Leading Schools through Transparency: A Measure for Accountability

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The Context

Schools are responsible for student achievement and school functionaries are held accountable for learning of all students irrespective of their socio-economic and religious background. The school heads and system level administrators need to ensure that they create a conducive environment for learning. This necessitates transparency on the part of school leaders, in their behaviour, actions and functioning. One can say that transparency is the cornerstone of good governance of school education.

Transparency, in the framework of school education, can be understood as access to information by different stakeholders which include teachers, students, school heads, system level functionaries, parents etc. Here 'access' would imply timely and reliable information on decisions and performance in the public sector, represented by the school. Transparency refers to being open, participative and engaging stakeholders in all stages of planning and implementation. This would enhance the ownership of stakeholders in schooling processes and ensure trust-building with the school head. In few situations, confidentiality is essential, such as student's personal issues or a crisis being faced by a teacher. However, in such cases, it is important that the school leader shares and maintains a two-way communication channel with the concerned student/teacher and help to resolve the issue at hand. This also comes under the purview of transparency.

It is argued that when stakeholders have access to information and are a critical part of decision making, only then they can be considered as meaningful contributors to a well-functioning school. The understanding of the term transparency is closely associated with making educational institutes more accountable to their stakeholders, not only in terms of resources but also financial management. Transparency includes accessibility to information as its most critical parameter. However, merely putting out data in the open or uploading dataset online is not sufficient: rather, steps must be taken to actively seek to make information on data, processes and school policy accessible to all citizens (Poisson, 2019). Transparency also emphasizes an unambiguous description of the roles and responsibilities of members of school-based management structures. These measures, together, can be seen as essential to deal with the mistrust associated with public institutions as well as a precondition for public accountability (Bovens, 2020). Thus, we can say that transparency and accountability go hand in hand. If a school is transparent, the teachers/ staff and school heads can be held accountable for their actions.

Why Transparency in Schools?

Transparency allows teams to come together and promote authentic relationships. The effects of transparency can be profound. Most importantly, students do better when school heads and teachers function in an open environment. Schools collect and keep information of each student which includes their academic performance, family background, behavioural traits and medical records. The school needs to share information with parents of the student for their academic and social well-being. This will help the parents to become aware of aspects of their child that they do not know of. For instance, if the child does not

come to school though he/she left for school from home or is indulged in deviant behaviour, information sharing between the school head/teacher and parents will enable them to take necessary action at the initial stage only. If we apply the principle of Johari window here, one can say that the parents have got to know the area regarding their children that has remained hidden (Johari Window, NCSL Handbook 2014). After receiving information on the academic progress of children, the parents can also give the feedback which may improve the learning competencies of students. This implies an accountability mechanism on the part of the school leaders/teachers and parents.

As an academic leader, the school head needs to supervise teaching learning process in a transparent way without any biases. If the teacher is finding any difficulty in understanding the basic concept, necessary academic supports like arranging for capacity development programme or mentoring by senior school teachers can be planned and implemented (NISHTHA 2021). As a teacher leader, if the teachers explore the challenges/problems being faced by students' learning in a transparent manner, the teacher can improve the learning processes and learning outcomes can be enhanced. Each student has different learning ability and style; if the teacher explains to the student and his/her parents as to the areas in which improvement is required like in writing skills or conceptual understanding of the content, the student stands to benefit. The students get an understanding as to how and why teachers had structured their learning experiences in such a way that their learning levels have improved. Transparent teaching learning practices are of most benefit to underrepresented, first-generation, and low-income students (Winkelmes, 2016). In organizing transparent teaching learning processes, the role of school leader is critical as he/she is instrumental in building a transparent school culture.

Another significant area in which transparency is required for smooth functioning of school is the awareness on fund procurement and its utilization. In India, School Management Committees have been entrusted with the responsibility of monitoring fund utilization for the school. To prevent leakages in financial matters, appropriate records need to be maintained and shared. Micro level studies have shown that this remains still a weak area (Chugh, 2021).

In India, national and state level initiatives with regard to school database has been taken and school database has been created on different parameters. These database deal with school information, school evaluation, and student assessment for all government and government aided schools in the country, aggregated at national level and open for the public. The unit for each of these database is the 'school', and it is expected that all the information is made available at national, provincial/state, district, block or cluster level that is generated at the school level. School related data can serve a critical purpose. It can be used as a powerful tool for social audit as well to ensure transparency, accountability and citizen engagement of the education system. Even though it is aggregated at the national level for the purposes of national and state level planning and management, the real use of this data lies in the hands of the school. The available school related data can be used for decision-making, creating school development plans, managing resources or other activities that form part of social audit by the community.

Leadership Strategies to build Transparency:

There are multiple strategies that a school leader can employ in creating a transparent school culture, which guarantees accountability amongst each stakeholder:

Provide holistic Picture/Scenario

While formulating the school development

plan, the school leaders need to share all aspects or information related to the plan to each stakeholder. The school head, teachers, SMC members can collaboratively discuss the possible interventions required to fulfill the targets/ goals to be achieved in the coming year and next three years. In this transparent process, the stakeholders will be involved and have a higher sense of ownership in the school.

Regular Meeting with staff/students

The school heads need to have regular meeting with the teachers, parents and system level functionaries to keep themselves updated on recent developments pertaining to school education. Similarly, the school heads need to have regular meetings with the system level functionaries to discuss various issues, challenges or innovations taking place in their respective school.

Two Way Communication

Open and two-way communication is an integral part of transparency. All the matters concerning the school must be communicated to different stakeholders and their opinion must be sought. This will enable participative decision-making processes to become a reality in the school.

Respect Diverse/ divergent opinion

There could be different opinion on same issues, for instance, the school team is involved in setting priority areas for school development. Since this is an open area, there can be divergent views of the SMC members, school head, teachers and parent representatives on the same. In such case, divergent views must be heard, valued, debated upon, discussed and a common consensus must be arrived at, with the facilitation of school leader. This will bring accountability of each stakeholder into the developmental process of the school.

Conclusion

An important area of concern in school education is enhancing student learning outcomes. For this, sharing of information with different stakeholders is essential. In this regard, the idea and execution of transparency in public education system has gained momentum. Transparent system ensures equal participation of different stakeholders in the planning and implementation of programmes for the holistic development of students. Transparency also brings accountability as each stakeholder is well-informed right from the beginning. However, Indian education system is still translucent; more efforts are required to make it transparent which will improve efficiency of the system and ultimately benefit the student.

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