Transforming Government School Education in Rajasthan:
Rajasthan Adarsh Yojana

OVERVIEW: The Rajasthan Adarsh Yojana is a holistic effort to improve government education in Rajasthan through systems reform. The initiative focuses on improving governance processes associated with education, reducing teacher and school leadership vacancies in schools, and improving school infrastructure.

ESTABLISHED: 2014

QUICK FACTS

PRIMARY PHILANTHROPISTS:
Michael & Susan Dell Foundation (Dell Foundation), Central Square Foundation (CSF)

GRANT AMOUNT:
INR 27 crores[1]
(USD 4.1 million) from the Dell Foundation;
INR 152 lakhs
(USD 225,000) from CSF

PRIMARY FOCUS:
Education

ARCHETYPE: Strengthen/reform systems
Rajasthan Adarsh Yojana aims to transform the quality of education in government schools across the state of Rajasthan through a series of holistic measures intended to improve the governance of schools, ensure adequate teachers and principals, and upgrade school infrastructure and learning.

KEY PARTNERS:
- Department of Education, Government of Rajasthan
- The Boston Consulting Group

WHY BOLD?

The Rajasthan Adarsh Yojana intends to improve the quality of education for 4.6 million students in 9,895 government schools across Rajasthan. The philanthropists are holistically supporting the government to strengthen the education system of Rajasthan. They have decided to focus their capital towards augmenting the government's core capabilities, which should ensure long-term impact.

KEY LEARNINGS

Collaborate effectively with key government stakeholders for systemic change

Focus on strengthening administrative infrastructure, which provides a foundation for other reforms
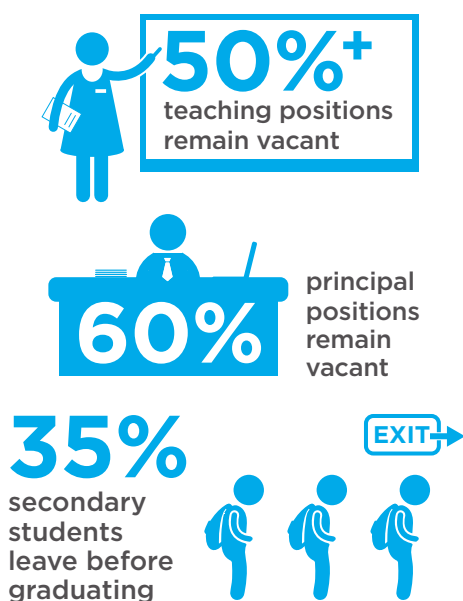
Build the system's capacity to sustain change

Use data to support behavioral change at multiple levels

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1   Conversion rates (INR to USD) reflect rates available during the April 2018 to June 2018 time period.

THE OPPORTUNITY FOR IMPACT

Until very recently, Rajasthan, India's seventh most populous state, had one of the nation's poorest performing public education systems. According to the National Achievement Survey, an assessment administered to children in government schools across India, Rajasthan's students performed consistently below the national average in reading comprehension, mathematics, language, and other subjects.[2] In 2012–2013, across all subjects and grades, Rajasthan ranked 24th out of 29 states and five union territories.[3] That dispiriting result delivered an unequivocal message: if Rajasthan was to equip its young people with the knowledge, skills, and mindsets to compete in the nation's economy—and thereby improve the state's GDP—its schools could not continue to receive failing grades.

Government schools
before the initiative

50%+
teaching positions remain vacant

60%
principal positions remain vacant

35%
secondary students leave before graduating

EXIT→

Rajasthan's 80,000 government schools were poorly equipped and understaffed. Numerous vacancies diminished the state's teaching and administrative ranks. Urvashi Sahni, advisor to the chief minister of Rajasthan, noted that until recently, more than 50 percent of the state's teaching positions and 60 percent of its openings for school principals were vacant. Many schools also lacked essential amenities. According to the 2014 Annual Status of Education Report (ASER), 37 percent of Rajasthan's rural schools lacked playgrounds, 26 percent did not have a provision for drinking water, and 23 percent did not have a separate toilet for girls.[4] Not surprisingly, almost 35 percent of the system's secondary school students left before graduating.

With high-quality public education in short supply, low-cost private schools emerged as alternatives. Private school enrollments in Standard I (first grade) through Standard V (fifth grade) had increased from about 35 percent in 2008 to 46 percent in 2014.[5] With fewer students—along with fixed and limited budgets—government schools have had to spend more per pupil to provide the same education services, challenging their viability.

Although some philanthropic organizations are trying to improve India's government schools, most address single issues, such as enrolling girls or improving teacher training. The Michael & Susan Dell Foundation (Dell Foundation), which has a dedicated portfolio

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2 National achievement survey 2014 state scorecard noting data for a number of states surveyed; CSF grants page for overall rank of Rajasthan.

3 Ibid.

4 Annual Status of Education Report (Rural) 2014, ASER Centre (January 13, 2014: 247).

5 Ibid, 232.

for education investments in India, and Central Square Foundation (CSF), which specializes in education, are taking a more holistic approach. They are working in concert to help the Rajasthan government strengthen the government education system's core components, such as governance and accountability processes, school infrastructure, and teacher and administrator training.

A BOLD INITIATIVE IN GOVERNMENT EDUCATION SYSTEM TRANSFORMATION

In 2014, the government of Rajasthan announced a new initiative, the Rajasthan Adarsh Yojana, which would establish one adarsh (Hindi for "ideal") school in each of the 9,895 gram panchayats across the state (a gram panchayat comprises a cluster of villages governed by a single village council). The state defined an adarsh school as an integrated primary and secondary school that is large, child-friendly, and fully staffed; most importantly, it provides a high-quality education. This model government school would serve as a blueprint for other nearby schools and ensure that at least one fully equipped, integrated school would be accessible to the area's children.

Naresh Gangwar, the education secretary of Rajasthan, spearheaded the initiative. Inspired by the state's commitment to improve its education system, the Dell Foundation and CSF, in 2015 and 2016 respectively, started to support the government's effort. The philanthropists committed to helping the government implement its vision and to funding the Boston Consulting Group (BCG) to provide strategic and project management support to the government.

Through the Rajasthan Adarsh Yojana, the government aims to improve the quality of education for at least 4.6 million children by the end of 2018. The effort is bold, not merely because of its scale, but also because it requires significant behavior change: stakeholders at every level in the education system, from teachers to government officials, will have to contribute to changing the quality of government schools. The initiative also envisions adarsh schools as "models" that will eventually set the standard for all of the state's schools.

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Director, Michael & Susan Dell Foundation, India

Given the initiative's ambition, the biggest challenge to getting started, from the partners' perspective, was in identifying and understanding the education system's core components, selecting those that needed to be restored or even reimagined, and creating a plan that would enable the government to bring such a transformation to life.

The Dell Foundation and CSF are backing this program because they believe that systems reform is the key to achieving impact at scale in education. "The millions and millions of children in this country is really the landscape that we want to address," says Debasish Mitter, who directs the Dell Foundation's India programs. "This is not about small changes on the fringes."

HOW THE INITIATIVE WORKS

The Rajasthan Adarsh Yojana envisioned that by the end of 2018, all of Rajasthan's gram panchayats would have one fully functioning adarsh school. With a staff of trained teachers, each school would produce improved learning outcomes for students in grades 1–12. The Rajasthan Adarsh Yojana also recognized the importance of good governance and accountability to improve school-level outcomes. In addition to activities geared towards advancing student learning, the initiative would also institute mechanisms that hold teachers, school leaders, and government officials accountable for achieving its objectives. To realize such a lofty goal, the initiative drew on a strong network comprised of the state government, the two philanthropic foundations, BCG, and local community groups.

The government has undertaken a host of activities to ensure that the initiative holistically transforms the education system. Key activities include: 1) integrating small primary and secondary schools to function as one adarsh school for grades 1–12; 2) improving the infrastructure of these schools; 3) fully staffing the adarsh schools, by creating transparent processes for transferring teachers and other support staff from overstaffed to understaffed regions; 4) installing an online, real-time management information system (MIS) to track data and build accountability at the student, teacher, school, block, district, and state levels; and 5) institutionalizing the State Initiative for Quality Education, a model where teachers continuously evaluate each student's performance and provide feedback tailored to each student's needs and learning style. Importantly, the data collected on the MIS is used to create reports that rank districts and schools on their progress towards becoming adarsh.

BCG, for its part, provides expertise in planning and management, at both the state and district levels. At the state level, BCG helps design the initiative and sets goals, works with key state government representatives (such as the chief minister, minister of education, and the secretary of education), and monitors progress. At the district level, BCG assists with the initiative's roll out. As the initiative nears its completion date, the consultancy is focusing on building the capacity of district officials to carry the initiative forward.

Both philanthropic partners contribute to the initiative. The Dell Foundation shares what it takes to scale and sustain education initiatives, which it has gleaned through supporting education initiatives globally and across India. Drawing on its experience from managing other education grants across India, CSF advises BCG and the government on specific areas like student assessments and pedagogy. By supporting this initiative, CSF is keen to learn more about how best to strengthen education systems and initiate similar programs in other states. To date, the Dell Foundation has given INR 27 crores (USD 4.1 million) to the initiative and CSF has contributed INR 152 lakhs (USD 225,000).

The initiative also operates at the grassroots level. Parents and other community members participate in school management committees, monitor the schools' functioning, and hold school authorities accountable to targets.

Students use e-learning tools in an adarsh school. (Photo: The Boston Consulting Group)

PROGRESS AND RESULTS

Since its launch in 2014, the Rajasthan Adarsh Yojana has rolled out its program across much of the state. The effort has converted about 95 percent of the 9,895 designated schools to the adarsh model. The total number of government schools in Rajasthan has dropped from 80,000 to 65,500, due to the integration of smaller schools into larger, adarsh schools. Teacher vacancies in those schools have dropped to 20 percent, from a previous average of 50 percent in 2014.

As more adarsh schools have opened their doors to Rajasthan's children, enrollment across all government schools has increased to about 700,000 across adarsh schools, with many students returning to the government schools from private schools, according to BCG. "School enrollment in government schools has bumped up," says Ms. Sahni. "The private sector had taken over a huge chunk of their children, because people had lost faith in government schools. But now the trend has reversed."

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Urvashi Sahni
Advisor to the Chief Minister of Rajasthan

Adds Mr. Mitter of the Dell Foundation: "[Increased enrollment] is a very, very important metric. It shows that parents are finding that the government schools are starting to become a choice and they do not have to necessarily take their children to a low-fee private school."

Management information systems have been installed by project staff in every adarsh school and have helped government officials make real-time decisions. According to Govind Rathore, a government district officer, before the system was installed, he could not determine how many schools in his geographically disparate jurisdiction needed his support as they tried to achieve their adarsh goals, or if they needed to be inspected to ensure teacher and principal attendance. Now, with granular data available on each school that even a smartphone can easily access, he can make these decisions in real time.

Most importantly, the initiative seems to be improving student learning. An external assessment commissioned by UNICEF and conducted by the Center for the Science of Student Learning showed that performance in core subjects improved by an 8 percent to 20 percent margin from 2014 to 2016 among students in the third and fifth grades in select adarsh schools. Notably, in the third, fifth, and seventh grades, girls outperformed boys in languages. According to BCG, the 2018 National Achievement Survey ranked Rajasthan's education system among the nation's top five states, a significant jump from 2014, when Rajasthan was 24th out of 29 states and five union territories.

The results achieved by the initiative have created an ecosystem for other, more targeted learning interventions to take place. "The Rajasthan Adarsh Yojana has helped reduce teacher and principal vacancies, and establish essential governance mechanisms for Adarsh schools. The initiative presents a great opportunity to now focus on improving standards of learning through strengthened classroom instruction," says Bikkrama Daulet Singh, managing director of CSF.

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Bikkrama Daulet Singh
Managing Director,
Central Square Foundation

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

Going forward, the initiative will seek to maintain progress and build on its administrative and infrastructure improvements in adarsh schools. It also seeks to make greater strides in improving students' learning, and to transfer some of the quality improvement initiatives that were successful in adarsh schools to non-adarsh schools. For example, the data management systems that were originally installed to monitor adarsh schools are now present in many non-adarsh schools as well. Only one-sixth of the state's schools are adarsh schools. Ensuring that all government schools offer quality education is crucial to achieving Rajasthan's vision of improving learning outcomes amongst all of the state's youth.

The Rajasthan Adarsh Yojana plans to increase its focus on improving classroom learning through the State Initiative for Quality Education. It is also plans to scale blended learning, adaptive learning,[6] and other innovative learning approaches, like Mindspark and Hello English, to all adarsh schools and eventually to non-adarsh schools as well. In addition, the Dell Foundation and CSF believe there is an opportunity to expand the effort, by eventually offering training opportunities in career skills, which would help improve students' livelihoods.

LEARNINGS TO DATE

Collaborate effectively with key government stakeholders for systemic change. The Dell Foundation and CSF decided to collaborate with a state government that was committed to transforming its education system in a holistic fashion, and whose leadership played an active role in creating and executing the initiative. The philanthropists then supported the government's effort to identify the key areas that needed to change, which in turn affected multiple components of the education system. The chief minister and the secretary of education of Rajasthan are closely involved in ensuring Rajasthan Adarsh Yojana's success, by continuously monitoring the program and helping to execute to plan. The state's commitment to the initiative makes it easier for the partners to add value.

The philanthropists also partnered with civil society groups to bring in subject-matter expertise (such as student learning assessments), introduce learning tools, and encourage community-level engagement for implementing the initiative. Without such collaboration, the philanthropists or the government might not have been able to help schools make such significant improvements.

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"A strong and effective collaboration amongst the senior-most levels of the government, the civil society, the private sector—including strategy consultants—and others has to be orchestrated to change such a large and complex system," says Mr. Mitter. "No one organization, however well-intentioned, should ever try to attempt such reforms by themselves."

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6 Blended learning is a form of learning that mixes e-learning with in-classroom, traditional methods of teaching; adaptive learning platforms are typically e-learning tools that 'adapt' their content according to the learning levels of the user.

Focus on strengthening administrative infrastructure, which provides a foundation for other reforms. By investing first in improving the education system's backbone (for example, instituting governance processes, integrating multiple schools into one viable unit, and upgrading school infrastructure), the initiative is laying the groundwork to sustain academic reforms over the long run. For instance, the initiative tries to decrease teacher vacancies and streamline the number of hours teachers teach, to create a platform for innovations to improve teacher performance. This approach contrasts with education initiatives that introduce learning tools or in-classroom innovations without strengthening the capacity of the system to sustain these efforts over the long term.

Build the system's capacity to sustain change. The philanthropists focused on building the government's capacity to initiate change, rather than fostering the government's dependence on third parties. By funding BCG's participation, the donors also provided the government with an important resource for assessing the education system, identifying what needs to change, developing a strategy to improve the quality of education in schools, increasing accountability of schools and the state government, and enabling a more effective system to emerge. To sustain this work after its exit, BCG is focusing on building the capabilities of the education system's district-level players.

Use data to support behavioral change at multiple levels. Systems-reform often requires behavioral change. Installing an MIS in every school enabled all stakeholders—from government officers at the state level to teachers in schools—to have a clear line of sight into how the initiative was functioning. The partners were able to utilize this data to create scorecards and incentives for schools and districts, and to motivate officials to change their behavior when needed. The data also provided a mechanism for top-down monitoring