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#### SUMMARY

*This year's Annual State of Education Report needs to be greeted with more than the usual worried nod. The bad news is not new, but it's really bad.*

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Acknowledgment of the problem, from the very top of the hierarchy down to the district administration, will be essential if teachers are going to be persuaded to take teaching seriously.

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*This year's Annual State of Education Report needs to be greeted with more than the usual worried nod. The bad news is not new, but it's really bad.*

We were in rural Uttar Pradesh recently, visiting a programme that Pratham was running. When we walked into a school, we saw a group of teachers sitting on the verandah, enjoying the mild November sun; the head invited us to sit with them.

"No classes today?" "No. The Pratham people are here. They are doing a great job. Very sincere." "How about the rest of the standards — isn't the Pratham programme only in third and fourth?" "Well, the older children have not shown up today. And the ones who have come are busy." She motioned towards the other end of the verandah, where a couple of sixth or seventh standard girls were minding twenty-odd first and second standard children. We did not know what to say.

The conversation drifted towards the problem of student attendance. "Parents these days care more about getting some work out of the

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children", she offered, with no apparent sense of irony.

There were no classes going on in the other school either. Except the ones conducted by the Pratham team. The younger kids were sitting under a large tree, watching lunch being prepared. The head invited us to join him at his table. "Aren't you teaching?". "I don't teach". He motioned towards the register, suggesting that it keeps him busy. The teacher who does teach was out for the day. "Her problem is that she is very beautiful. One of the people in the district administration keeps harassing her". "The whole system is corrupt. When I first took the job, we were paid a few thousand rupees. Now I get paid so much that I can't spend it. The problem is that people take the job for the money".

That was a first — someone complaining about being paid too much. The usual presumption is, of course, the opposite — that high salaries are the way to attract the best people and motivate them — and this is the stated justification for why UP pays teachers more than ten times the state's per capita GDP.

For comparison, the highest ratio of maximum teacher pay to per capita GDP in Europe is in Cyprus, where it is close to 2.5. Yet it is clear that such a high pay could be counterproductive, attracting the wrong kind of people. Perhaps in the old days when teachers were poorly paid, people went into teaching because they valued the respect that good teachers got from the community, and therefore strove to do their job well.

Perhaps, also, the fact that they needed the money more encouraged them to work harder on becoming known as a good teacher so as to be able to attract students for tuitions.

All of this is compounded by the fact that there is no obvious reward for performance. Those who are absent a lot and put no effort into teaching get their raises just like those who do. Children are promoted automatically, and for the most part, there is no one who is keeping track of what they are learning. It cannot be easy, unless you are especially motivated, to muster up a lot of enthusiasm for teaching a bloated syllabus to kids who have, as Pratham's Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) shows year after year, mostly fallen way behind.

This is why this year's release of ASER needs to be greeted with more than the usual worried nod; it is true that the bad news is not new, but it's really bad, as the deputy chairman of the planning commission, Montek Singh Ahluwalia, acknowledged while releasing the report — 78 per cent of children in standard III and 53 per cent of children in standard V cannot read a standard II level text. Moreover, this year's data removes all doubt that the scores have substantially deteriorated after 2009, ironically the year the Right to Education Act was passed. We are in a crisis; we might as well call it that.

The good news is that Ahluwalia is not the only one. There seems to be a permeating sense of a crisis in the upper echelons of the federal government and some of the state governments. Acknowledgment of the problem, from the very top of the hierarchy down to the district administration, will be essential if teachers are going to be persuaded to take teaching seriously. Perhaps one reason why Bihar and Punjab do relatively well in ASER while Tamil Nadu does badly, is that the state leadership in those states recognises that there is a big problem, while Tamil Nadu has mostly taken the view that the ASER data is wrong.

Once there is agreement on this issue, there is a lot that there can be done (in addition to trying to get teachers to care). Ahluwalia mentioned



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remedial teaching to help children catch up — the state and/or district authorities in Bihar, Haryana, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Punjab, UP and West Bengal have teamed up with Pratham to develop these kinds of programmes. He also mentioned that the insistence on covering the syllabus, often at the expense of teaching the child, is a big problem. We could not agree more.

Finally, one idea that is gaining increasing traction inside and outside government, is increased reliance on public-private partnership and private schools. We know from the work of Karthik Muralidharan and others that private schools deliver at least as much learning at a fraction of the cost, because unlike government schools they pay teachers market wages. At the same funding level, they may be able to do much better.

At some level, this is acknowledging a fait accompli: In 2013, about 28 per cent of rural children were in private schools, up from 18 per cent in 2006. Yet, there is a risk that the public-private partnership idea becomes the new mantra — a new distraction, a new way to avoid asking the real question.

If private schools are really going to be a large part of the solution, what happens to the million and more teachers on the government payroll? Given their political weight, it is unlikely that any government will let them go. The large majority of teachers and perhaps students will thus remain in government schools, and finding ways to make them work has to be a matter of national urgency.

Betting entirely on private schools, and letting the entire government system slowly bleed to death would be cynical and dangerous. The initiatives taken by some state governments suggest that it does not have to be this way.

*Banerjee is Ford Foundation International Professor of Economics at MIT, US. Duflo is the Abdul Latif Jameel Professor of Poverty Alleviation and Development Economics in the department of economics at MIT*

**Abhijit V. Banerjee and Esther Duflo**

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