

# School education paradox



MANY private schools today look like corporate headquarters rather than places of learning. Tall gates, air-conditioned corridors, smart boards, glossy brochures, international affiliations and a fee structure that signals prestige. Parents often interpret such visible signals as the proof of quality. In many cases, private schools do deliver good outcomes with structured routines, strong discipline and competitive results.

International news coverage

But behind this polished image lies a contradiction rarely discussed in public. Many teachers in private schools remain underpaid, overworked and professionally insecure. On the other side of the spectrum, government schools in many regions may struggle with infrastructure constraints: crowded classrooms, limited resources, ageing buildings or inconsistent facilities. Yet, government teachers by and large enjoy job security, regulated pay scales, retirement benefits and social dignity that private school teachers often do not.


This is the education paradox: some schools look rich while their teachers live poor and some schools look poor while their teachers live a secure life. The issue is not about praising one sector and blaming the other. The issue is more fundamental: are we valuing education or appearances?

A teacher's salary is not only a personal matter. It is also an education quality issue. When private schools keep salaries low, they may reduce costs and increase margins or invest in marketing, infrastructure or expansion. The school's brand rises, but the teacher's status remains fragile. In many places, private school teachers face conditions that would surprise those who pay premium fees. They are asked to take extra classes, manage administrative duties, handle co-curricular programmes, write reports, prepare 'inspection files,' support admission and participate in weekend events, often without additional compensation. Many work under short-term contracts and the fear of non-renewal becomes a silent tool of control.

A teacher who feels insecure is less likely to innovate in the classroom. A teacher who is underpaid may take tutoring after hours to manage household expenses. A teacher who is exhausted cannot deliver joyful learning. Over time, such pressure does not stay confined to staff rooms. It spills into the learning experience of children. In any profession, sustained high performance requires stability and dignity. In teaching, it is even more important because the 'product' is not a commodity. It is the growth and confidence of young minds.

Another uncomfortable reality is that salary practice in some private schools is not always transparent. Reports for years have it that salaries are shown in cases on paper as compliant with regulations, paid formally by cheque or bank transfers and then a portion is allegedly taken back in cash. Even where such practices are not widespread, the perception damages trust and discourages talented educators from staying in the profession. Whether such cases are occasional or common, they point to a structural vulnerability: teachers in private schools often lack bargaining power and lack institutional protection. Job insecurity makes it difficult to raise concerns. Teachers fear being labelled as 'non-

cooperative' or 'not aligned with the school culture.' In a profession built on moral authority, this is a painful contradiction.

Government schoolteachers are not automatically 'better' teachers and government schools are not automatically 'worse' schools. The reality is varied. Yet, it cannot be denied that government teachers typically operate within clearer service rules and pay structures. This stability supports long-term professional planning: training, upskilling and continuity in career. That said, government schools also carry challenges — bureaucratic processes, transfer policies,  political pressures in some areas and sometimes a mismatch between policy design and classroom reality. Still, when the system provides basic dignity and predictable compensation, it strengthens the idea that teaching is a respected career.

### Politics

So, why does the private sector, often charging higher fees, struggle to ensure comparable respect and security for its teachers? Many private schools invest heavily in what parents can immediately see: buildings, buses, uniform branding, digital platforms and extracurricular programmes. Teacher welfare is less visible. It does not appear on hoardings. It cannot be shown in a brochure the way an auditorium or a smart lab can. Parents should remember a simple truth: a school is not a building; it is the people inside it. A smart board cannot replace a motivated teacher. A well-designed campus cannot compensate for high staff turnover. A premium fee does not guarantee premium learning if the teacher is stressed, underpaid and fearful.

In education, the 'software' matters more than the 'hardware.' The teacher is the software. The National Education Policy 2020 is widely appreciated for its vision: holistic development, foundational literacy and numeracy, flexibility, vocational integration, teacher education reforms and a renewed focus on learning outcomes. It talks about teacher training and professional standards. Yet, many

observers note that it remains largely quiet on the concrete issue of teacher salaries and service conditions in private schools.

This silence matters. Because without enforceable minimum standards for pay, workload and job security, teacher development becomes a slogan rather than a lived reality. A nation cannot claim to transform education while leaving a large portion of its teaching work force in uncertainty. If we want quality education, we must treat teacher welfare as a core pillar, not an optional add-on. Some may argue: 'If teachers are unhappy, they can switch jobs.' But education is not like a typical corporate sector where switching is easy and stable. The cost of teacher instability is paid by children and parents.

When teachers leave frequently, students lose continuity. Learning becomes fragmented. School culture becomes transactional. Even the best curriculum fails without stable delivery. Moreover, low pay discourages talented graduates from entering the profession. Over time, teaching becomes a 'last option' rather than a respected aspiration. That is how a country quietly underinvests in its future. The paradox also creates an ethical tension: when schools charge high fees but compensate teachers poorly, a trust gap emerges. Parents feel that they are paying for quality and teachers feel that they are carrying the burden without recognition. No education system can sustain itself on such imbalance.

If we are serious about solving this paradox, we need practical steps, not only moral appeals. *Fair pay as minimum standard:* governments and regulatory bodies should ensure that private school teacher salaries meet minimum benchmarks aligned with qualifications and experience. 'Cost-saving' should not mean 'teacher exploitation.' *Transparent salary structures:* Schools should publish salary bands and service rules as many organisations publish pay scales. This will reduce under-the-table practices and build credibility with both teachers and parents. *Strong monitoring and grievance mechanisms:*

Regulation should not be limited to infrastructure, safety and examination results; it must include teacher welfare audits, anonymous complaint channels and meaningful penalties for non-compliance. *Professional dignity and job security*: Contracts should protect teachers from arbitrary dismissal and ensure reasonable workload limits. A teacher who lives under constant fear cannot build confident learners.

A strong education system cannot be built on weak foundations and teachers are the foundation. If we want better learning outcomes, better values and better futures, we must treat teaching as a dignified profession in every sector, private or public. Fancy infrastructure can impress visitors, but only a respected teacher can shape a generation. So, the issue remains: will we keep celebrating schools for their appearances? Or, will we start measuring schools by how they treat teachers? Because a nation that underpays teachers is not saving money. It is underinvesting in its future.

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