

School Consolidation in Karnataka: An Investigation

Introduction

Over the past few decades, India has made significant progress towards educating its once largely illiterate populace. With the help of progressive policies such as The National Policy on Education 1986, *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan* and The Right to Free and Compulsory Education Act 2009 (just to name a few), the nation's literacy rate has risen at a steady pace. This has led to the proliferation of an immense network of schools all over the country (more than 1.5 million) educating 260 million children from grades 1-12, making universal access to education, as envisioned by Article 45 of India's Constitution, an attainable reality. As of today, around 96% of the villages in the nation have an elementary school within a radius of 3km.¹

However, while access to education been improved, India continues to suffer from poor quality education. According to economist Geeta Kingdon, in 2015-16, 418,825 (~40%) government schools had total enrolment less than 50, and 108,183 government schools (~10.3%) had an enrolment of less than 20. Furthermore, These numbers have been climbing higher every year, indicating a long term trend of govt. school emptying up.² This has had an adverse impact on govt. school enrollments as a whole, while also leading to degrading infrastructure quality in the effected schools. The situation is exacerbated by declining fertility rates in India, a growing preference for private schools amongst parents in rural districts and teacher absenteeism.

As a result, policy makers around India are looking at school consolidation as a means of improving educational quality in government in schools. This report will analyze the possibility of doing so in Karnataka using a holistic framework.

Karnataka: An Overview

Karnataka's convoluted school system is divided into a combination of primary, upper primary, secondary, and higher secondary level schools ranging from grades 1-5, 6-7/6-8, 8-10/9-10 and 11-12 respectively.³ There are a total of around 75,000 schools in the state as of 2015-2016 according to the Unified District Information on School Education (UDISE). Of these, there are 45,000 plus govt. schools serviced by the state department.

Like much of the nation, Karnataka is suffering deteriorating enrollment in govt. schools. Between 2010 and 2016 the average enrollment in govt. schools in the state dropped by 10 students to 89 while that in private school increased by 3 students to 230.⁴ As many as 15,000 govt. schools have 5 students or fewer per class. Furthermore, the situation is worse in state

¹ *Education For All Towards Quality with Equity INDIA*. <https://mhrd.gov.in>

² *The Private Schooling Phenomenon in India: A Review*. <http://ftp.iza.org>

³ Jolad, Shivkumar. *Restructuring Government Schools in Karnataka*. <https://akshara.org.in>

⁴ UDISE. <http://www.dise.in/>

primary schools where more than 70% of the schools have less than 50 students. Therefore, it is imperative that the state govt. undertake policy actions to help ameliorate this deterioration in the quality of govt. education. School consolidation is a powerful toolkit in regards to this, if done right.

Consolidation Case Studies

Understanding the consequences of school consolidation in other nations and in different Indian states can help us understand how to define clear objectives while framing an effective policy that inhibits potential negative outcomes.

United States

In the 1930's schools in the US were small, community run institutions, with most employing a single teacher, similar to those in found in rural India today. Since then the no. of school districts in the US have declined by 100,000 or 90%⁵. Research conducted on the topic has provided important insights:

- Students adapted better than teachers, enjoying diverse social opportunities. However, students moving from smaller schools had adjustment problems. Even teachers who remained in the same school had trouble forming connections with new teachers.
- Students and teachers experienced academic and professional benefits after consolidation. Students had more course offerings while teachers had more professional development opportunities. However, moving teachers often experienced loss of confidence, increased stress and greater turnover.
- There was a loss of intimacy in larger schools for both groups due to a larger class size.
- Transportation was a challenge for moving students and teachers (who often had to relocate).
- Teachers liked that they now had to prepare for less classes and could focus more on quality.
- Interestingly, larger schools did not necessarily have better infrastructure or technology.

India

A handful of states in India have made attempts to consolidate schools. Srinivasa Rao has helped study these mergers in the states of Rajasthan and Odisha, thereby bringing to light policy failures and key areas to improve upon:

Rajasthan

Two key criteria of consolidation were followed leading to ambiguity:

- Primary schools with less than 30 children would be merged with those situated within 1 Km of it with the aim of reaching at least 30 students.

⁵ *A Phenomenological Study of Rural School Consolidation*. <http://jrre.vmhhost.psu.edu>

- Primary schools within the vicinity of a secondary/higher secondary school would be merged with it forming an *Adarsh Vidhalaya* or “Model School”.⁶

Around 14,672 primary schools have been merged since the policy was implemented with another 4,400 under proposal. The study highlighted some key issues with consolidation such as children dropping out due to lack of proper access to their new schools and no clear system to provide transport or cover any costs related to it for moving kids. Furthermore, there was no consultation with stakeholders including parents about the mergers and school closings

Odisha

Consolidation in Odisha is to be conducted in two phases:

- Phase 1: Schools with an enrolment of 5 or less than 5 children should be merged with a nearby school.
- Phase 2: (under consideration): Schools with an enrolment of 10 or less than 10 children are to be merged with a nearby school.

Around 5,000 schools in the state have been merged or closed under this policy. Unlike in Rajasthan, the govt. promised to provide a transport facility if the closed schools were located in tribal or remote places. Furthermore, a *Shikya Sahayak* is to be appointed to each merged school ensure the transition from the closed schools. Teachers are also to be transferred to the nearest consolidated school and there is a provision to demerge schools if there is adequate demand. Therefore, the Odisha policy is more holistic than that of Rajasthan.

Defining Objectives And Considerations

The Karnataka Government should have clear and defined objectives when moving forward with a policy for consolidating schools. These objectives will help formulate a well-rounded policy that caters to improving the quality of education in the state while mitigating potential pitfalls. Analyzing outcomes of consolidation policies elsewhere and following the MHRD guidelines for rationalizing small schools provides us these objectives:⁷

- Focus on improving quality without hampering access to schools for children. This would be in violation of the RTE Act of 2019.
- Schools should not just be closed, they should be merged or reorganized with existing schools. This is important to prevent decline in enrollments.

⁶ Rao, Srinivasa & Ganguly, Sriti & Singh, Juhi & Dash, Roma. (2017). *School Closures and Mergers: A Multi-state study of policy and its impact on public education system - Telangana, Odisha and Rajasthan* (2017).

⁷ *Guidelines for rationalising small schools*. MHRD

https://mhrd.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/Guidelines%20for%20Rationalization.pdf

- The entire process of should be carried out with the interest of the child in mind first and foremost. Furthermore, vulnerable populations such as tribal and girl child should be not be disadvantaged in any way.
- Teachers and resources should be managed and reallocated to the merged schools in an efficient manner. There should be policies in places to ensure educators are not effected negatively by the consolidation in terms of disruption in personal life.
- Similarly, the transition for students should be made as smooth as possible with an existing support structure to address any issues and a process in place to make the migrating students acquainted with the new school before the transition.
- Quality checks should be in place to ensure new school has adequate class room, toilets, mid-day meal provisions and other key infrastructure for all students.
- School consolidation should ensure vertical integration across different levels of schooling for continuity, and sharing of teaching resources.
- The process for rationalization of small schools should adhere to the neighborhood norms of the State/UT.
- There should be a focus on achieving cost efficiencies through economies of scale and reducing operating costs.
- It is imperative to have consultations with key stake holders such as parents, children, panchayats and other local bodies to ensure grievances are addressed in an effective manner.
- No school closing should be permanent, and there should be a possibility of demerger if required.
- Local customs should be respected. The merged schools should reflect the culture of the new students.
- Different districts may have different profiles in terms of socio-economic needs, physical geographies, interpersonal relationships in the community etc. Therefore, the consolidation should not be a “one size fits all” approach.
- Transparency regarding consolidation plan with an emphasis on the potential benefits (e.g., enhanced program or curriculum offerings, special services, etc.).
- There should be a mechanism in place to monitor the process of consolidation and a grievance redressal system to address the violations of RTE that may come about.
- Infrastructure should

Building A Framework

In order to build a robust framework to carry out the process of consolidation in Karnataka, the state should draw inspiration from existing ones and follow key considerations to satisfy the needs of all stake holders.

- According to the *Kothari Commission* of 1966⁸, optimal size of lower primary schools should be in the range of 160-200, with 4-5 teachers and a headmaster. Similarly, the optimal size of upper primary schools should be in the range 300-400 with 7-8 teachers and a headmaster

⁸ Jolad, Shivakumar. *Restructuring India's schooling system*. <https://www.ideasforindia.in>

- Furthermore, the RTE act of 2009 states that there should be a primary school (grade 1-5) within 1 km distance from the habitation of a child and an upper primary school (grade 6-8) within 3 km walking distance.
- According to the Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan (RMSA), a secondary school should be set up within 5 km from the habitation.⁹

Karnataka State Education Policy (KSEP)

The Karnataka State Education Policy (KSEP) as prepared by the Karnataka Jnana Aayoga in 2016 helps provides a rudimentary structure for school consolidation in the state:¹⁰

- In every panchayat of the State, there should be a consolidated school system from pre-school through Grade 1-12 in a single campus.
- Grades 11-12 should become an integral part of secondary school by bringing both lower secondary education (high school) and higher secondary education (pre-university) under the ambit of a single Commissionerate for Secondary Education.

Possible Scenarios

Based on the above mentioned guidelines, Dr. Shivkumar Jolad, has helped built a model that can be used a tool by the state Govt. in determining how to consolidate schools in the state whilst adhering to RTE norms and standards for schools

Table 1¹¹

Level	Enrolment per class	Total Classes	No. of sections	Total	Teachers
Primary	30	5	1	150	5+1=6
Upper Primary	35	3	1	105	3 (subject wise)
Model-1: Elementary (E) C1-C8		8	1	255 (200-300)	8+1=9
Secondary (SS)	30	2	2	120	6+1 (6 subject wise)
Model II: E+SS: C1-C10		10	1	375 (350-450)	8+6+1 (head teacher)=15

Therefore, according to the Dr. Jolad’s research and the data provided in the table above the state government should first look at consolidating primary and upper primary schools that form the bulk of the states’ school system into schools with around 255 students and 9 teachers. This

⁹ Jolad, Shivakumar. *Restructuring India’s schooling system*. <https://www.ideasforindia.in>

¹⁰ *Karnataka State Education Policy*. <https://www.karnataka.gov.in>

¹¹ Jolad, Shivkumar *Restructuring Government Schools in Karnataka*. <https://akshara.org.in>

would lead to a reduction of 29,581 schools in the system. Furthermore, as primary schools are also the ones most effected by declining school enrollment and competition from private schools, restructuring them would be the most resourceful way to make the public school system more efficient by opening up resources that can be allocated to improving school quality.

Based on the results of this initial consolidation, the state government can choose to merge the primary and upper primary schools with secondary schools as recommended by the KSEP to create schools with ~375 students and 15 teachers, leading to a reduction of 34,546 schools in the state. However, with more stringent requirements in terms of the educational and infrastructural resources, this consolidated school system would be much more expensive to create.

Conclusion

Burdened by falling fertility rates, a growing migration to private schools and declining yields on value-for-money from public education expenditure, Karnataka's govt. schools, much like those in the rest of the country are in need of a systematic overhaul if they are to be viable in the coming future. There needs to be a policy transition from focusing primarily on school access to the overall quality of the education system as a whole, and consolidation of govt. schools is a powerful tool in regards to this. By creating bigger schools with more educational and infrastructural resources, the Government of Karnataka can help improve the quality of education by focusing on learning outcomes and student development. The cost savings generated by such consolidation can help fund improved facilities for students, comprehensive teacher training programs and better governance of the school system as a whole. Consolidation can, therefore, serve as important instrument to clog the drain of students to private schools and help rejuvenate the public school system.

However, it is imperative that any such consolidation exercise be conducted around the student's importance foremost. There needs to be consultations with all key stake holders to ensure no child is left behind. Furthermore, transportation provisions and transitioning policies should be in places to make sure the consolidation does not do more harm than good. The new schools should be monitored post-merger to ensure that the outcomes are positive and if grievances do come up, they should be addressed in a systematic manner.