

STUDENT FIRST!

SCHOOL CHOICE BULLETIN | ISSUE 03, OCTOBER '07

PARENTAL CHOICE IN AMERICA IS WIDESPREAD UNLESS YOU ARE POOR

Why should we establish policies and programs that give poor and working class parents the capacity to choose the best educational environment for their children? Why should their children be allowed to escape from schools that more affluent parents who oppose choice would never tolerate for their own children? After all of the philosophizing about the need to protect the traditional public school system's funds and institutional prerogatives; looking past the expressed concerns about the separation of church and state, the real issue in America is not choice - it is who has it! Those of us with money already have it and have no intention of relinquishing it. If schools do not work for our children, we have at least two choices; we can move to communities where they do work or we can put our children in private schools.

It is important that at the outset to establish the operational definition of parental choice being used here, because this is a concept that is often misunderstood by some well meaning people or distorted purposefully by some people who oppose it.

The term is often understood as only tax supported vouchers. Vouchers of this type are only one form of parental choice - a very important form, but parental choice encompasses more than just vouchers. It defines policies that give families the capacity to choose from a wide range of learning environments that they feel are best for their children. These options can be public or private - charter schools, public/private partnerships, contract schools, home schooling, cyber schools, tax credits, private scholarships as well as innovative governance arrangements in the traditional public or private educational institutions.

Parental choice programs when properly created and implemented: give poor and working class parents the power to choose schools where their children have the opportunity to succeed and in turn give all schools the incentives to value children and work to meet their needs. Consider the power of this right in the hands of families who have little or no power because they control no resources, no levers of influence over the



Black Alliance for Education Options exists to help Black parents understand all of the educational options that exist



Black Alliance of Educational Options has been pioneers in the fight for school choice in the U.S

decisions and decision-making process that impacts their children's education. Consider how this power may change the shape of the future for their children. And consider how the absence of this power may mean their children will be trapped in schools that more affluent parents who oppose choice would never tolerate for their own children.

Parental choice is at the heart of three important concepts in our society: Freedom, Power and Democracy.

The fact is, in many areas of the country poor children, a disproportionate number of whom are children of color, are being precluded from being effective participants in the democracy because we are failing to educate them. Their ability to exercise freedom is being stifled because they and their parents lack the power they need to influence the decisions that are being made about their education.

The right kind of parental choice program will give a measure of equity to parents such as these who have long been denied a real voice in the educational affairs of their children. It provides access to educational environments that were inaccessible or did not exist prior to the programs. It provides a way out for children who need an escape hatch, while at the same time putting pressure on the traditional systems to change.

Parental choice programs by providing a measure of equity and enhanced accessibility, increase the likelihood that many more children will be able to gain the skills needed to be effective participants in a democratic society.

These programs are at their core, an empowerment strategy. The ability of poor and working class people to impact the flow and distribution of educational dollars is a critical ingredient in the struggle for fairness and equality for themselves and their children.

Parental choice is a necessary but not sufficient ingredient to any serious effort to change schools and school systems in this country.

We must also clearly focus on the impact on our children's lives of the existence of differential power and access to resources in our society based on race and class.

Children who are hungry cannot learn. Children who are abused and neglected are not going to be able to concentrate in school. Children need to see people in their immediate families working in order to understand the value of work and the connection between education and work. Children must see a society where their race will not be an impediment to advancement and respect. Children must interact with adults who have not already reached conclusions about their capabilities because of the color of their skin, or the clothes they wear.

We must walk a delicate line here because although race and class clearly have an impact on our children's perceptions and their life chances, we can not allow these conditions to be an excuse not to educate them.

Given the issues facing our poorest children the implementation of parental choice programs will not by themselves change their current educational reality. But the level of change that is needed will not occur without empowering their families to be able to choose the best educational environment for them.

Dr Howard Fuller,
Chairman of the Black Alliance for Educational Options (BAEO).



EDUCATING THE POOR OF INDIA

Education is now a Fundamental Right for children in the age group of 6 – 14, this by an act of Parliament (93rd Amendment).

In the preamble of the constitution under article 41, all children were to be in school within ten years from the date of Indian Independence. But this has not happened. Even though today education is a fundamental right and was already provided for in the constitution (Article 21), access to education has not happened even after 60 years of independence. As of now, more than 35% of the Indian population is illiterate – despite various schemes of the government and extensive efforts of civil society and international organizations.

The SSA (Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan) – Education for All, the latest avatar of implementing right to education or universalisation of education, has also not been found to be an answer to eradicating illiteracy. This is largely because of the attitude and approach towards the whole program.

First and foremost, the allocation of resources for achieving universalisation of education is inadequate. Taking the gross allocation as well as unit cost allocation in Delhi state and the organisations implementing SSA as an example, the implementation has been very shoddy. There has been inadequate allocation to cover the entire illiterate population under the age group of 6 – 14. The unit cost ranges from Rs. 845-1200 and the higher amount involves innovation of techniques and research. This amount is grossly inadequate for an out of school or dropped out child to be mainstreamed.

Invariably for any fund to be obtained from Government Departments one has to adopt 'under-the-table' methods and when the unit cost is already low, it is difficult to take out this grease money. If second and subsequent installments are not received on time, turn over of instructors happens and replacement of instructors becomes difficult - instruction suffers and finally preparing the child for mainstreaming does not actually happen.



Children in the MSEMV (Society for Human Development and Women's Empowerment) run school

Even after a period of 12 – 18 or even 24 months are over and the NGO succeeds in preparing part of the enrolled students for mainstreaming, availability of government and other schools to mainstream is inadequate. It will also not be out of place to say that SSA is a faulty scheme in which neither adequate resources are allocated, quality of education considered nor adequate facilities for mainstreaming made available. Although crores of rupees have been spent, effectiveness of the scheme is questionable in terms of providing qualitative education.

One can conclude that this is a program where enrolment takes place, yet education to mainstream and education of the mainstreamed does not happen, thereby defeating the very purpose of the scheme.

One would wonder why such a step motherly treatment is given to the scheme. Is it because the uneducated are all poor, marginalized and living in slums or remote villages? Do they not have equal rights as enshrined in the constitution? The SSA scheme is so limited and constrained that there are no provision provided for in the budget for mobilizing a child, motivating the family and enabling retention. It is expected that the NGO should do all this at a marginal cost, while at the same time expecting quality education and high rate of success. This can only be considered as wishful thinking and the kind of government resources allocated are not put to productive use. It appears to be a political gimmick – to declare good intentions without substance to achieve the envisaged goals.

(Corruption seems rampant and the real benefits of the schemes seems to accrue to people who were never the intended beneficiaries.

There are very good examples on the ground where the programme of educating and mainstreaming dropouts or non school goers have been implemented successfully with 150% results although it was planned only for 100% result. The merit of such cases as implemented by NGOs is visible in the following elements.

1. Adequate unit cost (Rs. 3500 – 4000) per child for a period of 2-3 years is available without corruptive and bureaucratic impediments.
2. Effective planning and mobilization of community as a whole - parents in particular and recruiting manpower with adequate commitment.
3. Advance rapport building and cordial relationship nurturing with government and municipal schools to facilitate the process of mainstreaming.
4. Continued handholding of the mainstreamed child by remedial education so that the child is interested and continues to learn in the new environment, i.e., government school.
5. Instructor training with a view to improve quality of education by imparting subject matter training, teaching methodology and tools and developing attitude of commitment to the child.
6. Facilitating the NGO to follow systems and procedures in planning, budgeting, monitoring, according high priority for the reviewing of activities on an ongoing basis so that adequate mid course correction steps are taken.

Although education is the state subject and it is the government's duty to implement the universalisation of education, what is affecting it is the lack of accountability. Unless accountability and commitment are demanded to ensure the right to education of the child, the profound hopes of a literate India will remain a distant dream. Unless the government develops better political will and willingness to change the approach and adopts a public-private partnership (PPP) model—a phrase being tossed around frequently—it is unlikely that the goals will be achieved. Also, unless it is given content and implemented on the ground, PPP will remain an empty phrase.

Another solution to this problem is being proposed in the form of providing support to the parents in educating their wards by giving the child and the parents a choice of the particular school in which the child can be educated. Huge budgets are being allocated and investments are being made for education to be administered by the government itself. The general perception, however, is that the government schools do not deliver and the children who should benefit feel cheated and their fundamental right is denied. For a democratically elected and governed state, it is essential that the welfare of the masses be encouraged. The poor constitute the masses – their purchasing capacity being poor due to inadequate opportunities and lack of means of production and not being part of the upwardly mobile mainstream, suffer due to marginalization of all sorts.



Tamu and Khushi, winners of the School Voucher awarded by the Centre for Civil Society

If this does not happen, the state cannot assume that they are in good governance and that they care for the welfare of the masses.

The scheme of direct support to the child, in contrast to education through public (government) schools, would necessarily provide for competition between educational institutes and the teacher community would have to deliver results to safeguard their interest and to remain in business. In fact, this approach has been successful in many nations. If this approach is taken seriously, under the Public-Private Partnership and by making the civil society organizations ombudsman, there is hope that India would become universally literate. This would help the poor to contribute intellectually in the process of nation building through the processes of competitiveness and patriotic endeavours.

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SCHOOL CHOICE CAMPAIGN National Campaign Update

Delhi >>>>>>>>>>>>



Winners of the vouchers posing with the Chief Minister Smt. Sheila Dixit, Education Minister Sri Arvinder Singh Lovely, Rtn TK Mathew, Mr. Gurcharan Das and Dr. Parth J Shah

CCS team facilitated the admission process orienting parents and schools on the implementation of the project. School vouchers were used by parents to seek admission into schools. Since this is the first year of the project, CCS

personnel helped parents with the nitty-gritty of the admission process. On July 26, all the vouchers were given away to the parents in a grand ceremony organised at Kamani Auditorium. The ceremony was attended by Smt. Sheila Dixit, Sri Arvinder Kumar Lovely, Sri TK Mathew, Mr. Gurcharan Das and Ms. Nafisa Ali.

Uttar Pradesh >>>>>>>>>>>>



NGO orientation meet in Allahbad

The mass campaign in Uttar Pradesh has gained momentum in the state after completion of NGO orientation. 72 NGO partners were oriented about the campaign strategies earlier. About 2,35,000 parents were contacted out of which 47,300 parents gave their direct support by signing a pledge letter to the minister. Village, block and district level meetings were conducted to reach out to the parents, civil society organizations and decision makers. 11 delegations have met their respective panchayat leaders demanding school vouchers. The Campaign received wide media coverage.

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Tamil Nadu <<<<<<<<<<<<<<<

The campaign in Tamil Nadu is going on in 6 districts. 22,500 signatures were collected last month from citizens supporting the campaign and direct contact with 55,000 people was made. 40 delegations met their respective Panchayat members to demand School Choice and 12 delegations met their respective Panchayat Samitis.

Jharkhand <<<<<<<<<<<<<<<



A street theatre group giving the messages of School Choice in Deoghar district

The 2nd phase of the mass campaign was started in August 2007 in the state. Phoolen - a Madhupur based organization is leading this campaign with 7 other partners from three regions of the state. Parents are being reached through street theatre performed by various cultural groups. 8,000 signatures have already been collected in the last one month and more than 20,000 parents directly contacted.

The mass and political campaigns are in full swing in 8 districts of the state.

Orissa >>>>>>>>>>>>



A mass rally at the district headquarter at Gajapati

All NGO partners and district campaign units have been trained and they are using their respective street theatre groups to conduct village level meetings. 41,960 signatures were collected last month and more than 2,00,000 parents have been directly contacted through the

West Bengal <<<<<<<<<<<<<<<

On August 23, our State partner Path Welfare Society organized a district seminar at Kolkata. NGO leaders, politicians and several members of state level bodies participated in this seminar and discussed the School Choice ideas. Similar seminars were also conducted in Murshidabad, Purullia and Howrah. A document titled 'State of School Education in West Bengal' has been prepared and will be shared amongst the stakeholders in a state level seminar to be conducted in October 2007.



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"For grades 1-5, I would give vouchers to parents and allow the schools compete for these vouchers. Because of competition, schools will have to hire better teachers, who will have to teach. The leftists and old educationists are horrified at this, but don't we owe it to ourselves to at least test this idea when all else has failed over the last 50 years?"

- Gurcharan Das



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