

“Bureaucratic Inertia vs. Agile Adaptation: Re-engineering K-12 Administrative Hierarchies in India through the Lens of OECD Educational Governance”

Original Research Article | Volume 1 | Issue 4 | 2026 | Article Number: 029

Accepted: 29 August 2026 | Published: 10 September 2026 | ISSN: 2979-8582 (Online)



Crossref : <https://doi.org/10.67693/BJCR-Z4IHG4Q5>



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Abstract

India's vast K-12 administrative apparatus continues to be constrained by multi-layered hierarchical structures that privilege procedural compliance over instructional leadership and rapid responsiveness, generating systemic inertia that undermines learning recovery, equity and adaptive capacity even after ambitious reforms. Persistent administrative overload on principals, severe middle-tier vacancies and fragmented delivery chains have limited the translation of policy intent into classroom outcomes, as documented in recent national assessments. Existing scholarship has yet to systematically transpose OECD multi-level governance principles—distributed leadership, calibrated school autonomy and agile feedback mechanisms—onto India's concurrent federal architecture and the institutional innovations envisaged under the National Education Policy 2020. This study therefore diagnoses the precise mechanisms of bureaucratic inertia across state directorates, district and block offices and emerging school complexes, benchmarks them against OECD standards of adaptive educational governance, and develops concrete re-engineering pathways that convert rigid hierarchies into outcome-oriented, agile systems. Drawing on comparative policy analysis of NEP 2020 provisions on school complexes and regulatory separation, OECD insights including the Delhi frontline-empowerment experience, and secondary evidence from UDISE+, PARAKH and ASER, the analysis reveals that legalistic norms and clerical burdens reduce middle managers to transmission roles while constraining principal instructional time. Re-calibrating authority toward empowered school complexes and distributed leadership can reverse these dynamics. The resulting model offers a scalable hybrid of hierarchical accountability and agile adaptation, essential for accelerating foundational learning, equity and system resilience on the path to Viksit Bharat 2047 and the

realisation of SDG 4.

Keywords: Bureaucratic Inertia, Agile Adaptation, K-12 Hierarchies, OECD Educational Governance, NEP 2020, School Complexes

I. From Hierarchical Stasis to Adaptive Agility: Re-engineering India's K-12 Administrative Hierarchies through OECD Educational Governance

With approximately 250 million kids enrolled in more than 1.4 million institutions, India's K–12 educational system is at a turning point. Implementation of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, which outlined an ambitious vision of competency-based learning, basic literacy, and systemic flexibility five years ago, is nevertheless hampered by ingrained bureaucratic inertia. Path-dependent rigidities that were also experienced by previous reforms like the Right to Education Act and Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan are replicated by multi-layered administrative hierarchies, frictions in Center-State Coordination, delayed Fund Flows (often averaging 11 months), and a compliance-oriented culture that prioritize process over results¹.

This inertia is systemic rather than just an administrative inefficiency. Rather than serving as instructional leaders, district and block officers sometimes serve as "Post Offices", and hierarchical clearance chains impede decision-making and reduce local responsiveness. The issue is made worse by Concurrent-List Federalism, which combines ambitious central frameworks with unequal state competence, political opposition, and institutional routines that are difficult to change. As a result, the system is still primarily focused on input conformity and access rather than learning outcomes—an orientation that the NEP itself aimed to reverse.

A strong analytical perspective is provided by OECD research on managing complex educational systems. Effective multi-level systems treat complexity as a design condition rather than a barrier, replace strict command-and-control with soft governance, capacity-building, and collaborative networks, and strike a balance between national steering and local autonomy, as shown in works like *Governing Education in a Complex World* (2016) and *Education Governance in Action* (2016). In high-performing systems, accountability moves from procedural integrity to proof of student learning, and middle-tier actors become facilitators of change rather than just compliance monitors.

This implies that re-engineering India's hierarchies calls for considerably more than small adjustments. It necessitates intentional redesign, which includes defining roles at the federal, state, district, and school levels; professionalizing the middle tier as instructional leaders; aligning data systems and incentives with outcomes; and incorporating agile feedback loops that enable quick adaptation without compromising coherence or equity. This essay examines how India's administrative architecture may move from bureaucratic inertia to dynamic adaptation, turning NEP 2020's goal from aspirational language into practical reality for the biggest educational system in the world. It does this by drawing on OECD insights into multi-level governance.

II. Re-engineering the Iron Cage: Bureaucratic Inertia versus Agile Hierarchies in India's K-12 Governance through an OECD Prism

India's K-12 administrative architecture remains trapped in a Weberian iron cage of hierarchical legalism, where compliance eclipses adaptation. This literature review synthesises the tension between entrenched bureaucratic inertia and the imperative of agile, multi-level governance as framed by OECD models, illuminating pathways for hierarchical re-engineering under NEP 2020.

a. Legalistic Norms and the Persistence of Inertia

Mangla's ethnographic research in northern Indian states shows that unequal primary education results are caused by legalistic bureaucratic norms that prioritize following rules over thoughtful problem-solving². These standards entail administrative constraints that hinder local involvement and undermine social co-production of services, even while they facilitate infrastructural improvements³. Such standards' persistence, especially in the wake of political turning points like Uttarakhand's statehood, solidifies inertia by encouraging households to seek private alternatives⁴.

b. The “Post-Office” Syndrome and Hierarchical Disempowerment

According to Aiyar and Bhattacharya, the "Post-Office" paradox is that the decision-making power is concentrated at district or higher levels, with frontline and middle-tier officials serving just as data transmitters and order takers⁵. This design turns prospective instructional leaders into reporting machines by encouraging apathy, understaffing (typically 30–40% of sanctioned jobs), and clerical overload (70–80% of the time)⁶. Extreme centralization further distances responsibility from community knowledge, with just around 3% of public spending occurring at local levels⁷.

c. OECD Lenses on Multi-Level Educational Governance

According to the OECD's Governing Complex Education Systems initiative, accountability, capacity building, and strategic thinking are essential for multi-level systems that strike a balance between local responsiveness and national coherence⁸. The networked, soft-steering modes that result from hierarchical command allow for improvisation, information sharing, and trust-based adaptation—exactly the nimble capacities lacking in India's unflexible hierarchies⁹.

d. Towards Agile Re-engineering

The flexibility agenda of NEP 2020 clashes with Center-State tensions and lingering legalism. In order for hierarchies to become adaptable platforms rather than inertial prisons, re-engineering necessitates moving from legalistic to deliberative norms, empowering the "Missing Middle", and integrating OECD-style capacity and horizontal responsibility. Thereafter the Administrators in India's K–12 system will be able to convert bureaucratic lethargy into adaptable, just governance.

III. Re-engineering Hierarchical Rigidity into Adaptive Capacity: A Methodological Blueprint for Confronting Bureaucratic Inertia and Enabling Agile Governance in India's K-12 Administrative Hierarchies through OECD Educational Lenses

a. Theoretical Framing: Contrasting Inertia with Adaptive Governance

This methodology is explicitly designed to interrogate the core tension of the research—bureaucratic inertia versus agile adaptation—within India's multi-tiered K-12 administrative hierarchies. It synthesises classical Weberian notions of hierarchical rigidity, rule-bound path dependency and compliance culture with contemporary OECD conceptualisations of educational governance that prioritise school-level autonomy, distributed leadership, iterative feedback and systemic resilience^{10&11}. The National Education Policy 2020's insistence on functional separation of regulation, provision and policymaking is treated as the critical domestic reform moment against which OECD benchmarks of adaptive, multi-level governance are applied¹².

b. Multi-Level Hierarchical Mapping and Comparative Case Architecture

A nested, multi-scalar case design maps the entire administrative chain—from the Ministry of Education and State Directorates through District Education Officers, Block Resource Centres and school clusters—across three purposely selected states that exhibit contrasting patterns of hierarchical density and

NEP implementation fidelity. This architecture allows systematic diagnosis of where inertia is produced and reproduced within the hierarchy. Parallel benchmarking against high-performing OECD systems that allocate substantial curricular, budgetary and human-resource responsibilities to schools supplies the external reference frame for identifying viable pathways of agile re-engineering¹⁰.

c. Mixed-Methods Protocol for Capturing Inertia and Adaptation Dynamics

Qualitative strands comprise process-tracing of decision cycles, elite and mid-tier bureaucratic interviews, and organisational ethnographies that surface the cognitive and institutional mechanisms sustaining inertia (drawing on recent sensemaking studies of middle-tier officials). Quantitative components construct composite indices of hierarchical density, decision latency and adaptive responsiveness using UDISE+, National Achievement Survey trends and available PISA-related governance indicators. Qualitative Comparative Analysis and Bayesian process-tracing identify necessary and sufficient configurations that either lock systems into bureaucratic inertia or unlock agile adaptation.

d. Analytical Integration and Reflexive Safeguards

Thematic analysis is guided by a dual codebook that codes simultaneously for inertial features (centralised appointment, non-teaching workload, compliance rituals) and OECD-aligned agile attributes (local autonomy, feedback loops, stakeholder co-creation). Temporal sequencing (2018–2026) captures pre- and post-NEP trajectories, including NIPUN Bharat and Samagra Shiksha implementation. Reflexivity protocols and sensitivity checks address researcher positionality and data limitations inherent in India's federal administrative data landscape.

This integrated design directly operationalises the research title's central dialectic, generating actionable evidence for re-engineering India's K-12 administrative hierarchies toward OECD-informed agile adaptation while remaining grounded in the structural realities of concurrent-list federalism.

IV. From Rigid Hierarchies to Adaptive Ecosystems: Re-engineering India's K-12 Administrative Structures against Bureaucratic Inertia via OECD Educational Governance

India's K-12 system, serving over 240 million students across 1.46 million schools, remains trapped in bureaucratic inertia that prioritizes compliance over learning outcomes. Hierarchical, legalistic norms—rooted in colonial administrative legacies—stifle frontline agility, even as the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 demands foundational literacy, school complexes, and decentralized decision-making. Viewing this through the OECD's education governance framework (emphasizing multi-level accountability, capacity building, and strategic thinking) reveals pathways for agile adaptation⁹.

a. The Grip of Legalistic Inertia

Akshay Mangla's comparative ethnography distinguishes *legalistic* bureaucratic norms (rigid rule-following, hierarchy, and procedural compliance) from *deliberative* norms (flexible problem-solving and civic co-production)². In states like Uttarakhand, legalism delivers infrastructure and enrolments but fails complex tasks such as instructional support and local coordination, raising administrative burdens that push families toward private exits². Yamini Aiyar and colleagues document the "post-office paradox": block-level officers perceive themselves as powerless message-carriers, spending 70–80% of time on clerical tasks amid severe understaffing⁶. Decision rights concentrate at district or state levels, leaving school and blocking actors with minimal discretion. Recent NITI Aayog analysis (2026) flags over 100,000 single-teacher schools, high non-teaching burdens, and governance voids that perpetuate low learning trajectories despite near-universal access¹³.

b. OECD Governance Principles as Diagnostic Lens

OECD work on governing complex education systems stresses balancing national coherence with local responsiveness through three pillars: clear accountability (aligned incentives across levels), capacity building (skills and resources for adaptation), and strategic thinking (iterative, evidence-informed steering)⁸. Decentralisation succeeds only when responsibilities, funding, and capacity are matched; pure hierarchy produces isomorphism and low-effort traps. India's dual bureaucracy (IAS generalists versus provincial line officers) often privileges top-down orders over persuasion-based leadership that improves learning¹⁴.

c. Comparative Pathways and Re-engineering Imperatives

Table 1: Comparative Pathways of Legalistic Hierarchies, OECD Aligned Models and Prioritized Reforms

Dimension	Legalistic Indian Hierarchy	OECD-Aligned Agile Model	Priority Reform
Decision locus	District/state apex	School complexes + empowered middle tier	Devolve instructional leadership
Accountability	Upward compliance reporting	Multi-directional (outcomes + process)	Shift from inputs to learning data
Capacity use	Clerical overload (70–80% time)	Mentorship & adaptive problem-solving	Re-skill middle managers
Civic interface	Administrative burden on citizens	Deliberative co-production	Strengthen SMCs with real authority

Re-engineering requires: (1) explicit activity mapping that assigns discretion where knowledge is greatest (schools/blocks); (2) capacity investments that convert “post officers” into instructional leaders, as piloted in select states; (3) hybrid accountability that retains national standards while enabling contextual adaptation, consistent with NEP’s school-complex vision and OECD multi-level guidance. Without norm change, hierarchical inertia will continue to blunt policy ambition. The alternative—deliberative, capacity-rich hierarchies—offers the only scalable route from access to equitable learning¹³.

V. Beyond the Iron Cage: Dismantling Bureaucratic Inertia for Agile K-12 Hierarchies in India through OECD Governance Principles

The K–12 administrative structure in India is still stuck in a multi-tiered system that prioritizes conformity above adaptability. Decision-making authority is concentrated upstream from the Ministry of Education through state Secretariats and Directorates, District Education Officers (DEOs), Block Education Officers (BEOs), and School-Level Organizations, but implementation costs are distributed downward. When the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 and the needs of global learning necessitate agile adaptation, this structure creates traditional bureaucratic stagnation, such as delayed fund transfers, clerical overburden, and the "Post-Office" Syndrome. When the system is seen through the OECD's framework for managing complex education systems (accountability, capacity, strategic thinking, and trust), it becomes clear how serious the issue is and how to re-engineer it⁹.

a. Anatomy of Inertia: Hierarchical Rigidity and the Post-Office Syndrome

Due to the parallel nature of education, there is often a lack of cooperation between the federal government and the states as well as dual accountability. Multiple permissions are needed for routine actions like teacher transfers, infrastructure punishments, and school recognition, which causes congestion. Officers at the block level describe themselves as helpless cogs whose main job is to broadcast commands rather than address local issues. Research shows that secretarial work, RTI responses, and data requests take up 70–80% of middle-tier time, leaving little time for instructional leadership. The enthusiasm for change is further undermined by average fund-disbursement delays of eleven months⁶.

Rule-following is encouraged above problem-solving by legalistic bureaucratic rules. Although these standards can increase enrollment and infrastructural indicators, they consistently perform poorly on difficult activities that call for societal participation and cross-institutional coordination—exactly the tasks that NEP 2020 requires³.

Table 2: Characteristic Features of Indian K-12 Administrative Hierarchy versus Agile Requirements

Dimension	Prevailing Hierarchical Pattern	Agile Adaptation Need (OECD-aligned)
Decision locus	Concentrated at state/district	Subsidiarity + school-level autonomy
Middle-tier role	Clerical “post office”	Instructional leadership & local problem-solving
Accountability	Upward compliance	Multi-directional (outcomes + process)
Time allocation	70–80% administrative	Majority academic & adaptive
Fund flow	Multi-month delays	Predictable, devolved, performance-linked

b. OECD Educational Governance as Diagnostic and Design Lens

The OECD's work on managing education in a complex environment places a strong focus on developing capacity, bolstering accountability, fostering trust, and striking a balance between national coherence and local responsiveness. Successful multi-level systems invest in school leadership, allocate duties based on subsidiarity, and view governance as dynamic rather than rigid. When combined with strong leadership and support systems, school autonomy in resource allocation and instructional concerns corresponds with higher outcomes—conditions that are mostly lacking in India's inflexible chain of command⁹.

The difference is further highlighted by the concepts of agile governance, which include knowledge production, adaptability, iteration, and multi-stakeholder cooperation. Instead of focusing on quick learning and contextual adaptability, India's system is still optimized for uniformity and hierarchical control.

c. NEP 2020 Ambition Meets Implementation Reality

NEP 2020 envisions school complexes, competency-based curriculum, empowered School Management Committees (SMCs), and fundamental literacy and numeracy missions. However, implementation is still unequal after six years. Institutional capacity is limited, funding has fallen short of the 6% GDP target, and top-down compliance exercises frequently take the place of true co-creation with states. While student-teacher ratios have improved and dropout rates have decreased, school numbers have decreased

and equity disparities still exist, according to recent UDISE+ 2025–26 statistics. A significant step toward decentralization is represented by the new 2026 SMC guidelines, which expand committees to secondary schools, require 75% parent participation, and devolve civil-works powers up to ₹30 lakh. However, these powers run the risk of remaining formal rather than substantive if the middle tier is not concurrently re-engineered.

Table 3: Selected Implementation Friction Points under NEP 2020

Friction Point	Manifestation	Governance Implication
Bureaucratic resistance	Multiple clearances, legalistic norms	Undermines iterative reform
Middle-tier capacity	Understaffing + clerical overload	Blocks translation of policy into practice
Centre–state coordination	Compliance meetings over co-design	Weakens trust and ownership
Local accountability	Incomplete devolution of funds/functions	Limits school-level agility

d. Pathways to Re-engineering: From Hierarchy to Adaptive Networks

Re-engineering necessitates intentional changes on three fronts. Redefine the middle tier first by transforming DEOs and BEOs from message-carriers into capacity-builders. This may be achieved by reducing clerical load through digital processes, protecting time for academic mentorship, and tying performance measurements to learning outcomes rather than file clearing. Second, fully operationalize empowered SMCs and school complexes with real personnel and financial discretion, backed by open data dashboards, to strengthen subsidiarity. Third, engage in leadership development and inter-level trust-building while integrating multidirectional, OECD-aligned accountability that combines school-level self-evaluation, peer review, and system-level strategic steering.

The iterative knowledge required by OECD principles can be produced via pilot projects that provide specific districts more operational autonomy and are rigorously evaluated. A realistic budgetary trajectory toward higher education spending and concurrent investments in state capability are unavoidable.

The K–12 system in India lacks an administrative operating system that can convert policy vision into adaptive classroom reality, not a lack of policy vision. India can transform its hierarchical structure from a barrier to a framework for flexible, egalitarian, and high-achieving education by challenging bureaucratic inertia with the disciplined flexibility of OECD governance standards.

VI. Conclusion: Transcending Bureaucratic Inertia toward Agile Multi-Level Governance

India's K–12 administrative hierarchies are still caught between the need for agile adaptation required by 21st-century learning outcomes and global benchmarks and bureaucratic inertia, which manifests as strict legalistic norms, multi-layered approval chains, and compliance-dominated middle-tier functioning. When examined through the lens of OECD educational governance, this research shows that the continuation of hierarchical structures, in which directorates concurrently oversee, regulate, and assess schools, creates systemic bottlenecks, weakens instructional leadership, and jeopardizes equitable delivery¹⁵.

Even under similar statutory directives, legalistic bureaucratic cultures that prioritize rule-adherence over thoughtful problem-solving yield inconsistent execution, according to evidence from comparative multi-level analysis. While deliberate variations allow for flexible adaptation and higher service quality, such rules in northern Indian states create administrative constraints that hinder communal co-production and promote family departure toward private alternatives². The structural deficit is further quantified by NITI Aayog's recent diagnostics, which show that more than one-third of schools have fewer than 50 students, 7% have just one teacher, and nearly 14% of teaching days are lost to non-academic duties. These findings are exacerbated by the fact that there are more than 2 lakh elementary post vacancies in states like Bihar alone¹⁶.

In contrast to hierarchical management, high-performing systems mix national standards with local autonomy, quality assurance procedures, and professional trust, according to OECD principles on education governance. According to PISA-aligned findings, better results and smaller equity gaps are correlated with teacher selection, longer preparation, classroom autonomy, and less administrative intervention. By supporting the separation of policymaking, regulation, and operations through autonomous State School Standards Authorities (SSSAs), school complexes as fundamental governance units, and less non-teaching responsibilities for educators, India's NEP 2020 expressly acknowledges these ideas. However, five years later, the "post-office syndrome," in which middle-tier officers spend 70–80% of their time on administrative duties, is still prevalent due to Center–state conflicts, delayed frameworks, and insufficient functional uncoupling⁶.

Agile systems consider governance as an adaptable ecosystem, as further demonstrated by the comparative OECD lens: information flows provide ongoing feedback; power is allocated with explicit responsibility; and organizational capacity permits frontline discretion within cohesive national goals. Instead, India's concurrent-list federalism and lingering centralizing impulses through fiscal conditionality and standards-setting have resulted in quasi-unitary centralization without corresponding perfection. Responsiveness to various linguistic, socioeconomic, and infrastructural settings is hampered by this mismatch of power and duty.

In the end, re-engineering necessitates a transition from path-dependent hierarchical inertia to multi-level adaptive capability. Institutionalizing deliberative norms, empowering the middle tier as instructional leaders rather than compliance conduits, and integrating OECD-style quality assurance that combines autonomy with open monitoring are all critical to success. Without this change, India's human capital trajectory continues to lag behind both OECD peers and developing comparators, and NEP 2020's vision of competency-based, inclusive, and future-ready education runs the danger of staying aspirational.

Dimension	Bureaucratic Inertia (Current Dominant Mode)	Agile Adaptation (OECD-Aligned Target)
Decision Rights	Multi-layered, top-down approvals	Distributed with school/complex autonomy
Middle-Tier Role	Clerical “post-office” functions (70–80% time)	Instructional leadership & mentoring
Accountability	Rule compliance & hierarchical reporting	Outcomes + professional trust

Dimension	Bureaucratic Inertia (Current Dominant Mode)	Agile Adaptation (OECD-Aligned Target)
Quality Assurance	Overlapping directorate functions	Independent SSSAs + transparent disclosure
Teacher Time	High non-academic diversion	Protected instructional focus
Federal Dynamics	Central conditionality & uneven state capacity	Cooperative multi-level coordination

VII. Recommendations: Operational Pathways for Hierarchical Re-engineering

To convert diagnostic insight into systemic change, the following sequenced recommendations operationalise OECD governance principles within India's federal and administrative realities.

- **Functional Separation and Institutional Redesign**

States must operationalise independent State School Standards Authorities (SSSAs) within 24 months, fully divorcing regulation and quality assurance from operational administration. Concurrently, accelerate formation of school complexes as the primary governance unit, consolidating small and single-teacher schools into cylindrical 1–12 configurations that enable resource sharing, continuous progression, and coherent leadership. This directly addresses NITI Aayog's structural diagnosis and NEP 2020's design intent.

- **Middle-Tier Transformation into Instructional Capacity**

Launch nationwide Leadership Enhancement programmes modelled on successful state pilots, reallocating middle-tier time from clerical overload to academic mentoring. Fill sanctioned vacancies on a time-bound basis, introduce performance metrics weighted toward learning-outcome support rather than file throughput, and institutionalise cluster-level professional learning communities. Capacity-building must emphasise deliberative norms over legalistic compliance.

- **Autonomy Coupled with Robust Accountability**

Grant school complexes and principals expanded discretion over pedagogy, local resource allocation, and teacher deployment within national competency frameworks. Pair this with transparent public disclosure of key indicators, independent inspection protocols aligned with OECD quality-assurance toolkits, and strengthened School Management Committees for bottom-up accountability. Reduce non-teaching duties through dedicated administrative cadres and digital workflow automation.

- **Federal Alignment and Fiscal Incentives**

Establish joint Centre–state task forces on school quality to resolve concurrent-list frictions and accelerate pending frameworks (curriculum, teacher education, holistic assessment). Link a portion of Samagra Shiksha and PM-SHRI funding to verified progress on SSSA operationalisation, vacancy reduction, and middle-tier role redefinition, while preserving state flexibility for contextual adaptation.

- **Continuous Evidence and Adaptive Learning**

Institutionalise participation in PISA for Schools and domestic learning assessments as feedback

loops rather than high-stakes rankings. Create a national knowledge platform documenting state-level experiments in agile governance, enabling rapid diffusion of deliberative practices that demonstrably improve outcomes.

Priority Action	Timeline	Key Metric of Success	OECD Principle Anchored
Operationalise SSSAs in all states	24 months	Independent regulatory functioning	Clear role separation
School-complex rollout & cylindrical restructuring	36 months	% schools in complexes; reduced single-teacher units	Local autonomy + efficiency
Middle-tier capacity & vacancy fill	18–30 months	% time on instructional leadership; vacancy rate <10%	Professional capacity & trust
Protected teacher instructional time	Ongoing	Non-academic duty days reduced by 50%	Focus on teaching & learning
Multi-level quality task forces	Immediate	Joint action plans adopted	Collaborative multi-level governance

Implementation demands political commitment to devolve genuine authority while building the professional norms that make autonomy productive. When hierarchical paralysis yields to adaptive ecosystems, India's K-12 system can translate NEP 2020's ambitions into measurable learning gains and position itself within the global conversation on responsive educational governance.

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