

Brief No. 019

December 2025

Advancing Overall Learning Outcomes in Tamil Nadu: Leveraging the Potential of Low-Fee Private Schools

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Published by

Centre for Public Policy Research (CPPR)
First Floor, Mandoli House, New Link Road
Elamkulam, Kochi, Kerala, India-682020
www.cppr.in | E-mail: research@cppr.in

Distributed by Centre for Public Policy Research, Kochi

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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Tamil Nadu's education system has made notable strides toward universal access, primarily due to the growing role of private schools. Nearly half of the state's students (48%) now attend private unaided institutions, the majority of which are Low-Fee Private Schools (LFPS) catering to lower- and middle-income families. LFPS, charging annual tuition fees ranging from ₹5,000 to ₹20,000, have emerged as critical education providers in the state. Despite being a major provider, LFPS operates within a restrictive regulatory ecosystem, characterised by high infrastructure standards and other compliance requirements that affect its recognition and survival. Frequent renewals, multiple No Objection Certificates (NOCs), fee regulation, and documentation requirements absorb school management's time and resources, leaving little room for pedagogical innovation, learning outcomes, or teacher development.

This policy brief examines the landscape of LFPS in Tamil Nadu and the regulatory constraints they face. It offers practical, outcome-oriented recommendations, including easing infrastructure requirements, simplifying recognition processes, revising fee regulations for low-fee schools, enhancing teacher support mechanisms, and promoting constructive engagement between regulators and LFPS. These measures aim to strengthen LFPS's role in improving learning outcomes and equity in the state's education sector.

2. THE ROLE AND REACH OF LOW-FEE PRIVATE SCHOOLS IN TAMIL NADU

Tamil Nadu's private education ecosystem plays a defining role in the state's schooling landscape. While government schools constitute a majority of total institutions, private unaided schools cater to a disproportionately high share of students. Private schools account for 21% of all schools but serve almost 48% of all students, according to UDISE 2024–2025. By contrast, government schools account for about two-thirds (65%) of institutions and enrol 36% of students.

LFPS form the bulk of Tamil Nadu's private school sector. As per the Tamil Nadu Private Schools Fee Determination Committee, 2025, approximately 77% of private unaided schools charge less than ₹20,000 per year, with the largest share falling in the ₹5,000–₹15,000 range. These schools function on minimal margins, often renting small buildings and employing local teachers. Yet, they manage to deliver consistent classroom instruction, cater to community needs, and maintain regular academic engagement.

For many families, particularly in urban and peri-urban areas, LFPS represents the only viable schooling option offering structure, safety, and continuity of learning.

3. PROBLEM STATEMENT

While LFPS expands access and choice for lower-income families, they face frequent, costly, and time-consuming regulatory requirements, such as annual renewals of multiple clearances (police verification, fire safety, and traffic NOC), that impose administrative burdens without proven gains in learning quality. The state's framework enforces strict infrastructure standards, penalising schools that provide effective instruction but fail to meet criteria such as owning contiguous land or maintaining elaborate facilities. As of 2024, 255 private unaided schools, predominantly low-fee ones, remain unrecognised solely for non-compliance with such norms, undermining their capacity to operate and deliver equitable education.

While Tamil Nadu's system emphasises rigorous oversight, its input-intensive norms limit its ability to focus on pedagogy, innovation, and student outcomes. The NAS and ASER surveys indicate that foundational learning and numeracy remain below desired levels across all school types, with average scores in mathematics and science for classes 3, 5, and 8 hovering around or below 50% and declining further in higher grades (NAS, ASER 2025). Considering that more than 75% of schools in Tamil Nadu cater to low-fee students, policies should be tailored to recognise the realities of LFPS and promote regulations that improve learning outcomes and accessibility without placing undue operational strain on affordable schools.

4. KEY BARRIERS TO OPERATING LFPS IN TAMIL NADU

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Frequent NOC Renewals: Annual or periodic renewals for fire safety, transport, and health/sanitation.

Short Recognition Validity: Three-year cycles lead to repeated compliance verification and inspections and to a risk of suspension.

Fee Regulation: Annual cost-based documentation is administratively heavy for LFPS. Infrastructure Compliance Costs: Land requirements and infrastructure norms require high capital investment, which LFPS struggle to afford.

Teacher Qualification Mandates: Recruiting qualified teachers in accordance with the RTE and 2023 norms is challenging on limited budgets, particularly for subject-specific staff.

Administrative Burden: Maintaining records for multiple NOCs, fee submissions, student enrolment, and teacher qualifications demands time and administrative capacity, which is often lacking in small schools.

Risk of Closure/Suspension: Non-compliance, even minor, can result in recognition suspension or cancellation, making school operations precarious.

Limited Access to Government Resources: Unrecognised or partially compliant schools cannot legally access government infrastructure, playgrounds, or programmes, further limiting their operational capacity.

Rent Seeking: At every level, from district to state, unofficial payments are pervasive. Schools face extensive documentation requirements, with NOCs coming from multiple departments. Each interaction is often characterised by rent-seeking behaviour, thereby increasing LFPS's operational costs.

5. PROPOSED RECOMMENDATIONS

Tamil Nadu's education ecosystem must evolve from a compliance-driven model to one that rewards outcomes and supports diversity in school operations. Based on stakeholder consultations and field insights, the following reforms are proposed:

5.1 ESTABLISH A STATE SCHOOL QUALITY AUTHORITY

In Tamil Nadu, a gap exists between compliance-focused regulation and improvements in learning outcomes. Inspections emphasise verifiable inputs, such as infrastructure and teacher availability, but student learning in areas like reading, mathematics, and critical thinking is harder to assess and requires sustained follow-up. Without linking inspections to outcomes, regulations enforce rules without improving performance.

It is therefore essential to establish an independent body to oversee education quality, recognising and periodically evaluating all schools—public and private—against a limited set of essential standards. Applying the same standards across sectors would ensure fairness and foster competition that benefits students. The body should also assess learning outcomes and publicly disclose school performance, strengthening accountability and enabling parents to make informed choices.

The independent regulatory body should operate separately from the state education department to avoid conflicts of interest and focus solely on setting essential standards, monitoring compliance, and enforcing accountability across all schools, without involvement in service delivery. The State, on the other hand, should retain responsibility for policymaking and capacity-building support to help schools meet these standards. Key capacity-building measures could include:

- *Mentorship programmes: Pair low-performing private schools with well-performing government schools to provide lesson plans, assessment tools, and classroom activities.*
- *Instructional coaching: Deploy coaches to provide hands-on classroom support and enhance teacher capacity in schools.*
- *Curriculum and assessment guidance: Assist schools in adapting curricula, designing assessments, and adopting pedagogical tools to improve learning outcomes.*

5.2 EXTEND RECOGNITION VALIDITY AND STREAMLINE NOCS

Recognition validity should be extended from 3 years to at least 5 years, reducing repetitive compliance cycles. NOCs, such as fire, police, and building safety, should be made one-time clearances unless there are major upgrades. Minor operational changes could be managed through annual self-declarations or affidavits, maintaining accountability while reducing bureaucratic overhead.

5.3 SINGLE WINDOW CLEARANCE

Currently, schools must navigate multiple departments to obtain NOCs, creating delays. A unified single-window clearance system that allows schools to apply for all required certifications (fire safety, sanitation, building approvals, etc.) simultaneously through a common digital portal would reduce time and duplication.

5.4 DISTINCT CATEGORY FOR BUDGET SCHOOLS

Create a distinct category for budget schools based on resources and fee structures. Regulations and compliance requirements should be context-sensitive, ensuring that while safety, child protection, and basic hygiene standards remain non-negotiable, detailed infrastructure mandates, such as library size, sports and lab facilities, ICT infrastructure, or prescribed classroom sizes, can be made flexible.

5.5 RELAX LAND AND INFRASTRUCTURE REQUIREMENTS

Amend the 2023 Private School Rules to allow schools to operate across clustered or multi-building campuses within a specified radius. The focus should shift from land size to structural safety and accessibility. This will enable schools in dense urban areas to continue operating legally while maintaining safety compliance.

Amendments to the 2023 Rules

01

Existing Provision:

Rule 8 (6) a: In Village Panchayat Areas, middle/high/higher secondary schools require 2 acres for middle, high and higher secondary schools.

a. The extent of land shall be a contiguous, single plot of land.

The existing rule requiring a "contiguous single plot of land" can be replaced with a broader and more flexible definition:

Recommended Amendment:

Educational premises shall consist of a clearly demarcated, accessible, and safe set of structures (either rented or owned) used exclusively for educational purposes.

02

Existing Provision:

8 (6)d: If the land is held in lease, the lease deed shall be for a period of not less than fifteen years.

Recommended Amendment:

If the land is held in a lease, the lease deed shall be for a period of not less than 5 years, with a provision for renewal or extension to cover the operational life of the school

03

Apart from the 2023 rules, schools are regulated by the 11 other rules with different specifications. For example, Rule 8 (6)a states that the minimum area should be 400 sq. ft., and the Tamil Nadu Combined Development and Building Rules, 2019: minimum 389 sq. ft.

Recommendation:

Create a consolidated guideline for school infrastructure

5.6 ENABLE SHARED INFRASTRUCTURE

Many low-fee recognised schools in Tamil Nadu face challenges obtaining recognition beyond the primary level due to stringent regulatory requirements, such as mandatory laboratories, libraries, playgrounds, and other resources. High real estate costs in urban and semi-urban areas make compliance difficult for budget schools. Recognition should instead consider assured access to essential facilities. If a low-fee school lacks a playground, it should be allowed to fulfil the requirement through a formal, verifiable access agreement with a government playground, or another neighbouring school, or a CSR-supported facility, thereby shifting the regulator's role from enforcing inputs to certifying secure access and clear accountability.

5.7 EXPANDING ACCESS TO GOVERNMENT FACILITIES FOR UNRECOGNISED SCHOOLS

Unrecognised schools operate outside the RTE Act's legal framework and are therefore unable to enter into formal agreements or memoranda of understanding with government authorities. Their absence from official education department records renders any use of public land or facilities, including government playgrounds, technically unauthorised, leaving them reliant on informal and often precarious arrangements. A more constructive policy approach would permit these schools to function and access government facilities, thereby recognising their contribution to low-income communities while maintaining regulatory oversight.

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5.8 REFORM TEACHER RECRUITMENT AND DEVELOPMENT

The Right to Education (RTE) Act, 2009, and NCTE guidelines require that teachers must have a minimum academic qualification (graduation + B.Ed./D.El.Ed.) and pass the Teacher Eligibility Test. The rationale behind such policy-making is to ensure quality. However, in practice, TET implementation excludes capable local candidates without formal credentials. It imposes compliance costs on private schools, prompting reliance on para-teachers to fill staffing gaps in rural/low-income areas. The following recommendations are suggested.

- *Retain TET only as a quality benchmark, in line with RTE Section 23 and the 2025 Supreme Court rulings, while the state could encourage TET uptake via structured coaching through DIKSHA/NISHTHA, combining online modules with hybrid approaches such as local mentorship or classroom workshops to better prepare teachers.*
- *Recognise para-teachers/contract teachers employed under regulated conditions within the RTE, state rules, and NCTE guidelines, particularly for primary grades. Evidence shows that locally hired para-teachers perform effectively, meeting local needs and language requirements, when supported by structured monitoring over a 6–8 month period. Their deployment particularly benefits rural areas with teacher shortages.*
- *Leverage EdTech to address subject-specific gaps, allowing subject experts to deliver lessons online, while teachers can serve as local facilitators for classroom management and student engagement. Section 22(b) of the 2023 Rules emphasises the promotion of learning through ICT and digital tools. This provision can be operationalised through an amendment requiring teachers to be trained in the use of EdTech in classrooms and in guiding students towards global learning opportunities. Such training could include pre-service modules, in-service programmes, and short-term certified courses.*
- *Allow flexible, responsive curricula in low-fee schools that support differentiated instruction and targeted interventions, enabling teachers to adapt content to students' diverse learning needs and ensure equitable outcomes.*

5.9 REFORM FEE REGULATION FOR LFPS

Low-fee schools should be exempted from cost-based fee fixation. Instead, they can operate under a self-declaration and parental oversight model. The current provision under the Tamil Nadu Schools (Regulation of Collection of Fee) Act, 2009, states: “No fee in excess of the fee determined by the committee under this Act shall be collected for admission of pupils to any standard or course of study in a private school.”

It is recommended that this be revised as follows:

“Notwithstanding any provision to the contrary, private schools that fall under the category of low-fee or budget schools, defined according to criteria such as fee bracket or service to economically weaker sections, shall be exempt from the fee fixation and approval process stipulated under this Act.”

5.10 PROMOTE INNOVATION AND EDUCATIONAL TECHNOLOGY

The state should enable LFPS to adopt innovative teaching and learning practices through targeted support or incentives. This includes:

- *Digital Infrastructure: Provide targeted support to LFPS by subsidising electricity and ensuring affordable internet connectivity.*
- *Teacher Capacity Building: Conduct district-level workshops on blended learning, vernacular-adaptive edtech tools, and digital pedagogy.*
- *Innovation or Performance Grants: Recognise and reward schools that successfully adopt blended learning or demonstrate improved learning outcomes by incorporating innovation metrics into accreditation and quality rankings.*

6. CONCLUSION

Tamil Nadu's new State School Education Policy (TNSEP) envisions inclusive, technology-enabled, and quality-driven education. However, achieving this vision requires the active inclusion of LFPS as partners, not peripheral actors. These schools educate nearly half of Tamil Nadu's children and are indispensable to the state's educational equity goals.

A shift from input-based regulation to learning-outcome-based governance is essential. Simplifying compliance, extending recognition, and aligning teacher development with technological change can help LFPS focus on their core mission of teaching and learning.

By embracing differentiated, enabling regulation, Tamil Nadu can lead the way in demonstrating how states can combine equity, accountability, and innovation. Recognising and supporting LFPS will not only strengthen educational access but also ensure that every child, regardless of income, has the opportunity to learn, achieve, and thrive.

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