VASTUTA

White Paper

Decentralising Education Governance: Panchayat-Led School Innovation Models

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Executive Summary

India's education system, one of the largest in the world, spans over 1.5 million schools and reaches hundreds of millions of children. Despite its scale and ambition, the system continues to face persistent challenges of poor learning outcomes, high dropout rates, and a disconnect between curriculum and local realities, particularly in rural areas. For too long, education policy in India has been shaped by a centralised approach that often overlooks the specific needs, strengths, and aspirations of local communities. While reforms have introduced new curricula and infrastructure investments, they have not sufficiently addressed the root issue: a lack of local ownership and contextual relevance.

This white paper proposes a bold yet pragmatic shift to bring Gram Panchayats to the centre of school governance and educational innovation. These grassroots democratic institutions, closest to the people and their lived realities, are uniquely positioned to shape a system that responds to the needs of their children. The aim is not to dismantle state involvement, but to create a shared governance model that balances top-down standards with bottom-up innovation.

By empowering Panchayats with planning authority, budgetary tools, and community engagement mechanisms, education can once again become a source of pride, participation, and progress. Locally-developed school plans, integration of livelihood-linked learning, and the inclusion of local mentors and artisans can help re-root education in the cultural and economic soil of each village.

This approach invites a fundamental rethink: that quality education is not just a government service, but a community mission. When schools are seen not as distant institutions, but as reflections of local identity and ambition, they transform from sites of compliance into spaces of co-creation. The future of India's education must rise from its villages, where children learn not only to pass exams, but to contribute meaningfully to their communities.

Background and Rationale

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act was a landmark reform, intended to empower India's grassroots democratic institutions. It constitutionally mandated the devolution of powers to Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), including responsibilities over key areas like health, water, and education. However, in practice, the education sector has remained overwhelmingly controlled by state-level departments. Panchayats, though recognised on paper, are rarely empowered to lead in shaping educational outcomes. Their role is often restricted to maintaining school buildings or overseeing minor infrastructure works, with little influence over curriculum, pedagogy, or innovation.

This disconnect is both a missed opportunity and a structural flaw. Schools serve as the beating heart of rural communities, yet the people closest to them, the local governance bodies have minimal say in how they function. Policy documents may reference decentralisation, but without real fiscal and administrative autonomy, Panchayats cannot truly lead. This centralised model has contributed to low accountability, poor learning outcomes, and schools that feel alien to their local contexts.

In contrast, numerous community-led schooling models in India and abroad show that when education governance is locally driven, outcomes improve. When communities co-create school plans, align learning with local livelihoods, and hold teachers and administrators accountable, student engagement rises and dropout rates fall. In regions like Himachal Pradesh and Kerala, stronger Panchayat involvement has correlated with higher school performance and improved retention. Internationally, models from Brazil's participatory education councils to Kenya's school management committees provide similar evidence.

Empowering Panchayats in school governance can unlock transformational change. With the right mix of autonomy, resources, and capacity-building, they can reshape education to reflect local economic realities, from agro-ecological skills to cooperative entrepreneurship. Such contextualised learning can enhance student interest, prepare youth for dignified local livelihoods, and bring pride back to schooling. Moreover, when communities are given ownership, they protect and uplift the institutions they create. Schools stop being distant government buildings and become vibrant community assets.

Decentralising education governance is not about weakening the role of the state; it is about deepening democracy and bridging the last-mile gap between policy and lived experience. The road ahead lies in trusting India's villages, not just with votes, but with the future of their children. Panchayats must be seen not as logistical assistants, but as co-authors of educational progress.
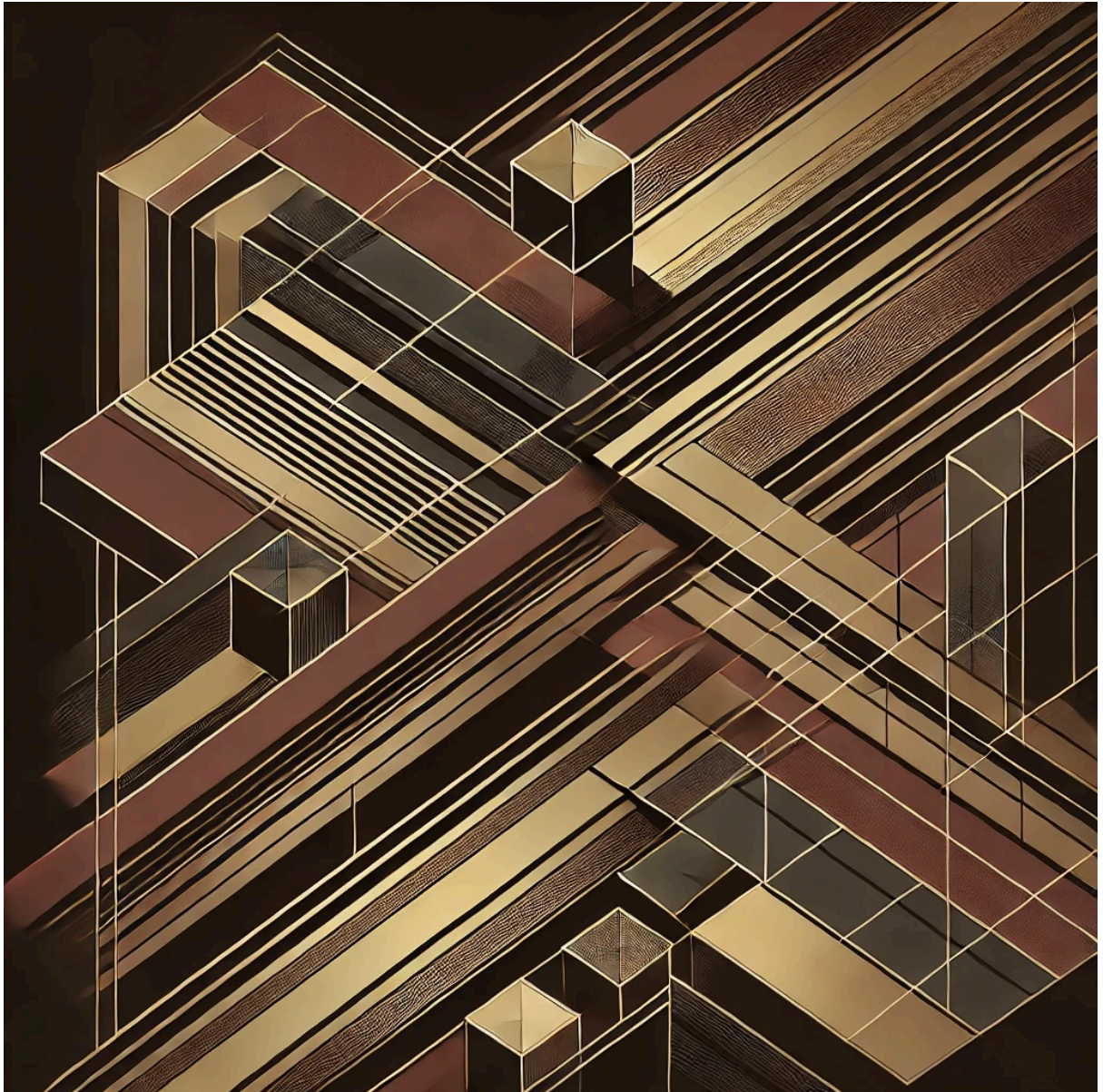
The Vastuta Framework: Panchayat-Led School Innovation Model (PLSIM)

We propose a structured framework to operationalise Panchayat leadership in school innovation, guided by three pillars:

A. Co-creation of School Development Plans (SDPs)

A central pillar of decentralised education governance is the collaborative development of School Development Plans (SDPs). These are strategic, five-year blueprints that chart the vision, goals, and priorities for each school. Under the proposed model, Panchayats, together with school heads, teachers, and parent committees, will jointly design these plans. The process must be participatory, reflecting the educational aspirations of the community and the socio-economic realities of the region.

Each SDP will focus on three key areas:

1. **Learning Outcomes**: Define clear academic goals for students across subjects, identify current learning gaps, and plan interventions such as remedial teaching, peer learning groups, and teacher development initiatives.

2. **Infrastructure Priorities**: Assess and prioritise school infrastructure needs including classrooms, drinking water, sanitation, digital tools, and learning spaces. Emphasis should be on creating a safe and engaging environment that supports learning.

3. **Local Skill Integration**: Introduce modules that connect education with local livelihoods. This may include agriculture-based learning, traditional crafts, cooperative management, and environment stewardship. Schools become hubs for both knowledge and practical life skills.

To ensure accountability and dynamism, SDPs will be reviewed annually in open Gram Sabhas, where parents, students, and community members can evaluate progress, raise concerns, and suggest mid-course corrections. This process promotes transparency, nurtures community pride, and ensures that schools evolve with the changing needs of the region. By embedding SDPs in local governance, we strengthen both education and democracy at the grassroots.

B. Community Budgeting and Fiscal Autonomy

For Panchayats to meaningfully lead school innovation, they must be equipped with both fiscal autonomy and the ability to make context-driven budgetary decisions. This white paper proposes that 15 to 20 percent of a Panchayat's annual development budget be earmarked specifically for education-related innovation. This allocation should not be limited to routine maintenance or infrastructure but should empower Panchayats to design and fund locally relevant educational initiatives.

The use of these funds must remain flexible, responding to the unique needs of each community. For instance, Panchayats may choose to establish nutrition gardens to support

midday meals and promote food education. They may engage community coaches or mentors; retired teachers, artisans, or local professionals to enhance learning beyond textbooks. Special incentives for girls' education, such as transport support or hygiene kits, can also be financed. Furthermore, funds can be directed toward learning labs focused on digital access, vocational skills, or environmental awareness.

To maximise impact, Panchayats should also be trained and encouraged to leverage convergence with other schemes and funding sources. Programmes such as MGNREGA (for labour and green campus work), NRLM (for self-help group collaboration), and CSR funds (for school infrastructure or digital tools) offer valuable partnerships.

By enabling Panchayats to plan and spend with purpose, we foster accountability, creativity, and local pride in schools. Fiscal autonomy, when rooted in community wisdom, becomes a tool for transformation, not just expenditure.

C. Talent Recruitment for Non-Teaching Roles

Revitalising rural education requires going beyond the classroom and reimagining the school as a vibrant, community-rooted ecosystem. Panchayats can play a pivotal role by identifying and engaging local talent for key non-teaching roles that enrich the learning environment and build life-readiness in students.

This approach encourages Panchayats to tap into their own human capital; retired professionals, artisans, sportspersons, agri-experts, and community leaders to support schools through structured engagement. These individuals can contribute to:

- **Mentorship Programs**: Offering guidance to students on values, personal growth, and career paths.

- **Life-skills Education**: Teaching essential skills such as financial literacy, communication, hygiene, and conflict resolution.

- **Sports and Arts**: Leading regular activities that nurture physical well-being, discipline, creativity, and teamwork.

- **Agri-labs and Climate Education**: Introducing students to soil health, climate-resilient practices, and local sustainability models.

While volunteerism is the ideal spirit, modest honorariums can be provided where needed, ensuring regularity and recognising contributors' time and effort. Panchayats can create a local "talent registry" and match community members with schools based on interest and skill.

This model reduces the burden on teachers, brings real-world experience into the classroom, and strengthens the emotional and social foundation of education. More importantly, it reinforces the message that a school is not only a place to study, but a shared space for nurturing the future by the community, for the community.

Anticipated Impact

Metric	Impact
Learning Outcomes	Local monitoring and relevance increase student retention and understanding.
Community Ownership	Villagers see schools as shared assets, not state-owned liabilities.
Bureaucratic Efficiency	Faster decisions and less red tape for minor yet impactful interventions.
Local Economy Linkage	Students connect classroom knowledge to their lived environment and future opportunities.
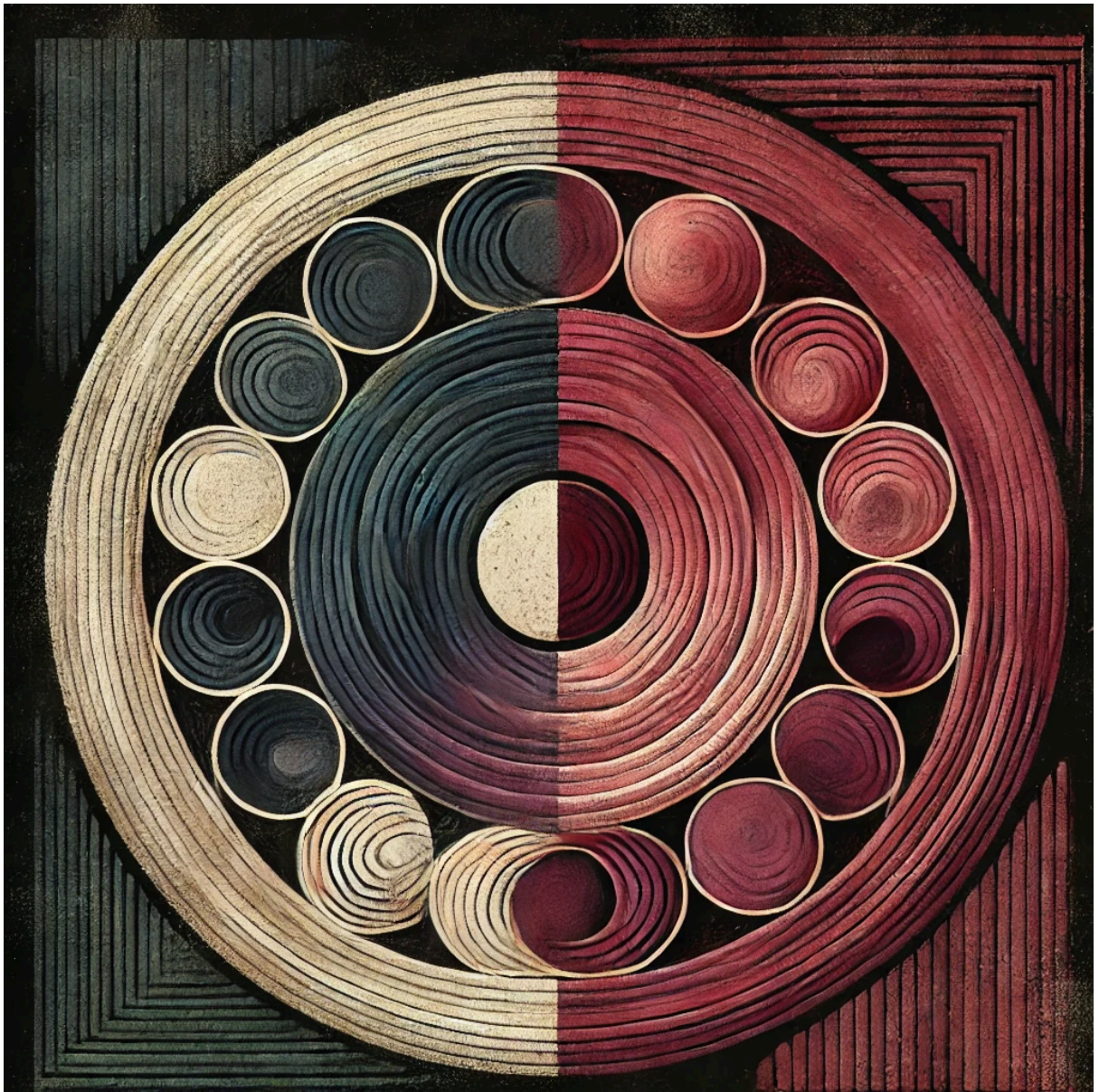
Policy Recommendations

To operationalise Panchayat-led education innovation at scale, clear policy interventions are needed across legislation, capacity building, technology, demonstration projects, and recognition systems. These recommendations are designed to transform Panchayats from passive stakeholders into proactive architects of local education reform.

1. Legislative Backing

The first and most crucial step is to **amend State Panchayati Raj Acts** to **formally incorporate education planning and monitoring roles** for Panchayats. At present, many states do not legally mandate Panchayat involvement beyond basic school infrastructure. By embedding education governance into the statutory duties of Gram Panchayats, a strong legal foundation is laid for decentralised reform. These amendments should clearly define roles in School Development Planning, fund allocation for education, community engagement, and monitoring of learning outcomes. Legal clarity will also encourage greater state support, including budgetary and administrative alignment.

2. Capacity Building

Even with legal authority, Panchayats require structured **capacity building** to engage meaningfully in education planning. This includes establishing **Block or District-level Education Resource Centres**, specifically tasked with training Panchayat members, school committees, and community volunteers. Training modules should focus on:

- Developing School Development Plans (SDPs)

- Budget planning and financial tracking

- Understanding learning outcomes and student assessments

- Integrating local economy linkages into schooling

These resource centres should act as both training hubs and field-support units, enabling real-time troubleshooting and mentoring. Partnerships with universities, NGOs, and retired educationists can enrich this process.

3. Digital Dashboards

To promote transparency and accountability, Panchayats should be provided with **simple, vernacular-language digital dashboards** to track school data. These tools must prioritise usability, especially in low-digital-literacy areas, and include features such as:

- Student enrolment and attendance

- Teacher availability and training records

- Progress on SDP goals

- Real-time feedback from parents and students

Such platforms can help local leaders make informed decisions, flag challenges early, and demonstrate progress to both the community and higher administrative levels. Integration with state-level databases will ensure alignment while preserving local autonomy.

4. Pilot Projects

To demonstrate viability and refine the model, it is recommended to launch **pilot projects in 100 Panchayats across diverse socio-economic and geographic regions**. These pilots should serve as **proof-of-concept zones**, testing all components of the Panchayat-led school innovation model; planning, budgeting, mentorship engagement, and community participation.

Each pilot should be supported with dedicated facilitators, digital infrastructure, and training inputs. An **independent evaluation mechanism** must be embedded from the start, measuring both quantitative and qualitative impacts such as student engagement, learning levels, community participation, and governance efficiency.

Insights from these pilots will help refine policies, scale effective strategies, and build political momentum for wider adoption.

5. Recognition Platforms

To foster a culture of excellence and inspire peer learning, the creation of **state and national recognition platforms** is essential. Annual awards should be instituted for **Panchayats that demonstrate innovation, inclusivity, and impact in education governance**. Categories may include best school development plan, most improved learning outcomes, strongest community engagement, and best integration of local skills into curriculum.

Public recognition through awards, media coverage, and peer-sharing forums will generate healthy competition, validate grassroots leadership, and give voice to models of success. It also helps reframe Panchayat education governance from a bureaucratic obligation to a source of local pride and nation-building.

Call to Action: Reclaiming Education Through Local Leadership

India's future is being written not in conference rooms, but in classrooms across its villages. The success of our education system will be measured not only by national metrics, but by whether every child, regardless of geography feels seen, supported, and inspired in their learning journey. For education to become truly transformative, it must belong to the people it serves. It must reflect the local context, build on community strengths, and be rooted in collective aspirations. This is the moment to move beyond top-down delivery and instead build a system shaped by those who live its reality every day.

Vastuta calls upon policymakers, civil society organisations, and local governance leaders to reimagine the Panchayat, not as a passive implementer of schemes, but as a creative architect of educational change. Panchayats, when trusted and empowered, have the potential to lead a silent revolution in school governance. They bring not only proximity and contextual understanding, but also the trust of the community. Their leadership can help tailor education to local livelihoods, revive civic pride in public schooling, and ensure accountability that flows from within, not above.

We must no longer treat education as a one-size-fits-all formula administered from the top. Instead, let us treat each school as a community institution, shaped by local wisdom, sustained through local ownership, and responsive to local needs. This shift demands systemic support: policy frameworks, financial tools, capacity-building mechanisms, and recognition platforms that centre Panchayats as the nucleus of grassroots educational reform.

Civil society has a crucial role to play in building bridges between government policy and village action. From training Panchayat members to facilitating community-school dialogues, from building local leadership to designing contextual learning materials, NGOs and development practitioners must walk shoulder to shoulder with communities.

Policy leaders must create the legal and institutional scaffolding needed to make this vision scalable and sustainable. This includes legislative reforms to formally recognise Panchayat roles in school governance, as well as aligning funding and monitoring systems to support local autonomy. The success of this movement will not be measured by grand declarations, but by the quiet strength of a well-run rural school, with children eager to learn and a community proud to nurture them.

Let our schools reflect the identity, aspirations, and wisdom of the communities they belong to. Let us restore dignity and relevance to rural education by giving people a voice and a stake in shaping it. Let children grow up seeing local mentors lead in their classrooms, learning not only from books, but from the lived experience of their own community.

This is a call to return education to its rightful stewards: the people. Let education in India rise from the grassroots. Let the village once again be the starting point of national renewal. Vastuta stands committed to this cause, and we invite all those who believe in the power of local leadership to join this journey.

For more thought leadership and collaborative solutions, visit www.vastuta.co