

**25% Reservations under RTE: At What Cost?
by Shruti Ambast**

Section 12 of the Right to Education Act (RTE) mandates that all private unaided schools need to reserve up to 25% of seats for children belonging to the economically weaker and disadvantaged sections of society. The state government will then reimburse these schools, but here is the catch – the amount of reimbursement will be equal to the per-child expenditure incurred in government schools (or the actual expenditure incurred by the school, whichever is lesser). This implies two things. One, the elite public schools for whom this amount will be wholly inadequate will want to hike the fee for the remaining 75% of students. Two, private schools whose expenditure is less than the governments, will want to increase their fees, so that they can avail the benefit of the reimbursement, or at least, this is what the government is worried about. Some ground-level findings suggest that even private schools which cater to poorer sections of society charge a higher fee than the amount the government is likely to reimburse.

The phrase ‘per-child expenditure’ is a sensitive one with the government these days. While the HRD Ministry claims to have no official figures on this subject, a meeting with the Deputy Director, Planning Branch, Delhi Directorate of Education reveals that this is something the government is still dithering over.

Independent estimates suggest that the per student government expenditure is as high as Rs. 13000 per year. However, it is unlikely for the government to reimburse private schools even half of this amount. Its estimates for one will be based only on recurring costs incurred by the government. What about capital costs? Should that not also be included when calculating the amount of reimbursement?

Rough figures obtained from a few small private schools in Shahadara show that their annual expenditure on a student ranges from Rs 4000 – Rs 20,000. The question is whether the government reimbursement will cover their expenses? If not, then the government will add to the burden of these edupreneurs already struggling to provide education to the poor.

Most private schools are done with their admissions for the year, so this problem will not impact them immediately. But eventually, a mechanism has to be devised to expedite the reservation clause in order to ensure that 2011 is not crippled from the start.

The government wants private schools to take on the onus of educating the underprivileged, which many feel is an abdication of the government’s own duties. While the cause of ensuring universal elementary education should be taken up by all, private schools, at least those who do a better job of providing education than the government, should be reimbursed fairly for their services.