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Where hope meets policy: A study of systemic reform in delhi government schools

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Abstract
India stands at a critical juncture in its educational landscape. Despite its burgeoning economy, the nation continues to lag significantly in average years of schooling and educational quality, as reflected in the low learning achievement among students across school stages and high unemployment among graduates. This paper argues that India's educational crisis is exacerbated by persistent lack of sufficient funding, a decline in government school infrastructure and a lack of scalable, well-implemented policies. Specifically focusing on government schools in Delhi, a crucial microcosm of India's urban public education system, this study examines the multifaceted issues hindering their transformation. Drawing upon a review of existing literature, including a case study of a government school in New Delhi and a comparative analysis of school governance in Delhi and Beijing, this research identifies key areas for intervention. Findings reveal that while policies like the "Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act of 2009" aim for universalization, their implementation often faces hurdles related to teacher capacity, inadequate professional development and disjointed accountability structures. A comparative perspective highlights the potential benefits of robust teacher training, clear career advancement pathways and effective communication among those involved. This paper outlines key priorities for a nationwide transformation of public schooling, emphasizing increased budgetary allocation, scalable implementation, empowering schoolteachers and principals and fostering parental involvement. Ultimately, true change hinges on sustained political will and an informed electorate demanding education as a top political priority, with actionable recommendations for Delhi's public education system.

Keywords: Public education in India; Delhi government schools; education reform; Right to Education (RTE); teacher professionalism; education policy, governance and funding

Introduction

1. India's looming educational crisis

India, poised to become one of the world's largest economies, is grappling with a serious challenge in its educational landscape. The nation ranks among the lowest globally in terms of average years of schooling (United Nations Human Development Report, 2023-24) [42] and significant challenges persist in achieving foundational literacy and numeracy. This educational deficit not only jeopardizes individual potential but also poses a substantial impediment to sustained economic growth and social equity. It has been argued that "Elementary education is crucial not only for economic growth but also for social equity and participatory democracy" (Sen, 1999, p. 144) [37]. Despite decades of policy interventions and substantial investments, the quality of public schooling continues to be a pressing concern across the country. Naik's (1975) [24] analysis in his classic essay "Equality, quality and quantity: The elusive triangle of Indian education", still holds good:

"The pursuit of quality has often linked itself with privilege and become inimical to that of quantity; the pursuit of quantity, in its turn, has often led to a deterioration of standards, and the pursuit of equality, in its turn, has often led to a deterioration of standards, and the pursuit of equality has often found to the inimical to that of quality, and has been frequently hampered by the very inequalities in society which it was intended to remove. We have tried to reconcile the inevitable conflicts with little result. . . (Naik, J. P.; Equality, quality and quantity: The elusive triangle in Indian education. Allied Publishers, 1975,p. 4) [24]"

Several other prominent scholars have made similar observations. For instance, Dreze and Amritya Sen (2013) note, "India's achievements in education remain deeply uneven and structurally flawed" (p. 220). Thakore and Yasmeen (2017) [39] observe, "India's school system

continues to struggle with infrastructure and learning quality, especially in rural and government schools" (p. 14). Nambissan (2010) [23] delves into the larger political economy of global education reforms and argues, "Globalization has further widened the education inequality gap, especially for the poor" (p. 45).

The universalization of elementary education has been a long-standing objective for the Indian government but despite policy intent it took around five decades post the implementation of the Constitution that education became a fundamental right through a Constitutional Amendment in 2002. Until 2002, the right to education was a part of the directive principles of the Constitution which remained a matter of debate and discontent right from the time of independence. Professor K. T. Shah, a member of the Constituent Assembly of India (1948) [38] had argued: "Placing education under Directive Principles weakens its enforceability and delays urgent reform" (Government of India (GoI), 1948, p. 297). Commissions like the Kothari Commission (1964-66) (GoI, 1966) [19] continued to emphasize education's role in national development, laying foundations for subsequent policies. These effort culminated in the enactment of the "Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act in 2009". This landmark legislation sought to guarantee every child the right to quality elementary education by mandating norms for infrastructure, curriculum, number of students per teachers and teacher qualifications. However, the gap between policy intent and ground-level implementation has led to suboptimal learning outcomes and perpetuates educational disparities, particularly within the vast network of government schools.

Based in this context, this paper undertakes a comprehensive analysis of the systemic challenges impeding the transformation of government schools, with a special focus on Delhi. Delhi, as the national capital and a metropolitan urban centre, offers a critical case study for understanding the complexities and opportunities within India's public education system. By synthesizing insights from recent academic research and official documents, this research aims to identify the key bottlenecks and propose actionable strategies for fostering a more effective and equitable public education system, both in Delhi and, by extension, across India. The overarching goal is to contribute to the ongoing discourse on education reform by providing a nuanced understanding of the issues at play and offering evidence-based recommendations for a sustainable and meaningful transformation.

2. Research questions

This paper covers the following aspects: policy implementation, teacher professionalism, governance and accountability, financial allocation and comparison with Beijing's public education. The overall question that it focuses on is - how can systemic reforms in governance, teacher professionalism, policy implementation and financial investment transform the quality of public education in Delhi government schools?

The specific questions are

- To what extent has the 'Right to Education (RTE) Act' been effectively implemented in Delhi government schools and what challenges persist?
- How do chances for teachers to grow and career advancement structures affect teacher motivation and effectiveness in Delhi's public schools?
- What are the key governance gaps and communication among those involved challenges in Delhi government schools and how do they impact school functioning?
- Is the current level and utilization of education funding in Delhi adequate to support systemic reform and improve learning outcomes?
- What lessons can Delhi learn from international case studies—such as Beijing's public school system—to inform its own transformation strategies?

3. Literature review: The landscape of public education challenges: The academic discourse on Indian public education consistently highlights a mosaic of challenges that collectively undermine the quality and effectiveness of government schools. These issues are deeply rooted in historical, social, economic and administrative contexts.

3.1. Policy frameworks and implementation realities

The journey towards universal education in India has been marked by significant policy milestones, from the recommendations of the 'Kothari Commission (1964-66) (GoI, 1966) [19]' emphasizing a common school system to the more recent 'National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 (GoI, 2020)'. 'The Right to Education (RTE) Act, 2009', stands as a pivotal legislation aimed at transforming elementary education. It mandates universal access to education, defines the minimum infrastructure norms for schools, provides a framework for curricular reforms and sets a limit on the maximum student teacher ratio. However, the implementation of RTE has been fraught with complexities and unintended consequences. Sarin (2015) [35], in a case study of a Government Girls' Secondary School in a low-income neighbourhood in New Delhi, found that while the RTE aimed for universalization, its implementation on the ground presented significant systemic challenges. These included challenges such as managing a "significantly high number of students per teacher," which in turn impacted the "professionalism of teachers" and the overall educational outcomes (Sarin, 2015) [35]. Various reports on the status of implementation of RTE have pointed to major gaps in implementation. A report by the Council for Social Development (2024) noted [5]:

"…while substantial progress has been made in several areas—such as increased school enrolment and decreased dropout rates—RTE implementation still faces numerous challenges. These include providing access to neighbourhood schools, ensuring quality education, addressing dropout issues, recruiting qualified teachers, tackling teacher shortages, providing adequate infrastructure, ensuring sufficient financial allocation for education, and giving teeth to the institutional mechanisms that are in place to support RTE implementation. (Council for Social Development; Implementation of the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009: Where do we stand?, 2024, p. 35) [5]"

This illustrates that legislative mandates alone, without robust implementation mechanisms and resource alignment, can fall short of achieving their intended qualitative objectives. Dubey's (2021) [10] reflection taking NEP 2020 as a case in point is important in this context: "NEP 2020 lays out a grand vision, but without implementation

strategy, it risks being just another document of good intentions" (Dubey, 2021, p. 36) [10].

3.2. Teacher professionalism, capacity and motivation

Teachers are unequivocally the most vital agents of change in any education system. Their professionalism, continuous training and motivation directly influence student learning. "Teachers.. are the cornerstone of a just society" (Kalam, 2002, p. 80) [18]. Literature on Indian public education frequently points to issues including insufficient pre-service and ongoing teacher training, inflexible career progression pathways and a low teacher motivation (Kumar, 1991) [20]. 'The Annual Status of Education Report (ASER)' by Pratham consistently highlights gaps in teacher capacity to ensure foundational learning.

Yan (2020) [43], in a comparative study of government middle schools in Beijing and Delhi, offers critical insights into teacher training and career advancement. While both systems face challenges, Yan's research suggests that Beijing often provides more structured and supportive mechanisms for continuous teacher development and clearer pathways for career progression. In Delhi, teachers often experience insufficient support, limited avenues for professional growth and insufficient recognition for merit (Yan, 2020) [43]. This underscores the necessity of moving beyond basic training to comprehensive, continuous professional development that fosters a culture of sustained learning and empowerment among teachers. Scholars and practitioners alike emphasize the centrality of teachers in reform efforts. Linda Darling-Hammond (2010, p. 27) [7] asserts, "Teachers are the core of any education system; investing in their development is non-negotiable." Lall and Anand (2022, p. 56) [21], reflecting on Delhi's education reforms, observe, "Teacher voices show that infrastructure, training and trust significantly improve classroom practices." Poonam Batra (2005, p. 4350) [3] argues that "teachers' professional voice and agency have long been missing in India's education reform discourse," a sentiment echoed by Diane Ravitch (2010, p. 73) [31], who warns that "top-down reforms often ignore classroom realities and result in disillusionment among teachers." These perspectives collectively underline that meaningful, lasting change in public education hinges on enabling and empowering teachers—not merely training them.

3.3 Governance, accountability and stakeholder communication: Effective school governance encompasses leadership, administrative efficiency, resource management and robust mechanisms for accountability to various stakeholders. In the Indian context, the governance of government schools has often been criticized for its bureaucratic nature, lack of decentralization and disjointed accountability structures frameworks (PROBE Team, 1999; UNESCO, 2014). Yan's (2020) [26, 40, 43] study specifically examines the "Governance of Government Middle Schools in Beijing and Delhi," focusing on "teacher training, career advancement and communication among those involved". Her findings highlight the importance of supportive accountability mechanisms and effective communication channels between school administration, teachers, parents and the wider community. In Delhi, challenges in communication among those involved and a perceived top-down approach to accountability can lead to disengagement and hinder collective efforts towards school improvement (Yan, 2020) [43]. Policymakers often overlook the crucial role of localized governance in translating national policies into tangible educational outcomes. Thus, UNESCO (2015) [41] suggests, "Governments must ensure participatory, transparent and accountable educational governance" (p. 9). Drèze and Amritya Sen (2013) [9] have also highlighted the importance of public action and participatory governance in improving social indicators, including education.

3.4. Financial allocations and expenditure efficiency

The quantum and strategic utilization of financial resources are fundamental to educational quality. Globally, a benchmark of 6% of GDP for public spending on education is often cited as desirable. India's education expenditure has historically hovered below this mark, often facing criticism for being insufficient to meet its vast educational needs. As Banerji notes, "The persistent lack of sufficient funding of public education directly translates into poor infrastructure and weak teacher support" (Banerji, 2017, p. 38) [2]. This chronic underfunding compromises both equity and excellence in the system. Voices from across sectors have emphasized the urgency of robust investment. "Funding public education is not charity—it is the most essential investment a democracy can make" (Rampal, 2002, p. 2521) [29]. Echoing this, Schleicher (2018, p. 87) [36] argues, "Education is not a cost—it's an investment in the country's future productivity". The challenge lies not just in increasing allocations but ensuring that funds are strategically directed towards core areas like teacher development, infrastructure maintenance and learning resources. Chronic underfunding and inefficient utilization of funds exacerbate issues such as high PTRs, lack of teaching-learning materials and poor infrastructure, as highlighted by multiple reports (for instance, the Economic Survey Reports, various years). 'The National Education Policy 2020' also reiterates the need for substantially increased public investment in education. Heckman (2008) [17] provides a strong economic case for investing in early childhood development, a principle that extends to foundational schooling and necessitates robust financial backing.

3.5. Curriculum relevance and pedagogical practices

Beyond access and infrastructure, the fundamental quality of education is determined by what is taught and how. Many policy critiques of the Indian public education system point to an outdated, rote-learning oriented curriculum that often fails to foster critical thinking, creativity, or problem-solving skills - as also acknowledged in the 'National Curriculum Framework (NCF) 2005 (National Council of Educational Research and Training, 2005) [25]'. NCF 2005 was based on a longstanding discontent with the students' experiences in schools as condensed in the Learning without Burden Report 1993 (GoI, 1993). Sarin (2015) [35] briefly touches upon at inconsistencies or limitations in practical application of suggested curricular reforms at the school level. The imperative of transforming schools also includes a radical shift towards child-centric, activity-based and experiential learning methodologies that prepare students for the complexities of the 21st century Transforming schools for the 21st century requires more than incremental reform - it calls for a radical pedagogical shift towards child-centric, activity-based and experiential learning. These approaches are not merely progressive alternatives but

essential for preparing students to navigate an increasingly complex, interconnected and unpredictable world. Research in curriculum studies has long underscored the value of constructivist learning environments, where learners actively engage with concepts through exploration, dialogue and reflection (Bruner, 1961; Dewey, 1938) [4, 8]. International studies have also demonstrated that systems that prioritize creativity, collaboration and critical thinking tend to outperform those driven by rote learning and standardization (Zhao, 2009) [44].

In the Indian context, a growing body of literature highlights how conventional pedagogies often fail to engage learners meaningfully, especially those from marginalized communities (Kumar, 2005; Rampal & Mander, 2009) [20, 30]. Ethnographic accounts reveal that when children are provided with supportive environments, they are not only capable of self-directed learning but also demonstrate remarkable resilience and curiosity (Sharma, 2021). This underscores the need for pedagogical practices that are culturally responsive and rooted in the lived realities of learners.

4. Methodology

This research paper adopts a qualitative, desk-based approach to analyse the strategies for transforming government schools in Delhi within the broader context of India's public education system.

4.1. Research design

The study employs a descriptive and analytical research design. It describes the current state of government schools, with a specific focus on Delhi, by drawing on published academic research and policy documents. It then critically analyses the contributing factors to their challenges and proposes potential avenues for transformation. A comparative analysis, utilizing the insights from Yan's (2020) [43] study comparing Delhi and Beijing schools, is integrated to broaden the perspective and identify transferable lessons and best practices.

4.2. Data sources: This study is based on a systematic review and qualitative synthesis of secondary data drawn from the following categories:

a) Peer-reviewed academic literature

- "Sarin, M. N. (2015) [35]. Quality education for all? A case study of a New Delhi government school. *Policy Futures in Education, 13*(3), 360-374. https://doi.org/10.1177/1478210315571211"
- "Yan, Y. (2020) [43]. *Governance of government middle schools in Beijing and Delhi: Teacher training, career advancement and stakeholder communication* (ICS Occasional Paper No. 42), Institute of Chinese Studies."

b) Government policy and planning documents

- Kothari Commission (1964-66) [19]. Education and National Development: Report of the Education Commission (1964-66), Ministry of Education, Government of India.
- National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, Ministry of Education, Government of India.

c) Official data repositories and indices

- Unified District Information System for Education Plus (UDISE+)
- Performance Grading Index (PGI), Ministry of Education
- NITI Aayog: School Education Quality Index (SEQI)
- Parliamentary Standing Committee Reports on Education (2020-2024), Govt. of India
- Directorate of Education, Government of NCT of Delhi's EduDel repository
- Government of NCT of Delhi's Budget Documents (Demands for Grants and Outcome Budgets) [16]
- SCERT Delhi Reports and Research Publications
- National Institute of Educational Planning and Administration (NIEPA) Reports

d) International repositories and indices

- "Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Education at a Glance"
- "World Bank Education Statistics (EdStats)"
- "UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS)"

e) Think tank and other research

- "Annual Status of Education Report (ASER), The ASER Centre, Pratham"
- "Centre for Policy Research (CPR)" - Policy briefs
- "Accountability Initiative, Centre for Policy Research"
- Brookings India reports
- Centre for Equity Studies (CES) - Studies on marginalization and access

4.3. Data analysis

A qualitative content analysis approach was used to extract relevant themes, arguments, findings and recommendations from the textual documents. Key concepts such as "teacher professionalism," "number of students per teacher," "governance," "teacher training," "career advancement," "RTE implementation," and "financial allocation" were identified and categorized. The information was then synthesized to build a coherent narrative around the challenges and transformative strategies for Delhi's government schools, integrating them into the broader Indian context. For the image files, a descriptive analysis was performed based on their titles and general implications regarding financial allocations and trends. While precise numerical data could not be extracted from these visual formats, their contextual relevance to funding and resource availability was noted and used to inform the discussion on financial challenges. Where tables and charts are suggested, they indicate points where visual data would enhance the textual analysis, drawing from the implied content of the image files or general knowledge of educational statistics.

4.4. Scope and limitations

This research is confined to a desk-based review of existing secondary data. It does not involve primary data collection (for instance, surveys, interviews and observations). Consequently, the findings and recommendations are derived from the interpretations and synthesis of the provided literature and general knowledge of the Indian education system. The specificity of the case studies, while providing rich insights into Delhi, may not be entirely generalizable to all government schools across India without further broad-based research. The inability to precisely extract numerical data from the provided image files limits

the quantitative depth of the financial analysis; however, the qualitative insights derived are substantial for understanding the broad landscape.

Findings: Key challenges in Delhi's government schools

The analysis of the combined documents reveals several critical findings concerning the state of government schools in Delhi and the pervasive challenges that impede their transformation. These findings are deeply interwoven and demand a well-rounded strategy for effective change.

5.1. Implementation gaps in the "Right to Education (RTE) Act" in Delhi: Despite being a landmark piece of legislation, the RTE Act's implementation on the ground in Delhi has encountered significant hurdles, particularly concerning its goals related to educational quality. Sarin (2015) [35] illustrates this vividly through her case study, noting that while universalization of access was largely addressed, the spirit of "quality education" suffered due to everyday challenges. A primary concern was the existence of a significantly high number of students per teacher (Sarin, 2015) [35]. This high ratio directly impacted teachers' ability to provide individualized attention, assess diverse learning needs and engage in the kind of nuanced teaching methods essential for quality education. The burden of large classes also affected "teacher professionalism," suggesting that an overburdened workforce struggles to maintain high professional standards. These ground realities are also echoed in broader surveys like the 'Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) by Pratham' (various years), which consistently point to learning outcome gaps despite increasing enrolment.

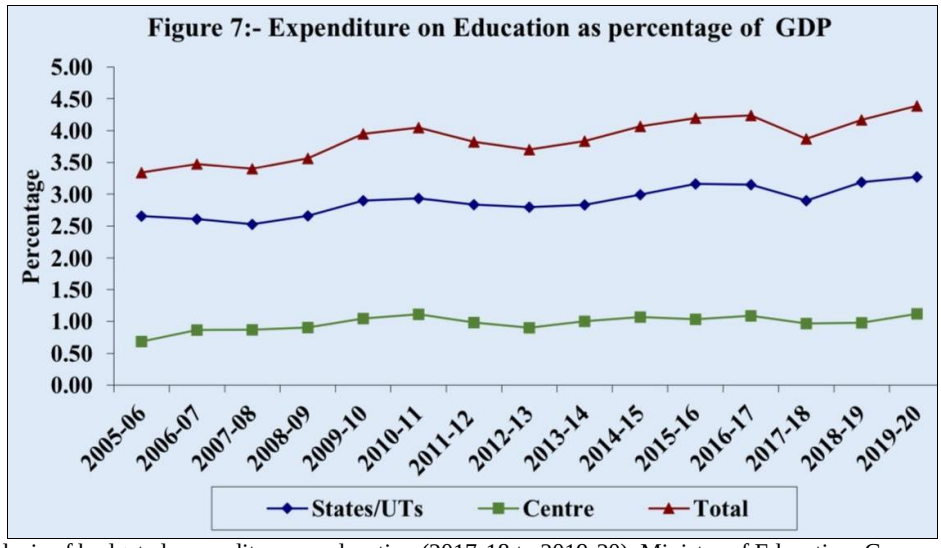
5.2. Deficiencies in teacher professionalism, training and career advancement: Both Sarin (2015) and Yan (2020) [35, 43] underscore the critical role of teacher professionalism. Sarin notes its erosion under the weight of systemic issues, while Yan's (2020) [43] comparative study with Beijing provides deeper insights into the specific deficiencies. Yan's research highlights that while Delhi's government schools engage in teacher training, the systems for continuous professional development and clear, incentivized career advancement pathways may be less robust or effective compared to Beijing. This suggests that teachers in Delhi may face limited opportunities for skill enhancement, pedagogical innovation and professional growth, leading to potential stagnation and impacting their motivation. The lack of structured support for teacher careers can lead to a less dynamic and less appealing profession (Yan, 2020) [43].

5.3. Fragmented governance and communication gaps

Yan's (2020) [43] comparative study on school governance in Delhi and Beijing reveals key areas for improvement in Delhi's administrative structures. Her findings suggest that issues related to "communication among those involved" and the overall effectiveness of accountability mechanisms are significant. Unlike Beijing, which might demonstrate a more integrated and supportive approach to governance and communication among school leaders, teachers and parents, Delhi's system appears to struggle with fostering a cohesive and transparent environment. Fragmented communication can lead to misunderstandings, reduce collective ownership and hinder the efficient implementation of policy reforms at the school level (Yan, 2020) [43]. Lack of clear lines of supportive accountability can also disempower school leaders and teachers from taking proactive initiatives for improvement. These governance issues are consistent with the broader critiques of public service delivery in India as discussed by scholars like Drèze and Sen (2013) [9].

5.4. Constraints of financial allocation and utilization

The macro-level trend of India's education expenditure as a percentage of GDP, as illustrated in Figure-1, generally points to a sustained but modest level of investment, often below international benchmarks deemed necessary for achieving high-quality universal education. While Delhi often allocates a significant portion of its state budget to education (as indicated by Table-1), the true impact depends not just on the quantum but also on the efficiency and strategic utilization of these funds.



(Source: Analysis of budgeted expenditure on education (2017-18 to 2019-20), Ministry of Education, Government of India)

Fig 1: Trends in education expenditure as percentage of GDP in India

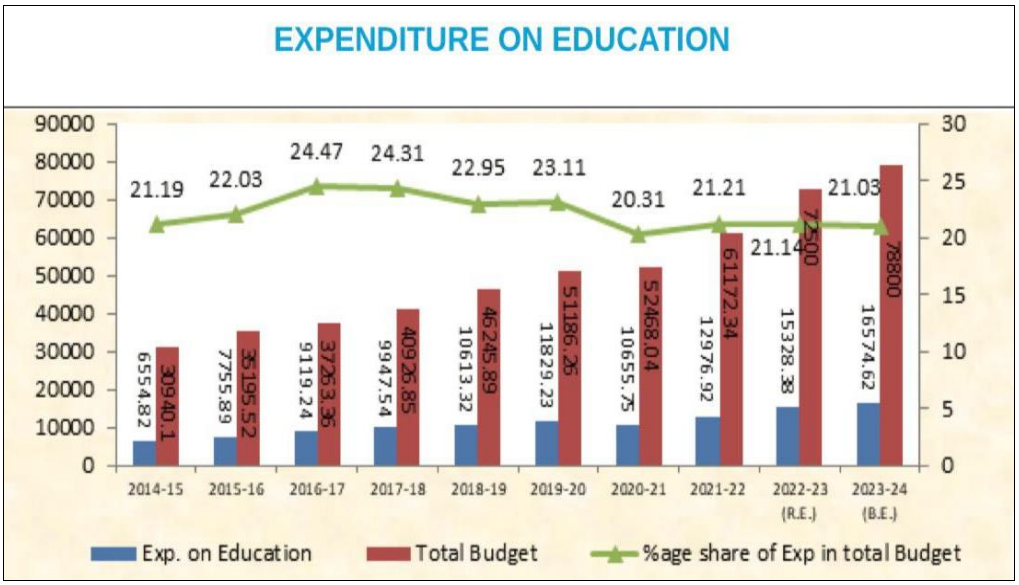
The state education budget allocations, presented in Table 1, indicate the variations in education budget allocation across different Indian states.

Table 1: State-wise education budget allocation 2016-17 to 2023-24

S. No.	State	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23 (RE)	2023-24 (BE)
1.	Gujarat	14.5	14.1	14.0	13.7	13.6	13.7	12.4	12.9
2.	Haryana	13.5	13.4	13.9	13.5	13.3	12.7	11.7	12.0
3.	Karnataka	15.5	14.8	14.1	13.7	14.0	14.1	12.7	12.7
4.	Kerala	17.7	17.2	17.0	16.6	16.6	16.4	14.9	14.9
5.	Maharashtra	18.2	18.0	17.2	16.4	16.5	16.4	14.2	14.3
6.	Assam	19.7	19.5	19.5	18.7	18.6	18.9	17.3	17.0
7.	Himachal Pradesh	19.2	18.9	18.8	18.0	17.7	17.4	15.3	15.5
8.	Chhattisgarh	18.4	18.2	18.0	17.4	17.3	17.0	15.5	15.7
9.	Tamil Nadu	16.1	15.8	15.4	15.0	14.9	14.9	13.6	13.7
10.	Uttar Pradesh	16.2	15.8	15.5	15.1	14.8	14.7	13.3	13.4
11.	Delhi	23.6	23.2	22.8	21.8	21.5	21.0	19.2	19.2
-	All India	14.7	15.0	14.4	14.1	13.8	13.5	13.3	13.3

(Source: Economic Survey of Delhi, 2023-24)

While Delhi, as an urban center, might have a relatively higher per-student spending capacity compared to many other states, the adequacy and efficiency of this spending are paramount. Figure-2 points to a decline in the percentage share of expenditure on education in the total budget during 2014-15 to 2023-24.



(Graph source: Economic Survey of Delhi 2023-24)

Fig 2: Delhi's education expenditure budget allocation, 2014-15 to 2023-24

Inadequate funding or inefficient spending can directly impede efforts to address high PTRs, upgrade dilapidated infrastructure, provide modern teaching aids, or implement advanced, continuous teacher training programs. Financial constraints thus become a major obstacle to achieving the transformative goals for Delhi's government schools. The 'Kothari Commission (1964-66) [19]' long ago recommended a 6% of GDP allocation to education, a target that India has yet to consistently meet.

In sum, the findings indicate that the transformation of government schools in Delhi requires a multi-pronged approach that addresses the implementation shortcomings of existing policies, invests significantly in human capital through comprehensive teacher development, reforms governance for greater accountability and collaboration and ensures strategic and adequate financial allocation. These elements are deeply intertwined and isolated interventions are unlikely to yield sustainable systemic change as Fullan (2016, p. 90) [11] argues, "True educational reform must focus on building internal school capacity and change from within".

Discussion: Intersecting challenges and pathways to transformation: The findings presented underscore that transforming government schools in Delhi is a complex undertaking, necessitating a holistic understanding of how various systemic challenges intersect. The concept of "transformation" transcends incremental improvements; it demands a fundamental paradigm shift in how public education is conceived, governed and delivered. "Reform is not just about creating pockets of excellence but building systems that deliver quality at scale" (Zhao, 2009, p. 126) [44].

6.1. The unfinished agenda of RTE and quality

The RTE Act's intent to universalize elementary education was commendable, yet as Sarin (2015) [35] highlights, its implementation in Delhi revealed a critical tension between access and quality. The persistent issue of high number of students per teachers, for instance, is not merely an administrative statistic but a major obstacle to effective pedagogy and a source of professional strain for teachers. Renowned educationists like J. P. Naik (1975) [24] have historically argued that neglecting quality in pursuit of

quantity leads to a hollow victory. The discussion must shift from merely providing a school to ensuring that every school is a nurturing environment for genuine learning. For Delhi, this means rigorous enforcement of PTRs, but also recognizing that reducing class sizes alone is insufficient without accompanying pedagogical support and professional development for teachers to utilize smaller classes effectively. The findings from ASER reports (Pratham, various years) consistently reinforce this gap in learning outcomes, emphasizing that enrolment does not equate to effective education.

6.2. Nurturing teacher professionalism

Beyond Training to Empowerment: Both Sarin (2015) [35] and Yan (2020) [43] converge on the critical importance of teacher professionalism. Sarin notes its erosion under everyday challenges, while Yan's comparative study with Beijing provides a pathway for improvement. The disparity in "teacher training, career advancement and communication among those involved" between Delhi and Beijing's government schools, as highlighted by Yan (2020) [43], is particularly insightful. National policy level documents (GoI, 1993; NCERT, 2005) have advocated for a system that empowers teachers, recognizing them as professionals who are central to the learning process. The current system in Delhi might lack the continuous, context-specific chances for teachers to grow and clear career pathways that could motivate teachers, foster innovation and retain talent. Transformation demands shifting from a top-down, one-size-fits-all training model to a more localized, needs-based and ongoing professional development system that values teacher autonomy and provides incentives for excellence. This also includes creating a supportive environment where teachers feel respected and heard, leading to improved communication among those involved, as indicated by Yan (2020) [43].

6.3. Re-imagining governance

Yan's (2020) [43] analysis of governance systems in Delhi, contrasted with Beijing, points to the imperative of strengthening internal and external accountability mechanisms while fostering collaborative environments. Current structures in Delhi may suffer from top-down directives and fragmented communication among those involved, leading to disengagement and a lack of shared responsibility. Policymakers, inspired by the 'National Education Policy 2020's' emphasis on decentralized governance, must re-engineer school management committees (SMCs) to become truly functional bodies that empower parents, teachers and local communities. This involves not just formal representation but also genuine participation in planning, resource allocation and monitoring. True accountability is not about blame, but about mutual support and a collective commitment to improving student success, as argued by Drèze and Sen (2013) in their work on public action [9].

6.4. Strategic financial investment and resource utilization: The generalized trend of education expenditure as a percentage of GDP points to a national challenge of underinvestment in education. Policymakers must ensure that increased budgets translate directly into better infrastructure, adequate teaching resources and sustained teacher development programs. Furthermore, innovation in resource utilization, exploring public-private partnerships where appropriate and leveraging technology can maximize the impact of available funds. The goal is not just to spend more, but to spend smarter, aligning financial investments directly with the goals of quality enhancement and equitable access.

In essence, transforming government schools in Delhi requires a comprehensive strategy that moves beyond piecemeal reforms. It demands acknowledging the interconnectedness of teacher quality, robust governance and wise use of education funds. Drawing lessons from both the challenges identified within Delhi (Sarin, 2015) [35] and comparative successes (Yan, 2020) [43], Delhi has the potential to build a model public education system.

Conclusion

The aspiration for transforming government schools in Delhi into centers of excellence is a critical objective for the equitable development of the National Capital Territory. This research, by synthesizing key academic insights and policy considerations, concludes that while foundational legislative frameworks like the Right to Education (RTE) Act have laid the groundwork for universal access, their ability to deliver quality education has been considerably limited by persistent systemic challenges. The core issues identified are multifaceted and deeply interconnected**.** First, the spirit of RTE, particularly concerning optimal number of students per teachers and the professional environment for teachers, has not been fully realized, leading to strained resources and potential compromises on pedagogical quality (Sarin, 2015) [35]. Second, teachers in Delhi's government schools often have inadequate avenues for continuous professional development, limited career advancement opportunities and insufficient supportive mechanisms, impacting their motivation and overall effectiveness (Sarin, 2015; Yan, 2020) [35, 43]. Three, there are governance issues as well. Issues related to communication among those involved and accountability within the school governance structures hinder collaborative efforts and efficient functioning (Yan, 2020) [43]. Four, while specific figures vary, the overall national investment in education (as seen in GDP trends) and the strategic utilization of state-level budget allocations remain critical factors influencing the pace and depth of transformation.

Overall, it can be concluded that true transformation necessitates a well-rounded strategy that moves beyond incremental reforms to a fundamental re-imagining of the public education ecosystem. Delhi has the unique opportunity to leverage its resources and policy-making capacity to pioneer innovative solutions that address these long-standing challenges. By prioritizing the human element (teachers), strengthening institutional mechanisms (governance) and strategically deploying financial resources, Delhi can set a precedent for quality public education in India. This aligns with the broader vision for education transformation articulated in the National Education Policy 2020.

Policy recommendations

Based on the findings and discussion, the following recommendations are proposed for policymakers and education stakeholders in Delhi to drive the transformation of government schools:

8.1. Empower teachers and enhance professional development

- **Comprehensive professional development**: Institute robust, ongoing professional development programs for all teachers, focusing on pedagogical innovations, subject-specific mastery, digital literacy and helping students with emotions and relationships. This should move beyond generic workshops to mentorship, peer learning and action research (Rampal and Mander, 2013) [30]. "We must decentralize curriculum and build teacher capacity to scale reforms" (Ramakrishna, 2024) [28].
- **Structured career progression:** Establish clear, transparent and merit-based career advancement pathways for teachers, including opportunities for leadership roles, specialized teaching and recognition for outstanding performance, drawing lessons from systems like Beijing (Yan, 2020) [43].
- **Optimal teacher-pupil ratios**: Rigorously enforce and ideally reduce number of students per teachers to ensure teachers can provide personalized attention, manage classrooms effectively and foster a conducive learning environment, as highlighted by Sarin (2015) [35]. This may require strategic recruitment and deployment.
- **Teacher autonomy and well-being**: Foster a culture of respect for teacher autonomy in pedagogical decisions and address issues related to workload and stress to enhance their professional identity and well-being.

8.2. Strengthen school governance and accountability

- **Functional School Management Committees (SMCs):** Revitalize and empower SMCs with clear roles, responsibilities and decision-making authority in school planning, resource utilization and monitoring. Ensure active and meaningful participation of parents, teachers and community members, aligning with the spirit of decentralization advocated by the National Education Policy 2020.
- **Supportive accountability frameworks**: Implement accountability mechanisms that are supportive, fostering continuous improvement rather than solely punitive. This includes regular performance reviews, constructive feedback and capacity-building for school leaders and teachers (Yan, 2020) [43].
- **Transparent communication channels:** Establish robust and multi-directional communication channels within schools (between leadership and teachers) and between schools and parents/community, promoting transparency and collaborative problem-solving (Yan, 2020) [43]. This aligns with the principles of participatory development emphasized by Drèze and Sen (2013) [9].

8.3. Optimize financial investment and resource utilization

- **Increased and targeted allocation**: Advocate for a sustained increase in the percentage of GDP and state budget allocated to education, ensuring that the investment is adequate to meet the ambitious goals of quality. The Kothari Commission's (1964-66) [19] long-standing recommendation of 6% of GDP must be a tangible target.
- **Efficient resource management:** Implement robust financial management systems to ensure efficient and transparent utilization of allocated funds, with a clear focus on direct classroom benefits, teacher support and infrastructure maintenance.
- **Technological integration:** Invest strategically in modern educational technology infrastructure and digital learning platforms to complement traditional teaching, enhance learning experiences and support teacher training, aligning with Ministry of Education initiatives like PM-SHRI (GoI, 2022).

8.4. Innovate curriculum and pedagogical practices

- **Competency-based learning**: Shift towards a competency-based curriculum that prioritizes critical thinking, creativity, communication and collaboration over rote memorization, preparing students for the 21st-century workforce (Zhao, 2009; Robinson, 2006) [33, 44].
- **Experiential and activity-based learning**: Promote activity-based, experiential learning methodologies that make education more engaging and relevant for students, as advocated by the National Curriculum Framework (NCERT, 2005).
- **Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE):** Strengthen the foundational stage of ECCE, recognizing its profound impact on long-term learning outcomes (Heckman, 2008) [17] and integrate it more seamlessly with the formal schooling system.

8.5. Foster community and parental engagement

- **Active parental involvement:** Develop systematic programs to encourage active parental involvement in their children's learning journey and in school activities, parent-teacher meetings and decision-making processes, recognizing parents as key stakeholders. As Rajput (2004, p. 78) [27] observes, “When parents are actively involved, the learning environment and school accountability both improve.” Similarly, Heckman (2008, p. 89) [17] emphasizes that “parental environment and engagement are often more decisive than formal schooling in the early years,” underscoring the long-term benefits of fostering strong parental participation from the foundational stages of education.
- **Community-school partnerships:** Cultivate strong partnerships between schools and local communities, leveraging community resources, expertise and support for school development and student welfare.

By pursuing these comprehensive and interconnected recommendations, Delhi can aspire to achieve a transformative leap in its government school system, ultimately ensuring that every child receives genuinely high-quality and equitable education, setting a powerful example for India's national education aspirations, a vision consistent with that articulated by Kalam’s (2010) [18] for ignited minds.

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