

## Testing Times in Andhra Pradesh

### *Andhra RTE Rules: The Pitfalls of High Stakes Assessment*

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*The Andhra Pradesh government's move to ensure teacher accountability in primary education, based on achievement of fixed and absolute test scores, suffers from serious conceptual flaws which could result in more harm than good.*

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The recent amendments to the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Rules in Andhra Pradesh show that history indeed repeats itself. The state government is embracing a model of high stakes assessment for schools that has proved to be ineffective in countries like the US.

The Rules provide that at the end of the academic year, wherever the performance of children in a subject/class falls below 60% of the standards prescribed by the Academic Authority, the class teacher/subject teacher will be

The Andhra RTE Rule prescribes stringent penalties for teachers when students fail to achieve at least 60% marks and reward them when they achieve more than 90%.

recommended by the local authority for penalty for committing a serious misconduct. If the performance of children in a subject/class, is above 90% of the standards prescribed by the Academic Authority, the class teacher/subject teacher will be recommended by the local authority concerned for the best teacher award at the district/state level.

The state government of Andhra Pradesh is on the verge of making the same mistakes that the No Child Left Behind Act in the US made through provisions like these. The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act passed in the US in 2001 creates a similar accountability system. It mandates that schools make progress toward closing the achievement gap between rich and poor, black and white, on an annual basis, and bring all students to grade-level proficiency in math and reading by 2014. If schools fail to make adequate yearly progress toward subject proficiency and graduation goals as defined by their respective states, NCLB requires schools and districts to take remedial action. Remedial action includes the opportunity for students to transfer to another, higher-performing school within the district, tutoring for students and in extreme cases, replacing school personnel or extending the school year.

Focus on absolute achievement levels with hard targets rather than continuous improvement of the child leads to neglect of both poor and high performing children.

The NCLB-model accountability requirements of the Andhra Pradesh RTE Rules as they currently stand will impact schools in rural and poorer areas most adversely. The targets are defined as absolute levels of performance in tests and are uniformly applied across the

board to all schools. Thus irrespective of what a school's baseline is, it is expected to meet standards of class-level performance, in this case defined as 60% in the test administered by the administrative authority. The focus is thus on achievement and not growth.

Such high-stakes testing leads to a scenario where teachers will concentrate their energies on borderline children, those perceived to be close enough to the required test score that they can be pushed up if they are given some extra attention. There is no incentive for teachers to pay attention to and work on the children far below the required standard. As a result such children will get neglected and in extreme circumstances, forced to drop out of school.

Another fallacy lies in measuring teacher and school effectiveness solely through test scores. Test scores fail to account for differences in socio-economic backgrounds of students. Inferences about school and teacher quality must account for the differences in students' socio-economic background, for example gender, caste, the income and educational levels of the parents especially the mother and whether the child gets supplementary help from tutors or parents. Unless such background factors are controlled for test scores cannot be treated as sole determinants of teacher or school quality. It should be the objective of our education system to make every child reach required levels of class proficiency. But unless the ultimate objective is pursued with care, the whole system can become counter-productive.

Our education system should enable every child reach to desired proficiency levels. But accountability systems based on absolute test scores fail to account for the varied socio-economic factors that affect performance.

The advantage that Indian policy makers have is that they can learn from the mistakes that other countries have made in designing school accountability systems. Research points towards the efficacy of adopting a more nuanced, flexible and value-added measure of student assessment, that measures growth as well as achievement. In this approach, schools track the progress of each student year on year. Success in this system is defined by a certain amount of growth, even if the student does not reach class level.

Furthermore, differences in student background characteristics are controlled for thereby isolating the contribution of schools and teachers to student learning. Such a system encourages teachers to pay attention to the lowest-performing children and acknowledges the progress that a school has made without compromising on the ultimate goal of meeting proficiency levels.

In a relative improvement based model a child of class 5 who was at the reading level of class 2 in year 1 and reached the reading level of class 4 in year 2 would not be viewed as a failure. In an absolute achievement model she would.

Accountability is crucial to improving learning achievement levels of school children in India and the fact that state governments are putting into place accountability systems is laudable. However, a poorly designed accountability system focused on high stakes testing will hit the poorest and most educationally backward students the hardest and only serve to exacerbate the achievement gap between such children and the children of the wealthy.