

'Fund students, not schools'

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PARENTS of poor children have to send their children to badly run government schools because the state subsidises them. The Centre for Civil Society (CCS) believes that giving parents the right to pick a school will ensure their children get a good education. CCS has launched a School Choice Campaign that turns education spending on its head.

Instead of funding schools, says CCS, fund poor parents. The government can give money to parents through education vouchers, cash transfers or tuition fee reimbursement schemes. An education voucher is a coupon of a specific amount that can

with poor parents. Some of the schools they chose were Bal Bharati, Guru Harkishen Public School and even St Columbas.

Civil Society spoke to Parth J Shah, director of the Centre for Civil Society on the School Choice Campaign:

What does your campaign aim to do?

Primarily what we want to do is change how the government finances education for the poor. Right now if you are a poor person the government has a monopoly on where your child should go. We are saying change the funding pattern so that the poor can also have a choice. So instead of giving money to government schools which then provide free education, give money to the parents so that they

ment was paying about Rs 1,700 per student every month.

That kind of money can buy education in a top private school. Money is actually being misallocated. It is being swallowed by the bureaucracy. By giving money to the parent you cut the flab in the system.

Should the government cap the fees of private schools?

No. In whichever sector we have managed to create competition you find consumers are getting a better deal. The problem is that there are not enough players because of regulatory hurdles. Remove these and then you will attract a large number of players. Then you would see a degree of competition which would lower costs and give better learning outcomes to parents.

Doesn't quality of schools need to be improved? Look at the mess over nursery admissions for instance.

Unless you have enough nursery schools there will be rationing caused by a shortage of supply. You can apply any criteria but it will not work because of shortages. You start on one regulation and then that doesn't work so you begin a whole lot more. You pass one regulation restricting school fees, the schools work around it, then you start another and then there is no end. Donations, harassment of parents are all related to a shortage of supply.

So how do you solve the problem of a shortage of schools?

You can have a venture capital fund for people who would like to start a school. We can create a system by which people with ambition, ability and drive but no money can have access to funds to start schools.

Some kind of micro-finance can be provided to existing small schools to upgrade. For instance, a school operating from a slum may like to invest money in infrastructure like providing toilets or drinking water or painting its walls. Social capital like training of teachers can be financed too.

What about improving the quality of schools?

There is tremendous need for third party evaluation. You can't have just one government agency doing it. You need to do school sampling-their results, infrastructure etc. The government can rely on a third party which is more professional and has a reputation to protect so they can't be bribed. Make the results public. That's all they need to do.

And government schools?

There is huge disparity in the funding of government schools. A school with 300 students gets the same funding as one with 500 students. We need to remove this disparity. The government should start funding its schools according to the number of students it has on its rolls. It should be per child funding instead of lump sum funding.

Secondly, a fixed amount can be given for daily running of the school including say the principal's salary. The rest can be provided according to the profile of the students. For instance, more money can be given if a student is from a backward and poor community.

Thirdly, at present it's the bureaucracy which runs government schools. Principals and teachers are told how to spend the money. They should get financial and managerial autonomy so if they need teachers they can go and get them.



Parth J Shah with core team members

be redeemed at any school chosen by the parent.

Competition in the school sector will grow if regulation is eased and finance made available, say School Choice campaigners. Government schools will be forced to improve if money is tied to enrolment and better grades and if they are given more autonomy.

For one year, campaigners will inform parents whose children study in government schools about school choice. They will also lobby with elected representatives including panchayats and talk to education ministers and secretaries. CCS will raise money for a private school choice fund to support 9,400 students.

Some school choice ideas have been tested. For instance, the Delhi government's department for the welfare of SC/ ST/OBC/Minorities has a SC/ST tuition-fee reimbursement scheme that it introduced in 2003-2004. It is meant for SC/ST parents whose annual income is below one lakh rupees and covers almost 90 per cent of the education expenses incurred by the parent.

Only 272 SC/ST students applied for the scheme. One reason is that not many know of it.

Besides, fees are reimbursed after parents pay the school and poor parents don't have the money to pay in advance. Also the scheme does not cover children studying in nursery. It applies only from Class One. CCS has suggested how the scheme could be made more effective.

According to CCS researchers schools that had fees between Rs 500 to Rs 1000 were more popular

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can choose which school they would like their child to go to. The parent may choose a government school. There are many places where the government school is better. The government school would also get more freedom. They can use the money which way they would like.

Right now the government gives a grant. If the school is getting, say, Rs 30 lakh it can continue getting that money but if it wants more it has to attract students through the voucher system.

Won't this entail a higher expense for the government?

What we found is that in many cases governments do spend a lot of money on education. An Akshara Foundation study in Bangalore, for instance, found that in municipal schools in Bangalore the govern-