

How Telangana has revamped its training of teachers, administrators and top education officials 💎

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The real measure of training at every level is whether something changed in the class rooms, in the daily lives of young children, whether schools are creative hubs of joyful learning and whether the teachers enjoy teaching and catalysing the all-round development of every child. | Photo: iStock/ Getty Images

Picture a training hall somewhere in a State capital. It could be a residential multi-day teacher training or the opening session of a capacity building programme for Block Education Officers, or a leadership workshop for senior officials of the education department. The details may differ, but the atmosphere, remarkably, does not.

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The room is attentive, as someone senior in the system has addressed the gathering and emphasised the importance of this training session. Participants take careful notes and the trainers convey their ideas with visible conviction. A well-designed module moves through its paces. By the end of the last day, people generally leave with a lot of positive energy, the sense that something useful has happened, that they now know something they did not know before, that they are ready to do things differently.

The authors of this piece sat in rooms just like this, across levels and across various States. One of us as a senior official, watching systems mobilise, while the other as a practitioner, tracking what follows.

And we have quietly observed and asked ourselves as to how that buoyant ebullience of the last day in the workshop can be sustained. Because what happens next is almost always the same, whether the participants are teachers, Block/Mandal Education Officers (BEOs/MEOs), Cluster Head Masters, or the leadership in School Education.

The training ends, everyone returns to where they came from, and within weeks, sometimes less, the intended change often becomes uneven, fragile, or much slower than the training had promised..

The training challenge is not just about teachers

When we talk about training in education, the conversation almost always circles back to teachers. And the concern is legitimate, classroom instruction is where children's learning is ultimately won or lost. But focusing only on teacher training misses something fundamental.

The education system trains at every level. Teachers are trained on pedagogy and classroom practice. Middle managers – be it Cluster Head Masters, Mandal/Block Education Officers (BEOs), District Educational Officers (DEOs), Academic Resource Persons (ARPs), are trained on school supervision, data use, academic mentoring and review processes. Senior leaders attend leadership programmes on systemic reform, reviews, planning and governance. Each of these trainings costs time, money and organisational energy. And almost all of them share the same structural weakness: they are designed around the content to be delivered and rarely, around the behaviour to be changed and how to create the enabling environment required for that behaviour to survive after the training.

A District Education Officer (DEO) who attends a three-day programme on using learning data to drive district planning may return to his/her district fully informed but may find it difficult to move away from the conventional command and control review mode. An MEO trained on academic mentoring may visit schools with a new vocabulary but have the same checklist to complete as earlier. A Cluster Head Master oriented on how to make cluster meetings more purposeful may return to conducting them exactly as before, because the governance environment around him has not changed, and the hierarchical, top-down, prescriptive organisational environment doesn't encourage creativity.

The failure, therefore, is not of individuals. It is systemic and it operates at every level. The point, therefore, is not to blame teachers or officials for not changing fast enough, but to ask whether the system has encouraged the creation of a larger vision widely shared and internalised by all functionaries. Do all the functionaries at various levels know the central purpose of their enterprise? Do all of them feel they should and have the capacity to advance the central mission - in this case, the overall development of every child under their care? Do they return from a training session with a feeling that their competence and confidence have been enhanced?

Starting with the right question

The design question that drives most training, at every level, is: what should participants learn? What content should we cover? What modules should we sequence? How many days do we need?

These are delivery questions. The right question is different.

For teachers: what must change in the classroom so that children learn better? Can I make every child learn and become more competent? What resources should I have and how do I use them creatively to make learning happen? How do I relate to each child and how do I connect with their experiences at home and the community? How mindful am I in responding to the learning needs and styles of each child? What support do I need from mentors, peers, government and community to become a more effective professional?

For middle managers: what must change in how a Cluster Head Master conducts a school visit, how an MEO runs a monthly review, how an Academic Resource Person

provides academic feedback, so that these interactions actually improve what teachers do in classrooms?

For senior leaders: what must change in how education officials design reviews, interpret data, ask questions in meetings and signal priorities, so that the system below them is oriented toward child development and learning outcomes rather than administrative compliance?

Each level has a specific behaviour that needs to shift. Each behaviour must connect to a visible outcome. And each training must be designed keeping in view that outcome.

When that chain is explicit, participants return with something more than information. They return with a purpose. When it is absent, they return with notes they may or may not revisit and a certificate they will most likely file away. They may even return with intent to transform, but find the working environment not conducive enough to convert intent into practice.

The enabling environment problem, across every level

Here is what the field teaches, over and again: intent to change and ability to change are not the same thing. The environment people return to is often more powerful than anything the training teaches. The external environment must not be at variance with the core work of teaching and learning. If it is, the training message weakens and motivation wanes after the participant returns to the workplace.

A teacher comes back motivated to try a new approach to reading instruction. But the timetable demands syllabus coverage. The visiting official asks questions unrelated to what the training emphasised. The review meeting tracks compliance data, not classroom practice. The headmaster is preoccupied with administrative demands. Within weeks, the new behaviour fades, not from lack of will, but from an indication that something else matters more. The system must have a common, overarching vision and an all hands on the deck approach. The 'Why' of the mission must be internalised across the system. The 'What' and the 'How' can be continuously shaped to achieve the common, overarching objective.

This is especially important in the case of classroom inputs such as teacher guides, student workbooks and assessment tools. A workbook is not merely a printed booklet to be completed. Used well, it can become an assistant teacher — organising practice,

giving children meaningful work, helping the teacher reach every child, and creating time for the teacher to support those who are struggling. But for this to happen, teachers need clarity on why the workbook exists, how it connects to pedagogy, how it should be transacted in the classroom, and how it can help children learn at different levels. Without that clarity, even a good material can become another compliance object.

Recent field conversations, including discussions after assessment cycles, also remind us that teachers do not reject support. Many teachers value structured materials, mentoring and clearer academic direction. What they often seek is support in a form they can absorb — practical, timely, non-threatening and connected to the classroom problem in front of them. The question is not simply whether support is available. It is whether the teacher experiences it as 'doable'.

The same dynamic operates one level up. A Cluster Head Master returns from training on academic mentoring. But his monthly school visits are still evaluated on whether registers are complete, not whether he asked the right questions about children's learning. The conversation he was trained to have with teachers never happens, because nobody above him is asking whether it happened.

And one level above that. A senior official attends a leadership programme on outcome-focused governance. He/She returns to review meetings that are structured entirely around inputs such as how many training days were completed, how many schools were visited, and how many reports were submitted. The data on learning outcomes sits in a dashboard that nobody opens during the meeting.

The system shapes behaviour at every level, even when it does not intend to. We ask people to think about outcomes while rewarding them for outputs. We ask them to have different kinds of conversations about reflecting on their practice while filling their time with mundane routines. These contradictions are not invisible to participants. They read the environment clearly and respond to what it actually rewards.

Telangana's experience with Foundational Literacy and Numeracy offers a useful illustration of what alignment across levels can look like. Rather than designing training for teachers in isolation, the State has worked to ensure that what teachers are trained on specific classroom behaviours is tied to where children currently are in their learning, is the same thing that Cluster Head Masters and Academic panels look for

during school visits, that MEOs ask about in mandal reviews, and that district-level conversations respond to.

The intent is that every touchpoint reinforces rather than replaces. That the teacher experiences the system as a coherent, competence-building, confidence-enhancing, creativity-nurturing organisation, not as a sequence of disconnected and often competing demands. A teacher should not hear one message in training, another during school visits, another in cluster meetings, and another in district reviews. Unless everyone is on the same page, even a well-designed training can become a weak signal in a noisy system.

Continuous Professional Development: Reinforcement over repetition

Even with well-designed training and a coherent enabling environment, gaps will emerge. This is not a failure, it is the natural course of any behaviour change process. A teacher who understood the concept in the training hall will encounter something in her classroom that the training did not fully prepare her for. An MEO trained on academic mentoring will face situations where his new skills feel uncertain. A senior official will find that the questions she learned to ask in a workshop land very differently in an actual review meeting.

This is precisely where Continuous Professional Development becomes essential — not as a calendar of fresh workshops on fresh topics, but as a sustained, structured process of returning to the same terrain with greater depth each time.

The monthly cluster meeting, where teachers gather under the leadership of their Cluster Head Master, is perhaps the most underutilised platform in Indian school education. Currently, these meetings function largely as information relays: instructions passed down, data collected upward, and sessions that nobody is truly prepared for. They could function very differently. A cluster meeting that returns month after month to the same foundational questions, are children reading? are they reasoning? what is getting in the way? what did you try?, creates the conditions for professional learning that no residential training can replicate. It is proximate to the classroom, grounded in real children, and cumulative in a way that annual events can never be.

The design of such meetings requires nuance. They need not be over-scripted to the point where teachers and Cluster Head Masters become passive recipients. Nor can they be left completely loose, where the meeting depends only on individual initiative. The real opportunity lies in semi-structured professional spaces, enough structure to keep the conversation anchored in children's learning, and enough agency for Cluster Head Masters and teachers to respond to their own classroom realities. Telangana's recent efforts reflect this thinking, where training design and enabling conditions are being aligned more deliberately so that what is discussed in professional spaces is reinforced through school visits, reviews and classroom practice.

The same principle applies at higher levels. District review meetings that return, month after month, to the quality of academic interactions at the school level, rather than cycling through new administrative priorities each time, build the kind of collective focus that produces genuine system improvement. Leadership convenings that revisit the same strategic questions, with fresh evidence from the field, deepen understanding in ways that one-time programmes cannot.

Across all of this, technology extends the reach of reinforcement considerably, and it is perhaps here that the greatest untapped opportunity lies. Short videos demonstrating a teaching technique, structured reflection prompts, curated examples of children's work at different learning levels, these can bridge the space between monthly meetings, keeping the focus alive when the next formal gathering is weeks away. Not as a substitute for human support and dialogue, but as reinforcement available precisely when it is most needed: in the quiet moments between one cluster meeting and the next, when a teacher is unsure and has nobody immediately to ask.

Technology helps most when it acts not as another reporting layer, but as a quiet companion to practice, offering short demonstrations, worked examples, peer videos, classroom prompts, or simple diagnostics that guide teachers in real time. Its value lies not in replacing human support, but in making it more timely, accessible and usable.

This is also where mastery learning becomes central. Foundational learning cannot improve by rushing through textbooks; children need time, practice and feedback to truly grasp concepts. Classrooms must balance teacher-led instruction, peer learning and independent work, allowing teachers to support those who need it most. Training must help teachers build this balance in practice.

The design principle, ultimately, is simple- the same core behaviours, returned to repeatedly, at increasing depth, in spaces as close as possible to where the work actually happens. Not different topics each time and a training for its own sake, but a system that understands that behaviour change is slow, that it requires iteration across all levels, and that the work of professional development, whether for a teacher in a village school or a Director in the State secretariat, is never really finished.

The only measure that matters

As States begin another annual round of trainings, the temptation will be to measure delivery: batches completed, districts covered, officials oriented, attendance recorded. These things matter but are not the only ones that should be measured.

The real measure at every level is whether something changed in the class rooms, in the daily lives of young children, whether schools are creative hubs of joyful learning and whether the teachers enjoy teaching and catalysing the all-round development of every child.

Did the senior official's review meeting surface a different conversation than it did six months ago? Did the MEO's school visit produce a genuine academic dialogue with the headmaster? Did the Cluster Head Master ask a teacher something she had to think about? Did the teacher feel more able to reach every child in the classroom? Did a child who could not read in June read with greater confidence in October?

We ought to build that kind of a learning ecosystem where everyone in the system reflects on how their knowledge, skills and attitudes can be put to optimum use for advancing the mission. Learning does not stick for teachers, for middle managers, for senior leaders because a workshop was conducted. It sticks because the environment after the workshop supports the new behaviour: in the classroom, in the school visit, in the cluster meeting, in the district review, in the questions that those at every level of the system choose to ask.

At the heart of this work is a simple belief: every child is capable of learning, and every teacher deserves the conditions that make it possible to act on that belief. Training can introduce that belief, but only an enabling system can help teachers practise it every day and make them creative, reflective practitioners.

The training hall may begin the process. The work that follows must complete it. And that work, purposeful, persistent, aligned across every level of the system, is what separates training that produces reports from training that produces change.

The question we must ask ourselves this year is not whether we trained enough people. It is whether, at every level, we designed for the change that was always supposed to follow.

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