

Open Letter to Hon Minister of Education, Government of Karnataka

Dear Mr. Kimmane Rathnakar,

We read recently in a [leading newspaper](#) that around 1,400 private, unaided schools operating without valid recognition will be closed down in Karnataka. The news article also mentions that the Department of Public Instruction would survey these schools starting 30th October 2014. The reasons put forward for initiating the survey of unaided private schools are, "sub-standard quality of education, lack of facilities and absence of teachers". We at National Independent Schools Alliance (NISA) are shocked by this move not only because such a decision will close down large number of unaided private schools but also because it will directly impact approximately 3.59 lakh school going children in Karnataka. This is particularly alarming in light of that fact that 21.9% of children in rural Karnataka alone attend private schools, a large number of which are private unaided schools.

The news article raises an issue of "unauthorised schools" running without a valid recognition. It also mentions how CBSE and ISFC recognised schools are violating the norms of State Education Act and that Government is planning to "Amend the Karnataka Education Act 1992 to bring all CBSE and ICSE schools under the ambit of the state government". It is true that under RTE, States have been given the rights to regulate the schools within respective states. The logical solution here would be to identify what areas of CBSE and ISFC are not in alignment with Karnataka RTE Rules and work out where the State government wants to intervene rather than a blanket closure of these schools, which as it were, are duly recognised under CBSE or ICSE.

The issue in Karnataka, as you must be aware, is of medium of instruction rather than of these schools being completely unauthorised. Many schools that you refer to as "unauthorised" are in fact recognised under State Education Act as Kannada medium schools but are providing English medium education. That there is a demand for English medium education, particularly from poor and lower middle class parents is a known fact. In fact, it is one of the core reasons why poor parents across the country are opting for low budget private schools over government schools. In light of this, the issue of schools recognised under State Education Act, providing English medium education amounts to violation of rules rather than being unauthorised. The solution here would be to reconsider the language policy 1994 of the state, which restricts the number of English medium schools recognised every year under State Education Act.



The news article also mentions that not a single government school faces issues related to recognition. The fact is that government arguably chooses not to derecognise government schools, although many of them are RTE non-compliant. DISE 2013-14 data shows that 11,549 out of total 21,996 government schools in Karnataka do not have playgrounds, 7,300 do not have compound walls, 6,000 do not have ramps and 500 do not even have electricity. ASER 2012 data shows that only 66.9% government schools in Karnataka meet pupil-teacher ratio norms, whereas approximately 57% schools have usable separate toilets for boys and girls. What action does the government intend to take against these RTE non-compliant government schools?

While we appreciate your concern on overall quality of education in Karnataka, we must mention that it is high time we consider Learning Outcomes of children as a key indicator of quality and not compound walls or size of principal's cabin, which has been the case so far. Presently, in Karnataka the challenge of poor learning outcomes is a much greater one for government than the private schools. This is evident in [ASER 2012 report](#), which shows a wide contrast between learning outcomes in private and government schools, with private schools outperforming government schools across all academic parameters such as reading and mathematical abilities.

In light of this, we are not entirely clear of the intent, methodology and focus of the survey of unaided private schools that the government is planning to start in all 204 Education Block. It would be important to announce upfront what parameters of education quality the survey takes into consideration. Is the government planning to conduct large-scale assessments of learning outcomes? If not, how else do they plan to comment on quality of education? At this point, the intent of this survey seems more to be creating grounds for closure of unaided private schools, than to actually make an objective assessment of their quality.

The fact that increasing number of parents from financially weaker sections of society are opting to send their children to private schools indicates that they have better hopes from private schools. Contrary to the popular belief, a very small percentage of these schools charge high fees, while a vast majority of them charge fees anywhere between Rs 200 to Rs 800 per month per child, which is lesser than the per child cost of education incurred by the government. This is in tune with the observation recorded in draft Approach paper to 11th Plan that if an effective choice is given to the poor at the same cost, they would invariably prefer private education. Closing down of unaided private schools on the grounds of perceived lack of quality would mean forcing government education on parents and depriving poor parents and children of education of choice, which clearly is not the aim of Right to Education Act.



Closure or de-recognition of schools, both private and public, will not solve the issue of quality of Education. A step towards achieving quality is developing a regulatory framework with substantial focus on learning outcomes and limited focus on inputs in education. NISA and its affiliates, many of whom are academicians, policy experts as well as school leaders representing 36,000 low budget private schools in India, are happy to work with you in developing such a framework. Simplifying the school recognition process itself could be another step in that direction. Our research shows that to be able to open a school in India, a school owner on an average requires anywhere between 35 to 71 different licenses and permissions. This highly complex and lengthy recognition process arguably contributes towards schools being unauthorised or running without proper recognition and eventually also facing the threat of closure.

We request you to appreciate the fact that unaided low budget private schools today are playing a very vital role in country's education landscape by making affordable education available to parents and children from poor economic backgrounds. A closer look at enrolment statistics will show that the only two choices poor parents have when it comes to educating their children are government schools and low budget private (unaided) schools. High cost private schools are far beyond the reach of poor parents, even with the provisions of 25% reservations. Closing down of unaided private schools will add the burden on government schools or force the parents to spend more and send their children to higher cost schools. The end result of both is direct or indirect denial of right to education to children from economically backward families!

Looking forward to a positive response from you.

For the Right to Education of Choice!

[National Independent Schools Alliance](#)

(An initiative of [Centre for Civil Society](#))

