

School ranks

High-performing States with good schools can nudge others if they have the political will

The Union Education Ministry has been attempting to get States into a competitive mode in upgrading their school education system by recognising progress with a Performance Grading Index (PGI) that assigns them a score. **It can be argued that countries and State governments use school education as a transformative tool most effectively where the political imperative is strong.** The Centre's effort with the PGI scoring system has been to try and nudge all States using a hall of fame approach. In the latest set of scores and grades for the pre-COVID-19 year, 2019-20, the Andaman and Nicobar islands, Chandigarh, Kerala, Punjab and Tamil Nadu have performed the best, although they still fall short of the 951-1,000 points slab, the highest possible. It should be heartening to 33 States and Union Territories that their PGI scores have improved over the previous year, and in the case of Andaman and Nicobar, Punjab and Arunachal Pradesh, by a noteworthy 20%. Several middling States continue to make marginal progress, some have improved merely by tweaking their data, while Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh actually regressed, although the PGI scheme is now three years old. **The score is derived using databases on 70 parameters such as access, equity, governance processes, infrastructure and facilities, and learning outcomes that are mostly self-reported by the States** but vetted by the Centre, with National Achievement Survey data also being incorporated. On some parameters, such as uneven learning outcomes between students from deprived communities and others, bridging the gap earns a better score.

The Centre, with its transparent scores and data for each parameter and sub-topic made available in the public domain, seeks to create a resource-sharing system that low-performing States can tap into. **This initiative is laudable, but it can work only if governments and Opposition parties see value in strong and open school education, and work to strengthen access, equity and infrastructure by budgeting fees and funds for universalisation.** It is such commitment that led Southeast Asia to carry out a renaissance in school education in the later decades of the last century, on the lines of Meiji-era Japan. India's school system has to contend with not just patchy access and infrastructure, but major equity issues that have come to the fore during the pandemic. Clearly, the shadow of COVID-19 will persist over the education system for the foreseeable future, and further progress on all parameters will depend on bridging the gaps, particularly on digital tools, infrastructure and subsidies for access. The PGI scores show that the southern and western States are on firm ground to achieve this, while those in central India and parts of the east and Northeast are less resourced. **What is evident from the Education Ministry analysis is that governance processes are the weakest link in some States. A new deal for schools can transform them as the Right to Education law envisages.**