

UNDERCURRENTS

Consulting Club of NSIT



Highlight:
Interview with
TATA Nano
spokesperson

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School Choice

Fund Students, Not Schools!

Over the years, India has tried varied approaches to improve student enrollment and the overall quality of education. As Pratham's Annual Status of Education Report (1008) shows, there is a huge gap between our policy aspirations and on-the-ground achievements. In the process of realizing our education goals, a two tier system of school education has been created. In this system, those who can afford fees choose private schools and those who cannot, are confined to state-run schools.

The gross inequality of schooling opportunities is the result of our current approach to education. The school voucher is a tool to change the way governments finance the education of the poor. School choice for the poor through education vouchers is one of the most radical and original ideas of Milton Friedman, whose reasoned case for unfettered free markets has transformed the minds of leaders, entrepreneurs and students across the world. A voucher is a coupon offered by the government that covers the full or partial cost of education at the school of the student's choice. The schools collect vouchers from the students, deposit them in their bank accounts and the banks then credit the school accounts by equivalent money while debiting the account of the government. No money actually changes hands, only the voucher moves from the student to the school, and back to the government.

In the present system, the schools are accountable to the government. The voucher system makes them accountable directly to the students since they pay for their education through vouchers. If the student does not like the school, she can take the voucher to another school. Under the voucher system, the money follows the student. In the present system, the money follows the school.

Centre for Civil Society's flagship project, the School Choice Campaign (SCC) was launched in 2007 and is a campaign to bring about the much-needed reforms in the system of school education in India today using the three pronged approach of **Education Vouchers, Regulatory Reforms and Encouraging Entrepreneurs.**

School Choice Campaign seeks to achieve the Right to Education of Choice for all. SCC believes that while the Government has a constitutional mandate to educate every child, it cannot accomplish this task by building more

government schools. It has to remain a sponsor and facilitator, and let entrepreneurs execute the task of delivering the service. This will bring choice of schools even to the poor while increasing the quality of education delivered through competition. Thus the slogan "Fund Students, Not Schools!" SCC launched India's first School Voucher Project, the 'Delhi School Voucher Project', on 28 March 2007. To understand the effect of School Choice, school vouchers worth up to Rs. 3,600 per year per child were awarded to 408 students from 68 wards in Delhi. The vouchers will be provided for a minimum of three years.

After the completion of the first year of the Delhi Voucher Project, an independent assessment study of the project was conducted by the Centre for Media Studies (CMS). Some of the main findings of the study were as follows:

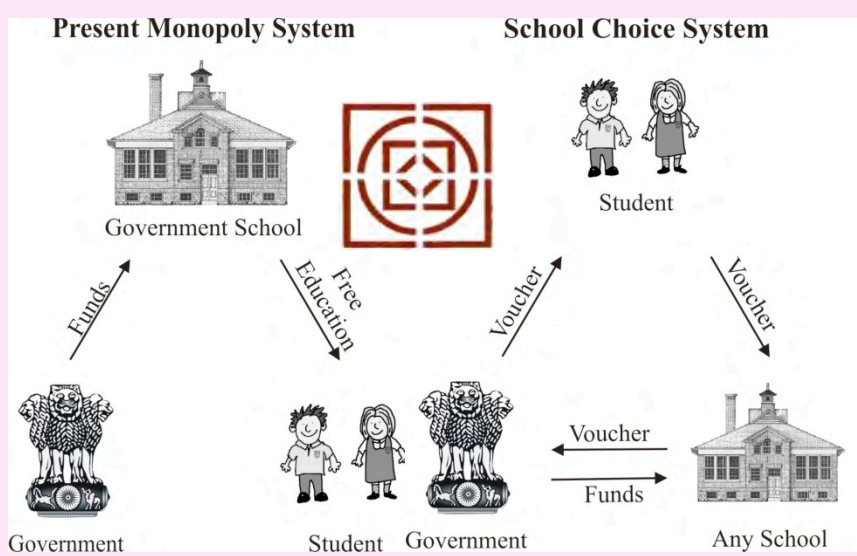
- Overall, the voucher students have performed better than those studying in Government schools and at par with the students in private schools in English, Mathematics and Hindi in all grades.

- The study found that the majority (63.1 percent) of the voucher beneficiaries exercised the freedom of choice after receiving the school voucher and switched over from a government to a private school.

- A high majority (94 percent) of the voucher parents mentioned that their children were happy with their present school. 61 percent of the voucher parents felt that their children had also become more regular with school work. More than fifty percent of the voucher parents noticed that their children had become more disciplined and studied more in their new school.

- A high majority (nearly 90 percent) of the voucher students and those attending private schools perceived that being educated in their present schools would provide them with opportunities for a better future. In comparison, a lesser percentage (61 percent) of children attending Government schools had the same opinion.

The Delhi Voucher Project is an experiment which is testing how school choice can help poor children attending government schools to improve their learning levels. This study has provided evidence that 'choice' when exercised can assist students from weaker economic backgrounds to learn better.



For more information on the School Choice Campaign, write to SCC at joinus@schoolchoice.in, or visit www.schoolchoice.in. Centre for Civil Society is an independent, non-profit organization working for the outreach, research and advocacy of innovative community and market based ideas for critical public policy issues facing India today, particularly in areas of education, livelihood, governance and environment.