

Photo: Sujan Singh



Photo: Mukunda De



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(Above) Students of the School Choice Campaign's Delhi Voucher project show their respective vouchers; (Left) While some are left with no choice other than attending occasional classes at the nearest govt. schools, a few privileged ones (eg. students of DPS) even get to attend fashion and textile classes

FUND THE STUDENTS: A LOGICAL APPROACH TO EDUCATION

Would you send your child to a government school?

From infrastructure to accountability, government schools seem to be perennially lagging behind. It's high time the government wakes up to the newer methods to force the government-run schools to perform and deliver the best to educate the future citizens of this country. BY ANINDITA CHAKRABORTY

Mrs. and Mr. Khanna (*Vasant Vihar, New Delhi*) have been extremely worried since the last few months – the reason being their four-year-old daughter's education. The major tussle was regarding the selection of a private school over a government one. "We just couldn't risk a government school for our daughter," is what they have to say. Unfortunately, they are not the only ones who have to go through this turmoil of parenting (*deciding on the right school*).

Even worse, this problem is not a recent development in the Indian education scenario in spite of the fact that the present government spend per child per month is more than the fees in 80% of the private schools. But still, the government schools in rural India are a pitiable sight. The scenario certainly differs a lot in the semi-urban and urban areas in terms of proper infrastructure, but the peril right now is that as much as 80% of the funds allotted to government schools is spent only on infrastructure and teacher's pay and not on enriching the way education is impart-

ed. Using it as an advantage, the private schools have managed to gain popularity among the parents.

Cut to the metros and there is a sea change in the way parents look at the type of schooling they want for their children. Most, if not all, believe that they should rather spend more and send their children to the nearest DPS (*Delhi Public School*)

instead of a government-run school. As one of the parents points out, "I want my son to get educated in the new westernised method where there is much more than mere classes of English, History and Maths. Public schools have classes like mental maths, playing with ceramics, fashion and textile, and teachers are readily available for counselling to help build up the person-

Reasons for sending child (with a voucher) to school (%)

Parents now have several other reasons beside getting their wards attend English, Maths & History classes

Reason (Multiple response)	Reason (Multiple response)		
	Voucher child (366)	Non-voucher child, but same school (370)	Non-voucher child & different school (371)
Improve their knowledge & skills	93.4	92.2	90.0
Better job prospects	86.3	84.1	81.9
Inculcate good habits & discipline	78.4	74.9	74.1
To make the child learn English	20.5	22.4	11.1
Everyone in the neighbourhood sends their children to school	1.6	3.8	5.7
Others (serves as crèche, get mid-day-meal)	1.0	1.6	6.7

Source: CCS first assessment report on Delhi Voucher Project of School Choice Campaign

ality of a child." In fact, these parents believe that the teachers in such schools are helpful and are willing to extend help even beyond class hours. But this is possible only for those who can afford such form of education. Thus, the question remains: What about the major part of the population that still can't afford to send their children to these plush private schools?

Speaking from the point of view of the government schools, the Principal of a renowned government school in Salt Lake, Kolkata (*name withheld on request*) argues, "What people fail to realise is that government schools have a wider horizon to cater to. We might be lagging behind in updating our syllabus (*which the government has started looking into*), but apart from that in terms of other parameters, it's because of the mass that we cater to, we cannot provide a different world to the students where they are kept inside plush centrally air-

conditioned classrooms, served breakfast and transported in air-conditioned school buses."

But the reason is more deeply rooted. The lag is in the accountability. For example, autonomous bodies like Kendriya Vidyalayas, which also are aided by the government, perform really well in managerial level, financial accountability, output from students and parents satisfaction. And the reason is that they are answerable to their authorities as well as to the parents. Thus, the only way in which the educational quality of the government-run schools can be improved is by setting benchmarks in terms of output.

An interesting initiative in this direction has been taken up by the Centre for Civil Society (CCS) through their "School Choice Campaign". The main propaganda here is to fund the students and not the schools with the basic ideology that every student (*from any economic strata*) should have the opportunity to receive good education. Thus, instead of funding the school in totality, students are provided with vouchers and they can go to any school (*private or government*) of their choice by using the same. Now the question arises – how this scheme can help remove the performance disparity between a government school and a private school? Well, simply putting it, the schools stand to receive only the amount of grant mentioned in a student's voucher. That means more

students, more grant. And with the students having an option to go for a school of their choice, schools can have access to grants only when they perform. And that's what is happening. A research done in the first year of implementation of this program shows that students are now happy with the education that they are receiving. But then that's not all. The whole exercise has also increased involvement of parents in the process allowing them to track progress of their wards. As per Sujatha Muthaiya, Associate Director, School For Choice Campaign, "Parents now question the teachers, the schedules, the lessons and try and discuss with the teachers about the regular progress of their children."

The West has been quite receptive to such models. In fact, educational reforms like funding the student has been extremely popular in Latin America. But in India, it's difficult to change the existing rigid mindset without the help of the government. But the government is yet to wake up. Though CCS has already approached it for aid, it still hasn't received an affirmative response. Answering about their chances in the future, Muthaiya says, "We will have to wait for that. There has been no confirmation yet."

Like we mentioned earlier, if Air Force/Army Schools and Kendriya Vidyalayas can, then why can't other government schools replicate the same processes and equal best in class benchmarks? **B&E**

Average expenditure on a voucher

Performance is the only yardstick to receive this grant

Heads (N=366)	Amount (Rs.)
School fees	2,394
Uniform	270
Books	447
Travel	96
Others (includes annual charges, examination fee etc.)	429
Per child average expenditure in a year	3,351

Source: Parents interview schedule