

1.1. FEB 2017
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Govt must shore up primary teacher recruitment early

VACANCY in teaching positions accounting for about 13.1 per cent of the total — 45,003 out of 3,43,000 — in government primary schools is gravely concerning although the situation has improved a little since the middle of 2015, when about 50,000 teaching positions were vacant. The situation is yet extremely grave, on another count, as now about 27.47 per cent of the positions of headteacher are, as New Age reported on Friday, vacant, which in 2015 was 31.74 per cent. While the figures show a slight improvement in about a year and half, which is effectively insignificant when viewed against the total of 64,122 schools and 17,615 of them are running with an administrative head, the fact remains that students, about 13.4 million, continue to be adversely affected. Government primary schools could not even be at par with other institutions such as non-government and private primary schools and kindergartens in terms of results in the Primary Education Completion Examinations 2015, with the number of GPA 5 scorers being 1,10,000 out of 21 million students from government primary school against 1,60,000 GPA 5 scorers out of 8,50,000 students from other institutions. In such a situation, teachers and education officials mostly blame teacher shortage as a major reason for the failure of primary schooling in government institutions.

Teaching position vacancies, many of which, especially of headteachers, have come to persist since 2009-2010, take a toll on both academic and administrative management in the institutions and classroom teaching. While the limited number of assistant teachers that the schools have are forced to take additional classes, to make up for the course curriculum, resulting in poor classroom teaching and, probably, poor evaluation in examinations, the absence of headteachers in such a large number of schools forces many of the assistant teachers to put themselves in the headteacher's shoes and, thus, these teachers need to worry about too many issues and cannot dedicate adequate time to classroom teaching. Yet again, some of the administrative functions are left undone as certain functions still fall beyond the bounds of assistant teachers acting as headteachers. Every year, on an average, 5,000 teaching positions fall vacant because of retirement, resignation, job termination and death. Some positions fall vacant temporarily because of illness, training, further studies and maternity leave, in case of female teachers. And teacher recruitment, which is usually a long-drawn process, cannot keep pace with the number of teaching position falling vacant. The issues appear not to have been considered in the teacher recruitment plan.

In such a situation, the government must fill in teaching vacancies, with utmost priority, and allow the primary and mass education ministry to recruit headteachers, in a transparent manner with adequate oversight, if it cannot for now have in place a wing of the Public Service Commission, the creation of which was heard to have been under way to deal with teacher recruitment. The government must act, in earnest and quickly, so that students are not left in the lurch.