

School Management Committees — Making the Accountability Structure Work

The Right to Education Act 2009, Sections 21 and 22, mandates that every government and government-aided school establish an SMC. The mandate includes:

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B practice-note Education

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Composition: An executive committee of 15 members, of whom 11 are parents or guardians of enrolled children, one is the headmaster (as convenor, not chair), one is a gram panchayat or local body member, and one is a student representative. Of the 15, at least 50% must be women. SC, ST, OBC, and minority communities must have representation proportional to their presence in the school community.

Functions: To monitor the working of the school; prepare and recommend the School Development Plan (SDP); monitor the utilisation of grants; track teacher and student attendance; monitor mid-day meal quality and regularity; and raise awareness about the RTE Act in the community.

Meetings: The executive committee meets monthly; the general body (all parents and teachers) meets once every three months.

Financial oversight: Any funds received by the SMC are held in a separate account; accounts are prepared and audited annually; the headmaster and chairperson jointly sign financial records.

That is what the law says. The reality in most tribal government schools in Odisha is: the SMC was constituted because the block education office required a list of names. Members were nominated without a formal election. Most members don't know they're on the committee. The register has two entries from two years ago. No SDP exists. No accounts are maintained. The headmaster runs the school without meaningful community oversight.

Why this matters for learning outcomes: Research consistently shows that school community engagement — when parents and community members have genuine information about school functioning and genuine voice in addressing problems — is associated with better teacher attendance, better use of school grants, and ultimately better learning outcomes. The SMC is the mechanism designed to produce this. When it doesn't work, the accountability loop is

broken.

The Five-Step Activation Sequence

Step 1: Establish the current status (1 week)

Before facilitating any SMC activity, understand what exists. Visit the school. Ask the headmaster:

- Is there a current SMC? Who are the members?
- When did the SMC last meet?
- Does the school have an SDP?
- What is the current balance in the SMC account?
- What grants has the school received in the last 12 months and how were they spent?

Then visit two or three SMC members independently. Ask them: do they know they are on the committee? Do they attend meetings? What do they understand the committee's role to be?

This assessment tells you which problem you are solving: non-formation (rare after RTE), nominal formation with no activity (common), or partial functioning that needs deepening (less common but more promising).

Step 2: Facilitate reconstitution through proper election (half day)

Most SMCs were formed by nomination. The RTE requires election by parents. A properly elected SMC has legitimacy that a nominated one does not.

Call a general body meeting — invite all parents of enrolled children. In the meeting:

- Explain the SMC's mandate in simple language (not legal language)
- Hold elections for the 11 parent representative seats, ensuring at least 6 women are elected
- Confirm or elect the student representative
- Confirm the gram panchayat member (typically the ward member)
- Elect the president and vice-president from among the parent members

Document the election: attendance register, list of candidates, vote count, results. This documentation is the SMC's founding legal record.

In tribal schools: Conduct the meeting in the community's primary language. Ensure women's voices are heard in the election — in some communities, male family members speak over women even in a meeting designed to elect women representatives. The facilitator's role includes actively creating space for women to nominate themselves and be heard.

Step 3: Build member knowledge (one session, half day)

Within two weeks of constitution, run an orientation for all SMC executive committee members. Not a lecture — a facilitated discussion around three questions:

What is our school's current situation? Present the school's basic data: enrolment, teacher attendance records, mid-day meal regularity, school grant amount and utilisation. If this data isn't available, say so — and frame that gap as the first thing the SMC should address.

What authority do we have? Walk through the SMC's specific powers under the RTE, using concrete examples. The SMC can: request the headmaster to explain how grants were spent; propose in the SDP that a specific infrastructure problem be fixed; write to the block education officer if teacher attendance is consistently poor; inspect mid-day meal quality.

What do we want to change first? One specific, achievable commitment for the first month. Not a vision. A concrete action: we will visit the school on the third Wednesday of each month and review the attendance register. We will call the headmaster to a meeting next month to discuss the grant utilisation records. Start small. Build credibility.

Step 4: Establish the monthly meeting rhythm (months 1-3)

The single most important indicator of SMC functioning is whether meetings happen on a fixed, regular schedule. Monthly meetings with a standard agenda, documented in a register, attended by a quorum.

Standard monthly agenda:

1. Teacher attendance — review the month's record. How many days was each teacher present? If attendance is below 80%, what is the reason?
2. Student attendance — what is the average daily attendance this month? Which students are absent frequently? Has the SMC or school followed up with their families?
3. Mid-day meal — was the meal served every school day this month? Was it adequate? Any quality concerns?
4. Grants and expenditure — any new grants received this month? How were previous grants spent? Are records available for review?
5. School Development Plan update — what progress on SDP commitments since last meeting?
6. Issues and actions — any problems raised by members; specific actions agreed with responsible person and deadline

The headmaster attends as Member Secretary — convening and documenting, not chairing. The president chairs. This role separation is important: it signals that the school's community, not its administration, owns the accountability process.

NGO facilitation in the first three months: Attend the first two meetings as a facilitator. Ensure the agenda is followed, that the headmaster presents information to the committee rather than the committee endorsing what the headmaster says, and that decisions produce specific action commitments in the register. By month three, the meeting should be able to run without you. If it can't, revisit the orientation.

Step 5: Build the School Development Plan (month 2–3)

The SDP is the SMC's medium-term action plan for the school — prepared annually, covering infrastructure needs, teacher requirements, learning quality goals, and community engagement commitments.

Preparing the SDP requires two steps:

School assessment: SMC members and the headmaster together walk through the school — classrooms, toilets, kitchen, water source, playground — and list what exists, what is needed, and what is in disrepair. They review the school's learning outcome data (ASER-style assessment results if available, or teacher assessment data) and discuss what the school's learning challenges are.

Priority setting: From the assessment, the SMC identifies three to five specific priorities for the year — specific enough to be actionable and measurable. Not "improve infrastructure" but "repair the girls' toilet block by monsoon." Not "improve learning outcomes" but "all Class 3 students can read a simple text by December."

The SDP is then submitted to the block education office — which is required to respond and incorporate school-identified needs into block planning. Most schools don't know they have this right. Most block offices don't consistently honour it. But an SMC that submits a documented SDP has created a paper trail that can be used in advocacy if the school's needs are consistently ignored.

The Specific Challenge: Tribal Schools

Language of SMC meetings

If SMC meetings are conducted in Odia and most parent members are more comfortable in a tribal language, the accountability function breaks down silently. Parents nod along without understanding. The headmaster runs the meeting because he's the only one comfortable in formal Odia. The SMC becomes what critics of the model say it always is: a front for school administration.

Practical solution: Identify one bilingual community member who can interpret between Odia

(for the headmaster and formal records) and the tribal language (for parent members). This person doesn't need a formal role — they translate naturally, as part of the meeting. Over time, as SMC members gain confidence, their use of the formal language often increases.

Teacher absence in remote schools

The most consequential accountability issue in remote tribal schools is teacher absence. In some blocks, government data shows teachers present on fewer than half of scheduled school days. This is the single largest driver of learning failure in tribal areas.

The SMC has direct authority to monitor teacher attendance — the register is a public document the SMC is entitled to review. An SMC that reviews the attendance register monthly, documents patterns of absence, and writes to the block education officer when absence is persistent is exercising exactly the accountability the RTE intended.

This will sometimes create tension with teachers who are accustomed to absence without consequence. The headmaster may be uncomfortable. Some teachers may attempt to influence SMC members through social pressure. The NGO's role is to support the SMC's legal authority — reminding members that their oversight role is mandated by national legislation, and that the block education officer has a legal obligation to respond to documented concerns.

Women's participation

The RTE mandates 50% women membership, but participation — women actually speaking in meetings, raising concerns, influencing decisions — requires active facilitation. In many communities, women sit quietly at the back of meetings while men speak on their behalf.

What helps: Holding a brief pre-meeting session (15 minutes, just women members) to discuss what they want to raise in the full meeting. Women who have formulated their point in their own language, in a comfortable space, are significantly more likely to raise it in the full meeting.

What to Measure at 12 Months

At the end of one year, a functioning SMC should demonstrate:

- Twelve meeting records in the register with attendance and decisions documented
- An SDP prepared, submitted to the block office, and at least partially implemented
- At least one documented instance of the SMC raising a concern (teacher absence, grant misuse, mid-day meal failure) with the headmaster or block education office — and receiving a response
- SMC members who can explain their role without prompting

An SMC that meets monthly and produces one substantive accountability action per year — one

letter to the block office, one grant utilisation review, one SDP submission — is doing more than 90% of the SMCs in Odisha are doing. That is the realistic and worthwhile target.

Related Knowledge Commons content: Education Sector Primer (*Sector 04*) · Practice Note: Teaching at the Right Level — How to Implement TaRL in Tribal Schools · Practice Note: Community Learning Facilitators

Evidence Grade: B — Multi-study. This Practice Note draws on the Tandfonline study on SMC adoption in disadvantaged schools (2021), ASPIRE India's SMC facilitation model, American India Foundation's SMC training documentation, and Odisha RTE guidelines from the School and Mass Education Department. Last reviewed: April 2026.

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