



STATE OF SCHOOL LEADERSHIP IN INDIA

Evidence from a multi-state study



DATA FOUNDATION

230

School leaders surveyed

87

In-depth interviews

Delhi • Telangana • Karnataka • Maharashtra

About Us



Alokit is a non-profit organization supporting professional capacity building and systemic improvement for government schools, middle leaders, and education departments.

We partner with state and district governments to design rigorous leadership development programs, strengthen foundational learning systems, and empower school leaders to drive continuous improvement from within.



A South-Asia based Monitoring, Evaluation & Learning (MEL) firm working with civil society organisations, funders, and social enterprises across South Asia. Populi builds robust evidence systems, designs and conducts evaluations, and generates actionable insights that strengthen programme effectiveness and long-term impact.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

India has 1.4 million government schools. Who is leading them and what does that mean?

THE GLOBAL CONSENSUS

Leadership quality is second only to classroom teaching in its impact on student learning outcomes (Wahlstrom et al., 2010).

THE SCALE

250 million students across 1.4 million schools. School leaders are the most consequential institutional actors on the ground.

THE EVOLVING POLICY CONTEXT

Post-RTE Act (2009) and NEP 2020 raised expectations from basic management to transformative instructional leadership.

THE CORE PARADOX

Policy aspirations have outpaced structural reality. Daily leadership is shaped by administrative burden, resource constraints, and centralized decision-making.

Navigating expansive and ambiguous responsibilities in a complex system



Multi-tiered system and Variation across state

Example: State---> District Education Officer---> Block Officer---> School



Expected to function as academic leaders, operational managers, administrative officers, and community liaisons.



METHODOLOGY

Purpose and methodology

School Leader: Current or practicing headmasters, principals and head teachers in government schools (primary, upper primary and secondary schools)

Purpose of the study



Document school leadership experiences



Analyze official role definition against school leader's own understanding



Evaluate support systems and feedback mechanisms



Identify key challenges and their implication

How we built evidence

230

School Leaders Surveyed

87

In-Depth Interviews

4

States



DELHI

TELANGANA (Pedapilli, Narayanpet & Rangareddy)

KARNATAKA (Raichur)

MAHARASHTRA (Pune)

Limitations: Purposive regional sampling • Self-reported responses may reflect social desirability bias. Although consistency of findings across methods strengthens confidence.

METHODOLOGY

Demographic coverage

35%

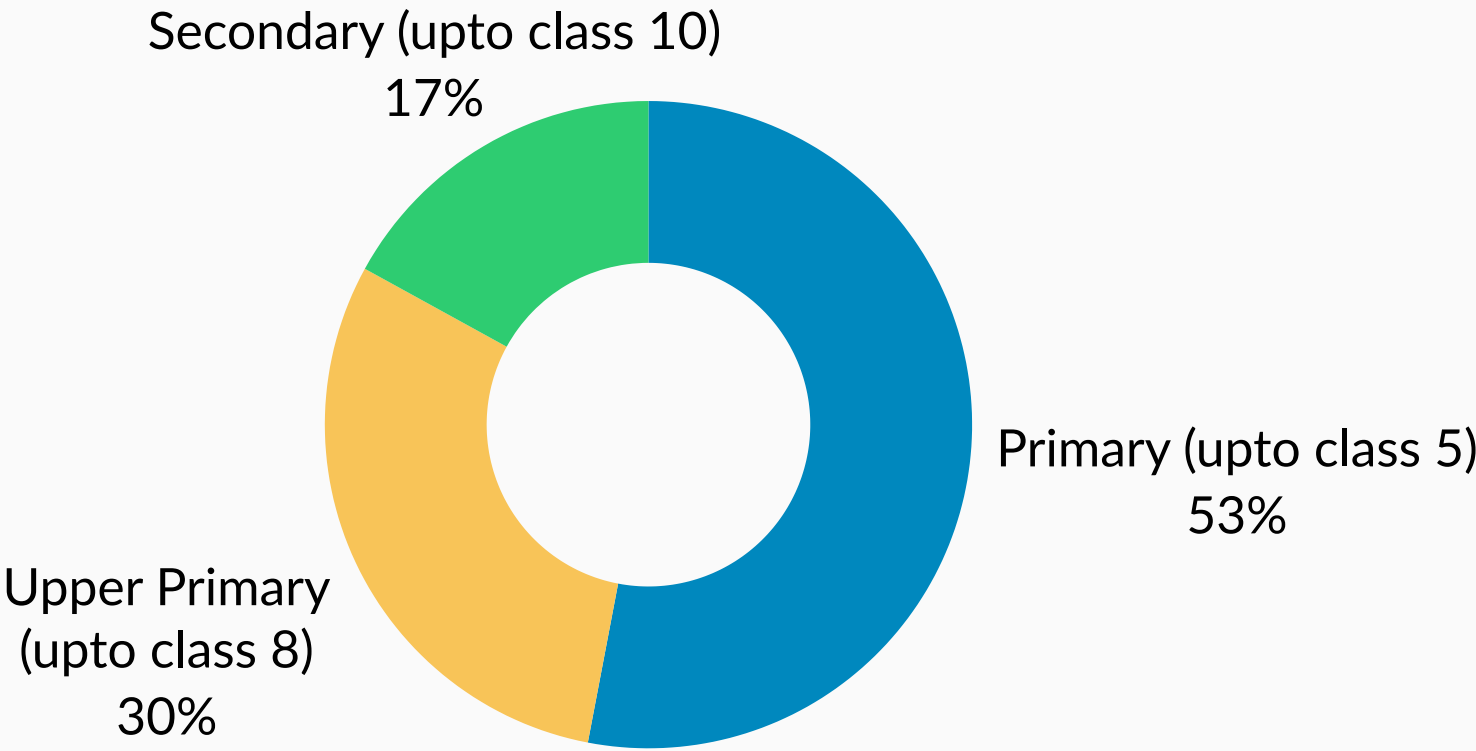
Female School Leaders

41%

Had Post-Grad degree

38%

Had B. Ed degree

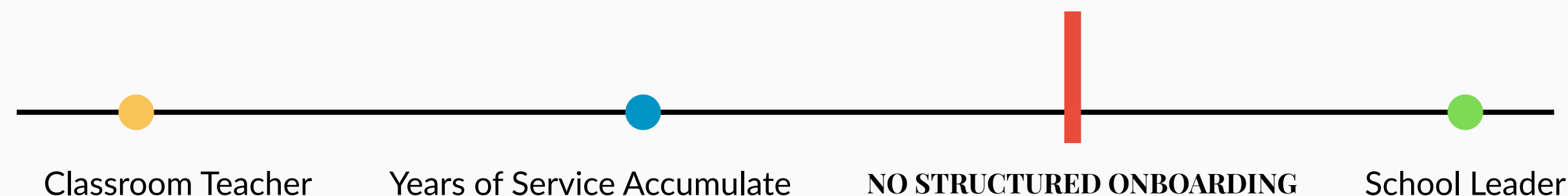


Location	Teacher-Student Ratio
Delhi	1:33
Narayanpet	1:32
Pedappalli	1:12
Raichur	1:54

HOW LEADERS ENTER THE ROLE

Leaders Learn the Role Through Trial and Error – Not Structured Onboarding

Many school leaders step into leadership roles after years of teaching, often without structured preparation, succession planning, or handover support.



1 in 10

received no guidance when
they first took on the role

36%

still experience confusion
about parts of the role today

53%

say the role turned out to be very
different from what they expected

THE RESULT: Most leaders learn the job by doing it — from colleagues, from circulars, from trial and error. The system promotes people into leadership and then leaves them to figure it out.

WHO LEADS THESE SCHOOLS?

Most Leaders Are Experienced – Many Lead Without Official Status



"I am not a qualified Headmistress. I also handle two classes... Just because I am the Headmistress doesn't mean I can do all the administrative work alone."

— In-charge HM, Pune

60%

have more than five years in a leadership role

MANY LEADERS ARE "IN-CHARGE" – NOT FORMALLY APPOINTED

In several locations, teachers carry full school leadership responsibilities – without the title, authority, or protections that should come with it.

- Raichur: Only 5 of 15 leaders held a formally appointed headmaster position.
- Pune: 9 of 14 were working as in-charge or acting principals – outside the formal cadre.

WHERE DOES THE DAY GO?

Leaders Want to Support Teachers. Administration Tasks Gets in the Way.

THE BASELINE REALITY

More than half of leaders spend at least 30% of their time on administrative tasks alone — paperwork, records, and daily operations.

Every hour spent on admin is an hour not spent observing classrooms or supporting teachers. Leaders know where they want to focus. The challenge is that much of their day is already spoken for.

LEADERS ALSO WANT MORE TIME FOR:

- Using data to review student progress: **19%**
- Creating annual school improvement plans: **28%**
- Creating learning goals for students: **24%**
- Appreciating students and teachers: **18%**



WHERE DOES THE DAY GO?

Leaders Want to Support Teachers. Administration Tasks Gets in the Way. (2)

THE MID-DAY MEAL (MDM) BURDEN

Critical for students but operationally demanding. Leaders coordinate delivery, manage cooks, maintain hygiene records, and complete daily digital reports. These tasks pull them away from classrooms every single day.

DIGITAL COMPLIANCE & WHATSAPP

Data requests arrive constantly — including after school hours and on weekends. Digital tasks have not replaced manual ones; they sit on top of them, extending the workday into personal time.

THE PATTERN: Leaders are not objecting to these programmes. They are asking for recognition that managing them takes real time — and that this time has to come from somewhere.



HOW CONTEXT SHAPES LEADERSHIP

High Student-Teacher Ratios Change the Nature of the Job

This is a qualitative pattern from interviews, not a statistical finding. But it was consistent across locations: the conditions leaders work in shape the kind of leadership they can practice.



Very High (40–73:1)

OPERATIONAL SURVIVAL

No room for instruction. Leaders manage logistics, cover for absent staff, and focus on keeping the school open.

High (30–39:1)

CONSTRAINED

Instructional work is possible but drowned by reporting. "I can see only two classes maximum daily."

Moderate/Low (5–29:1)

INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP

When conditions allow, leaders focus on teachers, students, and school improvement — the work they entered the profession to do.

AUTHORITY AND DECISION-MAKING

Leaders Are Accountable for Results But Not in Control of What Matters

Leaders have real control over how a school runs day to day. But when it comes to the decisions that most affect outcomes — staffing, hiring, resources — their influence is limited.

HIGH AUTHORITY <i>Daily Operations</i>	Discipline policies (3.6)	Timetable management (3.4)	
CONSULTATIVE ONLY <i>Budget & Infrastructure</i>	School budget decisions (2.7)	Infrastructure decisions (2.7)	
ZERO MEANINGFUL AUTHORITY <i>Staffing & HR</i>	Hiring teaching staff (2.0)	Non-teaching staff (2.0)	Teacher promotions (2.0)

THE RESULT: The areas where leaders have the least authority — staffing, hiring, non-teaching support — are exactly the areas that most directly affect how a school functions. Some leaders resort to personal funds or community goodwill just to keep things running.

School Leaders Need Structured Support for Growth

FEEDBACK IS RARE — AND WHEN IT COMES, IT'S NOT THE RIGHT KIND

- 1 in 4 leaders receives no feedback of any kind. When feedback does happen, it tends to focus on whether processes were followed — not on how to improve.
- Many leaders said they interpret indirect signals — an award, the absence of complaints — as the only indication that they are doing well.
- What leaders want is guidance on how to get better — not just whether they passed inspection.



"Even when someone visits, they usually point out what is wrong, but they don't explain how it can be improved."

— GHM, Telangana

TRAINING IS EPISODIC

- Nearly half (46.1%) receive training only once a year; many receive none.
- Training tends to cover administrative procedures. The challenges leaders actually face — managing people, supporting teachers, handling complex school problems — are rarely addressed.

SUPPORT SYSTEMS (CONTINUED)

Staff Shortages Force Leaders to Do Everyone's Job. They Asked for One Thing: Someone to Share the Load.

THE CRITICAL GAP

The absence of support staff watchmen, cleaners, clerks directly expands the operational burden on the principal.

THE GUEST TEACHER COMPLICATION

In Raichur, 14 of 15 leaders rely on contract guest teachers who cannot be assigned administrative duties, forcing all non-teaching work directly onto the headmaster.

THE UNANIMOUS REQUEST

When asked what single resource would most improve their effectiveness, the answer across all four states was identical:

**DEDICATED
ADMINISTRATIVE SUPPORT**

SCALABLE BRIGHT SPOT: Telangana's 'Record Assistants' for high schools are widely described as transformative for restoring instructional focus. Extending this model to primary and upper primary schools is a critical — and achievable — policy lever.



Deep Commitment Keeps the System Going. But Commitment Is Not a Substitute for Support.



91%

of surveyed leaders report being satisfied or very satisfied with their roles — acting as the system's shock absorber despite overwhelming structural neglect.

THE SOURCE OF SUSTENANCE

- Visible student progress and well-being.
- Recognition from parents and the local community.
- A profound sense of ownership over the school's culture.

THE SYSTEMIC RISK

Systemic reliance on leaders' intrinsic goodwill is not a sustainable policy. Rising non-educational demands and a lack of institutional recognition risk rapidly eroding this professional commitment.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Systemic Recommendations: Moving from Aspiration to Empowerment

The recommendations set out in this section are addressed to state governments, education departments, teacher training bodies, and non-profit organisations.



ALIGN DESIGNATION

- Expedite formal appointments for in-charge' leaders.
- Ensure official authority, compensation, and protection.

STRUCTURED INDUCTION

- Replace trial-and-error with a formalised first-year induction
- Establish peer-mentoring networks.

DEDICATED ADMIN SUPPORT

- Extend provision of clerks and record assistants
- Provide dedicated MDM personnel across school types.

PROBLEM- SOLVING REVIEWS

- Monthly district level problem solving review
- Each school should get a named officer for addressing one priority issue each month

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