

# RIGHT TO QUALITY NOT QUANTITY

EVEN AS THE GOVERNMENT STRIVES TO MAKE EDUCATION FOR ALL A REALITY, CRITICS ARGUE THAT THE NEED FOR IMPROVING ACCESS TO 'QUALITY' EDUCATION CANNOT BE UNDERMINED. SAKSHI KHATTAR REPORTS

DESPITE wanting to study at better (often private) schools, for many in the country — especially girls in socio-economically backward communities — a government school is the only option. With this in mind, a second pilot project of the 'school vouchers' idea, called School Voucher for Girls, was launched recently by the School Choice Campaign (SCC). These vouchers are aimed at helping 400 girl students at MCD schools exercise their 'choice' of studying in private schools. Under this, families will be funded directly in the form of vouchers and, in turn, redeem these vouchers in a school of their choice.

Further, by targeting traditionally disadvantaged groups — girls from Muslim families or those from socio-economically disadvantaged groups of North-East Delhi — this project hopes to demonstrate the empowerment potential of school vouchers, a model that can be taken further by state governments. The project has been launched by the Centre for Civil Society, a public policy research and educational think-tank based in Delhi, in collaboration with other NGOs and organisations.

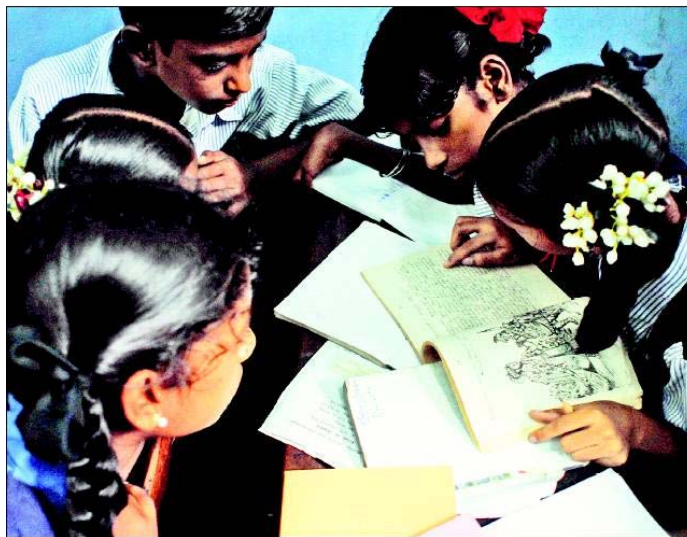
## EXERCISING CHOICE

Proponents of the voucher system opine that the poor often have no choice but to enter the government schooling system, which is broken and of poor quality. So, such vouchers would make private schooling accessible to the socially disadvantaged. Besides, they also believe this system would promote competition between government and private schools — leading to an overall increase in the quality of education in both.

Baladevan Rangaraju, national campaign director, SCC, elaborates, "Our aim is to show that funding students, instead of schools, is the best way forward when it comes to educational reforms. Thus, SCC seeks to achieve 'Right to Education of Choice for all,' and not just 'Right to Education.' We believe that the government cannot educate every child by building more government schools alone. It must remain a sponsor and facilitator while allowing 'edupreneurs' to deliver the service."

The focus is on providing primary education to girls from class II to V and this year, 400 girls (enrolled in class I of state-run schools in North-East Delhi) have been awarded these vouchers. These children will be provided an annual voucher of up to Rs 4,000 for the next four years to enable them to shift to a school of their choice.

Rangaraju adds, "We have identified 35 affordable private schools (APS) where these children can get themselves enrolled through our vouchers. Also, we have ensured that these vouchers cannot be used for any other



purpose except for admission to these schools to ensure that the parents don't misuse them." Nearly 1,600 children had applied for the vouchers, which were awarded randomly through a lottery system.

## STUDENTS BENEFIT

The SCC maintains that it aims only to help students and not to influence their choice or favour any particular school. Throughout the project period, the parents can exercise their 'choice of school.'

For instance, if a parent wants to shift his/her child from one empanelled school to another in the second year, they can do so and SCC would pay the voucher amount to the new school.

Also, parents are free to 'top-up' the voucher amount and send their children to schools that charge more.

## SCHOOL RESPONSE

Krishna Rawal, principal, Sharda Public School, says, "We will consider various parameters before enrolling students. This includes a standardised written test. Unless a child clears the test, we can't grant him/her admission." She adds that the school was currently "short of seats."

On the other hand, Adesh Kaushik, principal, Indian Public School, feels that the quality of the school environment would be affected by such a move. He adds, however, that it could be viable if students coming from MCD schools are given special attention. Similarly, Anju Rastogi, principal, Modern K D Public School, says, "It all depends on the attitude of teachers and how effectively they can teach students at different learning levels."

## PILOT PROJECT

The first school voucher project in India, the Delhi Voucher Project, was launched by CCS in March 2007 wherein vouchers up to Rs 3,000 per-year per-child were awarded to 408 students from Delhi. In the process, over 50 school choice activists reached out to over 12 lakh parents.

## KEY FINDINGS OF THE PILOT PROJECT

- Overall, the 'voucher students' had performed better than those studying in government schools and were on a par with students in private schools in English, mathematics and Hindi in all grades
- Over 63% of the voucher beneficiaries exercised the freedom of choice after receiving the voucher and switched over from a government to a private school
- Over 90% of the parents of the beneficiaries were happy with the academic progress of their children, their teachers and the standard of discipline in schools
- Over 50% of the parents found their children more disciplined after joining private schools