABLE AT: <http://www.iiep.unesco.org/en/india-using-open-school-data-improve-transparency-and-accountability>

- The study explored how school-level data in India are accessed and utilised by different stakeholders in the public education system and for what purpose. Focused primarily on U-DISE, while also looking at the potential usage of ASER and NAS, it attempts to understand the extent to which data is used for bringing in transparency and accountability in public education.
- It was part of a six country research effort published by UNESCO-IIEP to assess how open school data is empowering people and improving accountability in public education.
- The research in India was undertaken in three states—Rajasthan, Himachal Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh—in late 2017.

THE ISSUE

India is on the cusp of a demographic dividend and government-run schools, which enroll around 60 per cent of young Indians in elementary grades, are critical to clinching this chance. However, public schools have been struggling on two fronts - retaining students and ensuring high quality of learning. There is ample empirical and anecdotal evidence to confirm how the delivery of education services in government schools in the country has been impacted by systemic challenges. An underrepresented aspect in this context has been the role of a formal mechanism for ensuring accountability in solving these challenges.

Ideally, accountability should be ensured across two routes, external and internal—

- As part of external accountability, the schools and the government are accountable towards the citizens in the provisioning of services as per the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act (RTE Act) and thus for ensuring quality education.

- Second, every layer of public education administration (Union, state, district, block, cluster etc.) should be internally accountable to the other.

Data on school performance and status of service delivery - measured on the basis of students' learning levels and the availability of mandated infrastructure facilities in schools, can provide essential evidence to claim accountability. This can contribute in aligning the efforts of government stakeholders with the twin policy goals of improvement in service delivery and learning outcomes. A transition of focus to achieve these goals has been evident in recent years, in efforts to supplement national level open school database U-DISE with data on learning outcomes published by National Council for Applied Economic Research (NCERT) at district-level. Information provided in U-DISE has been the bedrock of elementary education planning under the erstwhile Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) scheme and now for Samagra Shiksha. Yet, there is very little usage of this data by citizens, especially parents and community members.

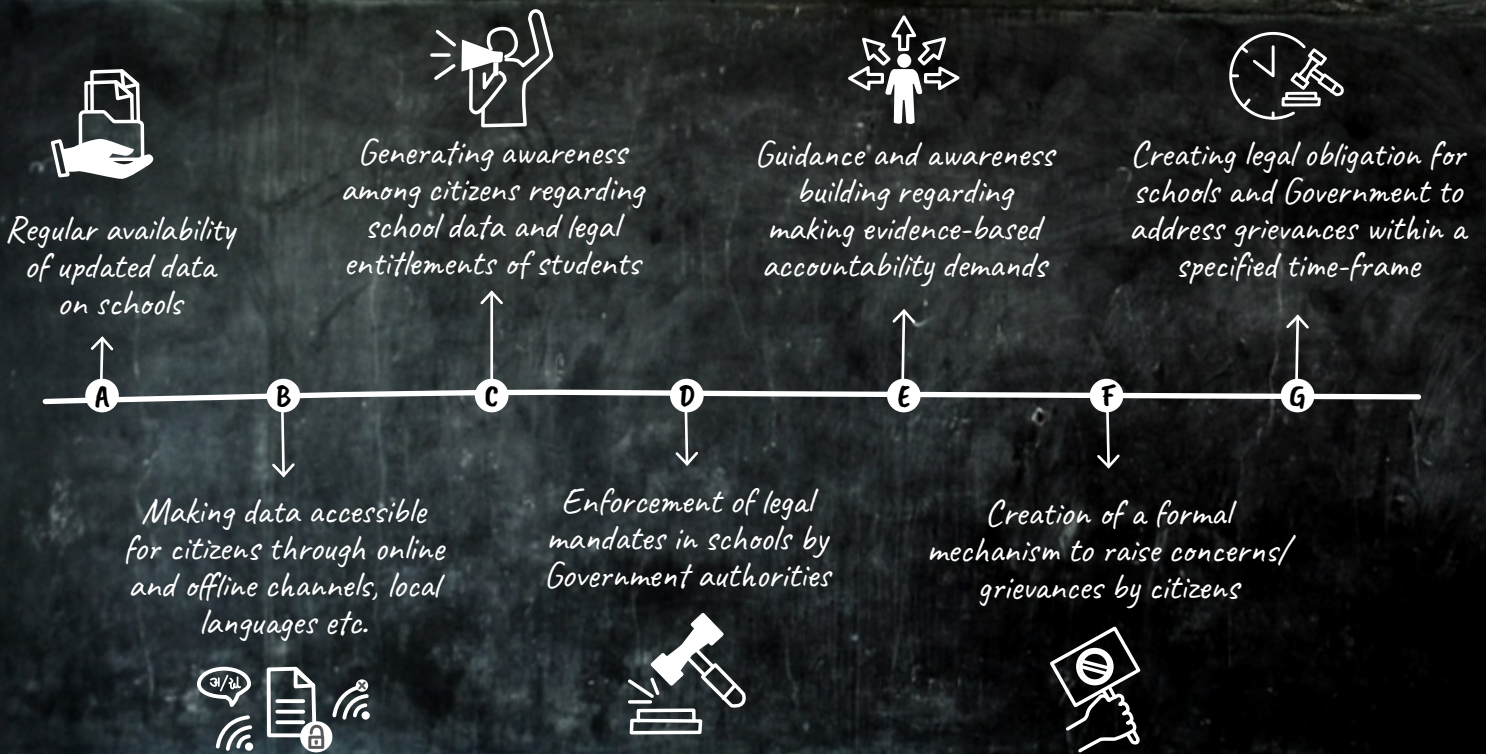
OPEN SCHOOL DATA AS PLANNING AND ACCOUNTABILITY TOOL

Accountability is a product of two things working in tandem: a system of institutions designed in a manner that makes accountability possible, and an informed and mobilised citizenry that can draw upon platforms for engagement to make accountability demands on the system. Both these aspects remain weak with respect to India's public education system. The links between accountability and public service delivery were brought to focus by the World Development Report (WDR), 2004 (World Bank, 2003). The report identified three key actors: clients, service providers, and policy-makers. In the context of public education, these players are citizens, teachers, school management bodies, government education departments at local, subnational and national levels. The WDR framework argued that delivery of basic public services, such as education, could be enhanced by putting citizens (including the poor) at the

centre of service provision and enable them to monitor the service provider.

Indian government envisages public participation model of accountability in elementary education where parents and communities are expected to be directly engaged in key areas of school functioning through School Management Committees (SMCs). SMCs are school-level committees consisting of parents, teachers and community members that are formed to take an active role in the planning, management and monitoring of developmental activities in school. The linkage between citizens and service delivery was evident in our 2018 study (refer to **Box 1**), which found that top three aspects on which the parents would like to have information were: learning levels, safety standards in schools,

FIGURE 1: Essential Conditions for Effective Use of Open School Data by Citizens to Ensure Accountability in Education



teachers' availability and qualification. The interest of the parents, majority of whom could be classified as belonging to low economic strata, contradicts the popular assumption that they generally do not want to engage with the education system. However, it is equally true that because of various issues such as lack of awareness about such data, non-availability of offline modes of access, and lack of guidance/training on how school data can be put to use as evidence, citizens rarely use school data to demand accountability.

Currently, the government has limited its 'transparency' and 'accountability' function to placing data collected on a few critical indicators in the public domain. U-DISE raw data till the year 2017-18 are available on request. However, little has been done by way of raising citizen awareness; sharing information directly at the school-

level in a manner that is accessible, relevant, and useful to stakeholders; and building a grievance redressal mechanism for them to raise concerns and close the accountability loop. The external accountability structure thus stands on shaky ground.

Weakness is replicated in internal accountability mechanisms. Even though U-DISE data can indicate potential malpractices in schools in the areas of management and service delivery, there is no formal mechanism for holding the teachers or the administration accountable. Officials are not penalised for data errors or inaccuracies. Nor is the data collected used as an indicator of performance for local government administration in the block or district. The only accountability relationship that exists currently is financial, i.e. fund utilisation, which is used to take decisions on fund release.

USAGE OF OPEN SCHOOL DATA ACROSS THE WORLD

Challenges specific to India such as low literacy, lack of awareness about school data and low income levels among parents, directly or indirectly impact the usage of school data as evidence either to make school choices or to demand accountability. Experience of other countries offers insights on how open school data is a useful tool for ensuring accountability.

One way of creating awareness about school data is by making them easily accessible and thereby creating an environment for starting discussions around issues that need to be addressed. Faced with a similar challenge, school report cards (SRCs) in Phillipines were disseminated among parents in school assembly meetings twice a year. This makes for an easy to implement solution. Similarly, SRCs in Australia are designed in a way that provide for public participation: providing feedback, asking questions and submitting request for information. Recognising the potential of an easy-to-comprehend data, Australia launched an online portal called 'My School'¹. It has a range of indicators about each Australian school. Instead of displaying all school-level information in the report cards, they have created relevant SRCs for different categories of stakeholders with only the most relevant information for that group. Again, parents or citizens have the flexibility to only look at indicators that they are interested in and that too in the form of graphs or of visualisation. Citizens can look at trends in school performance over time. The

uptake for such information is bound to be more promising. Similarly, in Indonesia 'Corruption Eradication Commission' uses this information to allow stakeholder participation in monitoring schools. However, parents' involvement is still limited and lot of effort is required to generate awareness.

In order to ensure pedagogical accountability it is essential to include data that reflect learning outcomes in SRCs. Countries such as Phillipines, Indonesia and Australia do include learning assessment data as part of SRCs. Australia includes data on performance of students in annual national literacy and numeracy tests (NAPLAN) along with other indicators similar to U-DISE such as enrolment, attendance, teachers and expenditure of school funds. Similarly, SRCs published by the Phillipines government include mean scores from a 'National Achievement Test'. Many Latin American countries also include learning outcomes in school data made available to public. However, a major challenge in India is that currently we do not have information on learning outcomes at the school-level and as a result SRCs available from U-DISE do not address learning levels. Learning levels are assessed by NCERT through National Achievement Survey (NAS) based on a sample of schools across every district in the country. As a result, the data on learning outcome are representative at the state and district-level only, and not at school-level.

RECOMMENDATIONS

There are several measures that can be taken at the Union Government level specifically by the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD), which can help achieve an accountable public school education system:

For external accountability

- **Concerted and sustained public awareness generation campaigns:** Our study found that majority of the surveyed parents (90 per cent) were

not aware of the existence of U-DISE SRCs even as they sought information on similar indicators mentioned in U-DISE. Awareness generation activities and trainings on how data can be used need to be undertaken. At present there is no separate budget under Samagra Shiksha for dissemination of U-DISE data, which makes it difficult to take up such efforts. Assigning budget for dissemination of school data is extremely important.

1 'My School' is run by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), an independent statutory authority responsible for collecting and reporting data on Australia's schools. Available online at: <https://www.myschool.edu.au/>

- **Bolstering online and offline mechanisms for sharing school-level data with the public:** U-DISE school report cards reach the public domain one year after data has been collected thereby impacting its timeliness for short-term interventions that can better how children are learning. Schools do not always display U-DISE SRCs on their public notice boards. Our study found that the sharing the SRCs in their current manner and format, might be of limited relevance to parents (with most data provided in the form of online PDF documents which semi-literate/illiterate/non-internet user parents cannot make use of). Of people who knew SRCs existed online, most found the format difficult to understand.

Data should thus be made available at touch points over and above schools, in languages spoken in the region at regular intervals to ensure penetration and accessibility. The format of school report cards for general citizens (including parents) should be separated from the SRCs used for policy and planning purposes. The relevant versions should include visual elements, easy to understand explanations on data indicators and additional indicators on learning outcome performance for comprehensive knowledge building of parents, local communities and SMCs.

- **Developing grievance redressal mechanisms:** It is well recognised that the opportunity costs for citizens to place accountability claims on the state are high. These costs are worth bearing only if there are clear avenues of redress, and if citizens have trust in the governments' ability to be responsive to their accountability claims. Our study shows that citizens are unaware of where and how they can lodge a complaint or seek redress based on their monitoring of school systems. Moreover, there is little administrative follow-up on grievances, and lack of internal accountability for managing citizen grievances. *In the absence of a clear-cut grievance redressal mechanism, even those who have school-level information through Open School Data and want to use it, might be powerless.* This dilutes existing accountability attempts by the public and disincentivises their involvement. A solid grievance redressal mechanism

will enable stakeholders to address corruption and call out negligence, inefficiency, discrimination, and other problems that plague the system.

- **Strengthening the link between U-DISE data and school-level planning:** By design, U-DISE is expected to be used as a tool for planning and decision-making by the education administration. Despite a mandate to make school-level plans, the planning process begins at the district-level using U-DISE data. As our work on the planning process has repeatedly highlighted, an important reason for the absence of school planning is the lack of discretionary funds and powers available, which creates disincentives for SMCs to engage in planning activities, leading to a vicious cycle of low awareness and low usage of critical education data. To address this gap, the education financing structure has to be restructured in a manner that ensures greater discretion and decision-making authority to them.

For internal accountability

- **Strengthening the link between performance and the inter-governmental fiscal transfer system:** The current planning and budgeting system for elementary education financing is closely linked to U-DISE data. Under the erstwhile SSA scheme (part of Samagra Shiksha now), the states used to present their annual work plans and budgets for elementary education by linking them to output and infrastructure goals arrived at using U-DISE data. Final budgets approved are linked to these goals. However, there has been no mechanism of direct financial accountability if goals stated for one year were not met. Partial accountability is sought - linked to expenditure (of funds) rather than achievement of targeted goals. To address this gap, it is important to restructure the fiscal transfer system in a manner that links budget allocations and expenditure management to performance on key indicators.

- **Using learning outcomes in planning and budgeting for school education:** To ensure that the system incentivises accountability for outcomes, care will have to be given to design the fiscal transfer system such that it is linked to the right indicators. The recent commitment to undertake a learning assessment survey (NAS) every alternate year offers an opportunity to do just this. Through NAS, the newly formed Samagra Shiksha scheme could align its planning and budgeting system to create a budget window that links some proportion of funding to state governments with performance on learning outcomes. While there should be some incentive for districts or states performing better, government can also prioritise interventions on quality improvement in those areas that are lagging behind.
- **Establishing an inter-operable, real-time database for ease of decision-making:** Often data for similar indicators related to school education are collected by different government authorities- Union government, states governments and project offices for centrally sponsored schemes. In the current architecture, these different databases function in silos, independent of one another. This creates a number of problems in inter-governmental coordination, overloading of data collectors at the frontline, and in maintaining data quality. Crucially, the presence of multiple databases serves to obfuscate accountability. Interoperable databases at least at the state-level will serve to strengthen the quality of data, ensure data validation and comparability, and avoid duplication, in the process creating conditions for affixing accountability at the right level of government.

We are a research group which works on strengthening transparency and accountability in governance which is responsive to citizen need. We do this through evidence-based research on state capabilities and factors affecting efficient public services delivery in India. We are a part of the Centre for Policy Research, one of India's leading public policy think tanks.