

Educational access in India : a policy focus

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This Policy Brief describes and explains patterns of access to schools in India. It outlines policy and legislation on access to education and provides an analysis of access, vulnerability and exclusion. The quantitative data is supported by a review of research which explains the patterns of access and exclusion. It is based on findings from the Country Analytic Report on Access to Basic Education in India which can be found on the CREATE website.

In 1950 India made a Constitutional commitment to provide free and compulsory education to all children up to the age of 14. In 2002 a constitutional amendment made free and compulsory education a fundamental right for children aged 6-14. Yet, universal access to elementary education remains elusive and quality of provision erratic. Provision of quality education in India is an enormous quantitative challenge. In 2004-2005, data available from the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) showed that 182 million students were enrolled in 1.04 million elementary schools (grades 1-8) across the country (GoI, 2007a). This accounted for approximately 82% of children in the 5-14 year age group in that year. Over the past two decades demand for schooling in India has increased, but provision is unequal. The National Policy on Education (NPE) (1986) and its Programme of Action (POA) (1992) state that all children, irrespective of caste, creed, location or gender, should have access to elementary education of a comparable quality. But in reality, schooling provision favours those better off, and disadvantaged groups (including poor children, girls, children from Scheduled Caste (SC), Scheduled Tribe (ST), Other Backward Class (OBC) groups) have less access and access to poorer quality education. Large variations in access exist across different states, geographical areas, and social categories such as gender, caste and ethnicity. Policy makers whilst making great strides to improve

physical access to schools, have ongoing challenges to provide meaningful access for all children in India.

Indian policy context:

Education in India is the joint responsibility of the central and state governments, and educational rights to education are provided for within the Constitution. Further commitments to the universalization of education as well as the legal, administrative and financial frameworks for the government-funded education system are found in two main sources. These are the on-going series of Five Year Plans for National Development and the National Policy on Education (NPE) (1986), with its Programme of Action (1992). Additionally, Sarva Siksha Abhiyan (SSA) is a programme which aims to achieve universal elementary education of satisfactory quality by 2010.

The general pattern of education adopted at the national level, commonly known as the 10+2+3 pattern, envisages a broad-based general education for all pupils during the first ten years of schooling. The elementary education which has now been made free and compulsory for the children of 6-14 years age group includes primary (I-V) and upper-primary/middle (VI-VIII) stages. Most states conduct examinations after class VIII for entry to secondary school. A policy of automatic promotion has been introduced at the elementary stages to encourage children to continue their education to at least Grade 8, whilst minimizing repetition and dropout. As a result of the NPE policy initiatives changes are being made on the ground. A massive infrastructure development and teacher recruitment drive was initiated nationally. NPE (1986) focused on the need for improvements to school environments (including building conditions, availability of tap water and toilet facilities), instructional material and teacher training. The District Primary Education Programme (1994) brought additional resources to the sector through the involvement of bilateral and multilateral donors. Village education committees, parent-teacher and mother-teacher associations have become active across the country. Legislative moves to bring elementary education under Panchayati Raj Institutions (local self-

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