



# For the many, not the few

**Ashwin Assomull**, partner, L.E.K. Consulting, dissects his organisation's latest report, commissioned by Jacobs Foundation, which examines how independent operators across the global K12 market are patching gaps in public provision

For many years, private education has often been viewed as a choice for only the wealthiest members of society. However, today, private sector provision is growing across all areas of education (from nurseries to schools and higher education) in most major economies, serving children from a wide range of economic backgrounds. Aside from providing better access, quality, and innovation to the populations it serves, there is a role for the private sector to play in supporting public sector education.

## Growth in private education provision

Privatisation is no new trend. It has made education, which already ranks among the top ten sectors in the world by gross value addition, the fastest-growing consumer subsector, in terms of spend. K12 education is the largest component for household expenditure, with an estimated \$370-390 billion spent globally in 2018 alone.

Growth in private education has been driven by a number of factors. Besides rising household incomes and inadequate public provision – demand for English-based education, the growth of expatriate populations in global urban centers, a focus on student outcomes, and prioritisation of holistic '21st century' education, have all contributed to greater demand for private institutions. Private schools now serve one in four children globally, and in the fast-growing emerging markets such as India, Malaysia, and Brazil, private enrolments far outpace those in public schools.

## Private schools for public good

While there is no doubt that the sector's prospects remain undiminished even in the current crisis, private educators have had constantly to defend their value, given that education has traditionally been thought of as a public good. As a passionate supporter of the private education sector, I was delighted to collaborate with our friends at the Jacobs Foundation on an extensive piece of research that explores the key challenges facing global education and the manner

in which the private sector is addressing these problems for the benefit of communities the world over.

Although access to basic education has increased rapidly over the past few decades, including emerging markets within Asia and Africa, difficulties still persist. Insufficient supply and funding gaps still pose challenges to universal access, with many marginal groups being kept out of schools even today.

Poor quality is another key issue: insufficient infrastructure and learning materials, a dearth of well-trained school leaders and teachers, outdated or misaligned curriculum, and poor pedagogical approaches are challenges prevalent in many state schools the world over. Moreover, accountability is sorely lacking, with governments and other key stakeholders failing to take full ownership and responsibility for education outcomes.

## How can private schools help?

For a better understanding of how private schools can help address some of these problems, we scanned over 1,000 global education models for this report that was commissioned by Jacobs Foundation. We homed in on eight case studies that demonstrate the true value of a socially impact-focused private education institution. The organisations we assessed reported better learning outcomes than government schools. Applying their learnings to the public sector could vastly improve the quality of education across the board.

Co-chief executive at Jacobs Foundation, Fabio Segura, believes there is no better time to harness the strengths of private school operators to contribute to the greater good. He says: "Given their increasing relevance in the short and long term, private schools can help address the key issues in global education by creating public good. They can herald change by increasing access, providing affordable, quality education, innovating current learning ecosystems, training personnel in the sector, being accountable for learning outcomes and participating in public-private partnerships."



### Whole-school delivery

Interestingly, the case studies showed that privately-run schools can actually create value for society along the entire value chain. This tends to happen through three main methods of application, starting with whole-school delivery. In areas underserved by the government, organisations – such as Muktangan, based in India, and The Citizens Foundation (TCF), based in Pakistan – have stepped in to provide free, affordable, quality education. Some of these programmes are aimed particularly at fostering inclusivity and equity, such as Colombia-based Alianza Educativa's Superaula initiative, which has been specially created for students with learning difficulties. TCF is another good example of an equity-creating model, as the organisation runs all women-schools in some conservative communities to drive girls' enrolment.

Also, private innovations in curriculum and pedagogy have scope for broader application. At Rising Academies in Liberia, student and teacher feedback is regularly monitored to modify the curriculum, while Alianza's 'Navegar Seguro' curricula helps provide socially relevant content to students from lower economic strata to support their holistic development. In an example of a different pedagogical approach, at Muktangan schools students in the same class are divided into three groups based on their subject aptitude, with instruction tailored to their differing needs.

Privately-run schools also play an important role in training teachers and school leaders. For example, KIPP, a state school chain in the US that is privately-run has its Leadership Design Fellowship, which hosts various summits for teachers and school leaders. In addition to operating 15 free schools, EducAid in Sierra Leone runs teacher-training programmes for community schools including a teacher quality enhancement programme, where it trains partner-school teachers.

Lastly, private institutions can help plug important gaps in infrastructure and technology by sharing school grounds and other facilities in resource-poor settings.

### Role of funders and donors

Although private institutions can play a critical role in improving public systems, several obstacles still remain. Lack of financial incentives, distrust between public and private sectors, changing regulations and government regimes are barriers, but donors and socially minded foundations can help surmount some of these difficulties.

Segura adds: "The report identifies a course of action for such benefactors. First, donors acting as neutral brokers can help bridge the divide between state and non-state actors through dialogue with state authorities and policy development. Besides helping create regulatory frameworks, donors can lend their support to the creation of quality assurance systems while investing in infrastructure that fosters a conducive ecosystem for local entrepreneurs.

"Foundations and other impact investors can also identify, codify, showcase, and reward best practices and innovations that incentivise the delivery of public good. They could share actionable toolkits for school operators or fund research that advances wider sectoral understanding by monitoring, evaluating programmes and making results public."



The creation of working networks is another space in which intervention is required. Those interviewed by L.E.K. cited the importance of having places where private sector schools and stakeholders, including communities, think tanks, governments, and other actors can come together to collaborate and share knowledge. Funding existing networks or convening new groups, either virtually or in person will both prove beneficial.

Ultimately, donor support can fuel innovation by private sector schools. Grants, prizes for meeting challenges, loans and outcomes-based funding can give privately-run schools the financial security and incentive to generate public good. One thing to bear in mind is that any such intervention should be prepped for long-term engagement without being too closely aligned with a particular government's objectives.

### Conclusion

Addressing persistent problems in the world of education is no easy task and all stakeholders need to be brought to the table. Private institutions can play an important role in reshaping the education sector, but they will need willing partners in the public sector, as well as a supportive regulatory environment that empowers them while also providing checks and balances.

And we will have to hold these ambitious projects to account, with performance closely monitored and measured. Having identified public-private models that work, we'll now have to set them up for even greater success with clear delivery targets and more importantly, do the hard work of creating a multitude of them to ensure we are well on our way to meet the lofty and long dreamt of goal of providing quality access to education for all. ■