

## Universalizing Education through Private Initiatives

*Excerpts from 'A Better India: A Better World' by NR Narayana Murthy, Founder-Chairman, Infosys and Padma Vibushan recipient. The book is published by the Penguin Group, 2009, article abridged from pages 132-148.*

'It is important to consider the state of primary and secondary education in the country since the secondary school system is the input channel for higher education. Without a vibrant primary and secondary education system, it is unlikely that we will have a sound university education system. By all counts, we have failed even in achieving our goals in basic education. Today, India is home to the largest number of illiterates in the world, with over 390 million illiterate people. Twenty-five million Indian children are out of school, accounting for 20 per cent of the world's children out of school. India spends just 2.1 per cent of its GDP on elementary education. The impact of our neglect of primary education can be assessed by the following example. A whopping 650 million people are estimated to be dependent on agriculture that produces just 25 per cent of the GDP, resulting in an alarmingly low per-capita income of less than Rs 12,000 a year, much lower than even the already low per-capita GDP of the country. These people can barely survive. The only hope is to move these people from agriculture into low-tech manufacturing. Alas, most of them are illiterate and unfit to be pulled out of agriculture.

Amartya Sen believes that access to basic education is a human right, and 'a vital part of people's capacity to lead lives they value'. In 1992, the Indian government announced



a planned target of 'universalizing' elementary education in India. This goal was divided into three broad initiatives – universal access, universal retention and universal achievement – aimed at making education accessible to children, making sure they continued their education, and finally, ensuring that they completed their goals. By the end of 2003, an estimated 90 per cent of India's rural population had primary schools within 1 km of their residence, and 84 per cent had upper primary schools within 3 km. Between 1991 and 2003, the gross enrolment ratio in primary education rose from 82 per cent to 95 per cent, and in upper primary education from 54 per cent to 61 per cent. These are good statistics. However, these education programmes have failed to build in accountability in implementation and outcomes. In fact, over 90 per cent of the government

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expenditure on elementary education goes towards the payment of teachers' salaries in state schools. The programmes have placed an overemphasis on increasing enrolment with little attention paid to retaining students or to learning outcomes. This lack of accountability has resulted in what one educationist has called 'universal sub-par education'. State schools often lack even basic infrastructure and facilities.

The lack of focus on quality has severely impacted the teaching quality in schools. In 2003, World Bank researchers made random visits to 200 primary schools in India, and found no teaching activity in half of them. A survey by Harvard University's Michael Kremer found that one out of four teachers in India's government-owned elementary schools was absent at any given time. Teachers did not attend school at all for almost a third of the school year. The low quality of education across state schools has significantly affected learning outcomes – a recent national survey revealed that close to 35 per cent of the children in the 7-14 age group surveyed could not read a simple paragraph and almost 60 per

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cent of children could not read a simple story. Less than half of the children in the fourth grade could handle first-level mathematics. This apathy has also led to high drop-out and failure rates among students. It is estimated that of the 100 students who enrol in first standard, only seventeen finish the tenth standard.

Weak educational standards in government schools have resulted in private schools, mushrooming across the country. A recent study found that 16 per cent of rural children are now in private primary schools that charge an average of Rs 90 a month in fees, as opposed to free government education. Private schools also perform better than public schools. The economist Geeta Kingdon's survey showed that private schools are more efficiently run with lower unit cost per student compared to state schools. The children in such schools also scored 10 per cent higher on verbal and mathematics examinations than their peers in public schools.

In a poor country like India, I believe that higher education, as well as primary and secondary education in urban areas, must be left to the private sector. Any subsidy in urban or primary education should be provided directly to schools by the voucher mechanism devised by the well-known economist Milton Friedman. There should be incentives for the faculty to perform better. I believe that a competitive environment in fees will eventually reduce the cost of education.

By enabling a renewed, re-energized education sector, we have the potential to transform our country into a true knowledge power, and realize a future of prosperity and growth. □



# Right to Education: Reservations, Reimbursements and Repercussions

By passing the landmark legislation guaranteeing elementary education as a fundamental right, the Union Minister for Human Resource Development, Mr Kapil Sibal – has stirred the education system into action.

While the single-minded commitment to universalize education is commendable and bureaucratic efficacy desirable, the challenges facing the implementation of the Right to Education, are extraordinary. Nearly 200 million children (aged 6 - 14 years), comprising students currently enrolled in government and public schools along with those who are 'out of school', will be affected by the legislation.

The Section 12 of the Right to Education prescribes reservation of at least 25% of seats in government aided, private unaided and special schools for children from weaker sections and disadvantaged groups – and provides the clearest indication of the government's vision of social inclusion. Some commentators have gone further and interpreted this provision as a voucher scheme and a public private partnership. On the other hand, school leaders have rallied against the implementation of this Section on the grounds that it interferes with the management of private unaided schools. A closer look at the prospects and pitfalls of this contentious section in the Right to Education bill is presented here.

## Reservation or voucher scheme?

The rightful implementation of this feature will indicate a definite shift in the government's approach towards educating the poorer sections. Conventional ed-

ucation policies have always focused on the opening and running of government schools to provide free-of-charge education. In a remarkable shift from this tradition, the government has enabled private schools to provide education for underprivileged children through Section 12.1.c. Regarded by some observers as a voucher-like-scheme; this feature mandates the private provision of a public good. By extension, the onus of providing education squarely rests upon the school, with little parental involvement and none of the accountability that a school voucher would provide. Furthermore, questions on how the two student cohorts (fee-paying and 25% reservation) will be integrated in the classroom have not been addressed. In reality, this Section combines the idea of reservation of seats for underprivileged children and empowers, to some extent, parents to aspire to send their wards to a private school.

## Reimbursement resentment

The reimbursement mechanism proposed by the Right to Education Bill in Section 12.2 (the school "shall be reimbursed expenditure so incurred by it to the extent of per-child-expenditure incurred by the State, or the actual amount charged from the child, whichever is less.") has prompted negative reactions from private school managements. By dictating the terms of payment, the government has reserved the right to fix its own price and provoked private unaided schools to resent this imposition. The schools are concerned about the potential increase in financial burden, as a result of the reimbursement conditions, on

the fee paying students. The argument goes that if the fee reimbursement by the government is much lesser than the actual fees charged by the school, then the discrepancy in expenses can only be resolved by increasing the school charges of fee-paying students.

The expectation that private unaided schools, which receive no financial support, are required to contribute to the dispensation of government's duty to its citizens is seen as unreasonable. As such, any friction between the government and private schools is undesirable. The government must clarify its stand on the school managements' concerns and invite representatives from private schools to negotiate the way forward.

One possible solution could be that the government reimburses private schools on par with its own per-child expenditure in better performing government schools (such as Kendriya Vidyalaya, Navodaya Vidyalaya, etc). Another alternative could be a graded system for reimbursement. Schools may be grouped – based on infrastructure, academic outcomes and other quality indicators – in to different categories, which would then determine their reimbursement. An amicable and agreeable solution that takes into account the concerns of the private schools will be in the best interest of the very underprivileged students that the government is seeking to help.

**Manu Sundaram**

*Associate - School Choice Campaign*

## Q & A

### What if parents misuse the voucher?

No human system designed to give a free benefit can be completely immune from abuse. The issue really is which system is less prone to misuse, and where even the misuse is negligible as there are larger benefits for the target population. Education vouchers make the transfer of government funds transparent and accountable. The education voucher can only be used for the purpose of education. The school collects the vouchers from students, deposits them in the school bank account, the bank then debits the government's account for the amount of money specified in the voucher. No money changes hands at any level. The transfer of money is through the bank and therefore easily traceable in case of a dispute. Importantly, poor parents well understand that education is their children's ticket out of poverty. Today they already send their children to private schools despite having free government schools nearby. Education vouchers would only empower them more in choosing a better school.

## FACTSHEET

Expenditure on educational institutions as a percentage of GDP / Expenditure on Educational Institutions from public and private sources (including international resources)

COUNTRY	PERCENT
Chile	6.8%
Indonesia	1.5%
India	4.5%
Australia	5.8%
France	6.3%
Turkey	3.7%
Israel	8.5%
Tunisia	8.1%

**Source** - Education Counts, Benchmarking Progress in 19 WEI Countries, World Education Indicators – 2006



# NATIONAL CAMPAIGN UPDATE

## School Vouchers For Girls

The School Choice Campaign launched its second voucher project on 22 July 2009 at the Sriram Mandir Hall in North East Delhi amidst parents, local ward councillors, principals and NGO representatives. The event was graced by the presence of local community leaders including Mr Divya Jaiswal (former Deputy Mayor Delhi) and ward councillors. The event also saw the awards ceremony of the 400 voucher beneficiaries (girls) of the project who will receive vouchers up to Rs 4,000 per annum for the next 4 years, ensuring the completion of their primary education in a school of their choice. These girls are from poor families and studying in standard II of state run schools and most of them belong to the minority community.

The occasion also saw a detailed counselling session for the parents to help them choose a school for their children for the first time. The School choice Campaign also gave a Handbook to the parents which contained a comparison chart of the services and facilities provided by the schools in their neighbourhood. The initiative aims to empower the parents to exercise their choice in an informed manner by providing them with necessary knowledge. The Centre for Media Studies will be doing the baseline and the yearly surveys for the project along with doing a perception study to study the process of choice by the parents. ACCOR Services, specializing in ticketing and vouchers is going to handle the financial transactions by issuing vouchers to parents and directly depositing the corresponding fee in the school's account.



The dignitaries and the beneficiaries at the awards ceremony



'a sample voucher'

Before the launch ceremony, the first phase of this project saw the creation of awareness of school vouchers. With the help of 'Social Action with Your Assistance' (SAYA), a local NGO, parents of eligible children were informed about this project and encouraged to apply. Assistance with filling up applications was provided. The selection of successful voucher children was done using a randomized computer program on 21 July 2009 in the presence of local ward councillors and leaders. 52 schools covering the 8 wards of North East Delhi are participating in this project and are offering admissions to the 400 girl students in an attempt to create choice and competition.

## Student First! Dialogue Series



Mr Sam Carlson at the dialogue series

The School Choice Campaign, in partnership with the India Habitat Centre, launched 'STUDENT FIRST! Dialogue Series on Quality Education for All' a monthly forum for debate by the nation's foremost experts on national education policies and solutions to problems of quality in the education sector.

### July - 'School Board Exams: Assessment or Harassment?'

The inaugural discussion in the dialogue series was on 'Board Exams: Assessment or Harassment?' The discussion featured- **Mrs Gauri Ishwaran**, Founder Principal of Sanskriti, recipient of the Padma Bhushan in 2004 and **Dr Janaki Rajan**, former Director of SCERT Delhi and Professor of Education Jamia Milia University. The discussion highlighted the improper mode and misguided nature of assessment that is prevalent in our schools today. Mrs Ishwaran strongly supported independent assessment by schools and the accreditation of schools by independent agencies, which, she argued will allow market forces to identify quality schools. Dr Rajan presented a compelling case to allow schools greater autonomy in designing their curriculum and recommended School Leaving Certificates issued by the schools as a viable alternative to board examination results.

### August - 'School Fee Hike: What is the real problem?'

In recent months, the hike in the fees charged by private schools, in order to implement the increases in salaries and other benefits as recommended by the Sixth Pay Commission, has fired up parents, civil society organisations and community leaders in to action the Delhi Government passed three government orders to control the adverse effects of the controversy and has fixed the amount of fee hike that is permissible. School Choice Campaign brought together the major parties concerned - the parents and the schools - **Mr Surinder Gupta**, President, Unrecognised Schools Association, **Mr Ashok Aggarwal**, Advocate and Advisor, Social Jurist and **Mr S L Jain**, President, National Progressive Schools Conference during the panel discussion. With the active representation of the Delhi Abhibhavak Mahasangh, other parents associations, public policy experts and school leaders, the discussion entertained all view points. At the end of the discussion, the panellists agreed that there should be greater representation of parents on the schools' Management Committees as well as more transparency in the management of private schools.

### September - 'Right to Education: Will it be enough?'

The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Bill 2009 guarantees education as a fundamental right to every child between the ages of 6 and 14 years in India. The promise, potential and pitfalls of this historic legislation were the focus of the September Dialogue titled 'Right to Education: Will it be enough?' The panel of experts represented the fields of education; development work and public policy to provide a multidimensional perspective on the issues surround the Right to Education. **Mr Sam Carlson**, Lead Education Specialist - World Bank, addressed the 'quality' aspect of the legislation. **Ms G Syamala**, Executive Director - Action for Ability Development and Inclusion, shared her experiences working with the government to make the RTE Bill more inclusive, and outlined the challenges faced by children with disabilities. **Ms Yamini Aiyar**, Director - Accountability Initiative (Centre for Policy Research), presented her views on how the accountability of the fundamental Right to Education will be guaranteed by this legislation and strongly impressed upon the need for local monitoring of this right.



## ANNOUNCEMENTS

### Student First! Dialogue Serious on Quality Education for All

Book launch and Panel Discussion on Prof James Tooley's book "The Beautiful Tree" on 11<sup>th</sup> November, 2009, 6 pm, Amaltas Hall, India Habitat Centre'. For information, write to [baishali@ccs.in](mailto:baishali@ccs.in).

### ASAR Launch

Action for School Admission Reforms (ASAR) is School Choice Campaign's initiative to usher in fairness and transparency in nursery admissions. Like last year, the ASAR helpline has been opened to address the grievances of parents facing nursery admission problems. If there is a school demanding donation, or not showing the break-up of marks, and for any other problem, please write to us at [delhiasar@gmail.com](mailto:delhiasar@gmail.com) or call us at 09953059097.

### School Choice in Hindi!

Now you can read School Choice related stories in Hindi! Visit the newly launched website [www.azadi.me](http://www.azadi.me), India's first Liberal portal in Hindi. For details, write to [azadi@ccs.in](mailto:azadi@ccs.in).

## Snapshots from the Launch Ceremony of School Voucher for Girls



*Counselling session for parents by the SCC team*



*A glimpse of parents who came for the launch ceremony*



*A parent poses with her daughter after receiving the voucher*



*A field worker helps a parent fill the voucher application form*

*For comments and suggestions about the newsletter, email us at [studentfirst@ccs.in](mailto:studentfirst@ccs.in).*

All successful campaigns depend on good people and execution. We welcome ideas, participation and financial assistance from all well wishers to give millions of children in India a quality education of their Choice. For details on how you can join/support us/volunteer with us, email us at [schoolchoice@ccs.in](mailto:schoolchoice@ccs.in).

### Support the Campaign

School Choice Campaign  
K-36, Hauz Khas Enclave, New Delhi 110016 India  
Tel: +91 11 2653-7456 / 2652-1882 Fax: +91 11 2651-2347  
Email: [studentfirst@ccs.in](mailto:studentfirst@ccs.in)  
Website: [www.schoolchoice.in](http://www.schoolchoice.in)

