

Executive Summary
of
The Private School Revolution in Bihar: Findings from a survey in Patna Urban
By Baladevan Rangaraju, James Tooley & Pauline Dixon

It is common knowledge that private unaided schools, including low cost schools, are “mushrooming” across the country. But knowledge of the sector is very limited, as very few studies have adequately mapped the phenomenon. In particular, a study that analyses the complete private schools’ landscape within one city has never before been carried out. Conducting a thorough on-the-ground census of private unaided schools in Patna Urban, this study attempts to fill some of the gaps in our knowledge. By focusing on a previously unstudied phenomenon in an entire Tier II city, the findings of this study will have implications for the entire country in the wake of the regulations for private schools in the Right to Education (RTE) Act.

The official data shows private education as an entirely insignificant part of the educational landscape in Bihar: The District Information System for Education (DISE) data for 2008-2009 estimates a total of 93 private schools *for the whole of Bihar*. Provisional data for 2009-10 suggest 14 private schools in the entire state. Our study found these figures grossly underestimate the true picture. In Patna Urban alone, our study team visited 1,224 private unaided schools – and even this is a lower bound on the true number, as of course we cannot be sure that we visited all of the schools. Despite the apparently insignificant official number of such schools, in fact, private unaided schools make up the vast majority of schools in Patna – 78%, compared to only 21% of government schools and 1% of private aided.

Classifying private unaided schools into three categories, based on their monthly fee levels, our analysis shows that 69% of private unaided schools are low cost, 22% affordable, and only 9% higher cost. That is, the vast majority of private unaided schools found in Urban Patna were low cost, charging fees less than Rs. 300/- per month. These schools were not found to be operating in secluded pockets of the city or in the fringes alone. In fact, plotting the location of 1182 private schools and 111 government schools using GIS technology, we found that there existed hardly a road or a street in Patna without a private school. Significantly, the number of private schools within one kilometre radius of a government school ranged between 9 and 93.

Concerning enrolment, using the figures we found in the private schools and trusting those supplied by government, we suggest fully 65% of schoolchildren in Patna attend private unaided schools, with just 34% attending government schools.

Moreover, classifying private school attendance by fee bands reveal that there are roughly as many children in low cost private schools as there are in government schools, (32% compared to 34%). That is, nearly 1 out of 3 children in urban Patna attend a low cost private school.

These findings are quite revolutionary. Until now, there has been no data on schools in Patna that has included *all* private unaided schools. Since the DISE data do not include unrecognised schools, this study has found that the existing data exclude three quarters of the schools operating in the city. They also exclude close to 68% of the city's elementary level students. This amounts to missing education information on at least 2, 38,764 of the approximately 3, 33,776 students enrolled in primary and upper primary schools.

We supplemented our detailed survey with interviews with a random sample survey of 361 households. This household survey shows that nearly 70% of those with children in government schools would prefer to send their children to private unaided schools if they could afford to do so. More than half the respondents did not think the government schools provided quality education. In fact, about a fifth seemed to have chosen a government school only for non-educational benefits such as the free midday meal and uniforms.

Section 19 of the RTE Act, 2009 requires that all unrecognised schools in the country be closed down within three years of the Act coming into force. For Patna, this would mean shutting down almost all private unaided schools which will result in a host of problems. If unrecognised schools were to close down, finding space for two thirds of the city's children who attend these schools in government ones that are said to be operating to capacity serving the other one third is impossible. Instead what is required is not to seek to close private unaided schools but to come up with a more innovative policy aimed at capitalising on the existing institutions.

We recommend a new recognition policy that would bring the unrecognised schools out of the extra-legal sector without having to abide by a host of rules and laws that do not focus on quality or children's educational attainment and which represent needles barriers to entry, innovation and entrepreneurship.

To encourage focus on quality, and to ensure minimum levels of transparency and fairness in the market, the government should create a healthy school eco-system. This requires planning based on authentic data on all types of schools and appreciation for better performing schools. To achieve the later, we recommend that all schools be rated annually, preferably through external agencies or self-regulation, against a well-defined, researched and meaningful set of input and performance indicators.