

SCHOOL CHOICE NATIONAL CONFERENCE

Quality Education for All: Policy Solutions for Better Schooling

The first School Choice National Conference (SCNC) on Quality Education for All: Policy Solutions for Better Schooling was organized by the School Choice Campaign on 16 December 2009 at the India Habitat Centre, New Delhi. The Conference had an excellent blend of top-level national and international academics, policy makers, eminent speakers, education experts and advisors as well as a very good representation of delegates comprising of development workers, corporates, academicians, school leaders, government officials, civil society, social activists, youth and the media.

The Conference focused on the key provisions of the Right to Education Act and their potential impact on the future of Indian elementary education-implementation of the 25% in Section 12 of the RTE, Graded Recognition System, and Strengthening Government Schools.

The Inaugural Session of the Conference included a welcome address by Dr Parth J Shah, President, Centre for Civil Society, and keynote addresses by Mr Sam Carlson, Lead Education Specialist, World Bank India and Mr Kanwal Rekhi, Managing Director, Inventus. Dr Shah impressed that “quality and choice were two sides of the same coin” and Mr Carlson spoke favourably of Public Private Partnerships in the implementation of the Right to Education. Mr Rekhi wrapped up this thought-provoking session with a strong pitch for increased “choice and competition to liberalize the education sector” in India.

The first session of the Conference-Private Schools and the Poor witnessed a detailed and definitive discussion on Section 12 of the Right to Education

Act. Section 12 requires private unaided schools to reserve 25% of Class 1 seats for children from economically weaker sections under a government sponsored scheme. The first presentation of this session was made by Mr Amit Kaushik, CEO, Shri Educare and former Director, Ministry of Human Resource Development, on the conception of Section 12, its promises and pitfalls. The next speaker Dr Karthik Muralidharan, Assistant Professor, University of California spoke on the primary research on teacher absenteeism, inactivity in government schools and the superior performance of the private schools. Mr Anders Hultin, CEO, GEMS Education UK and former Advisor to Schools Minister of Sweden explained in detail the implementation of the universal voucher program in Sweden which allowed children to attend private schools under the sponsorship of the government. Summing up the session, Prof R Govinda, Vice-Chancellor, NUEPA spoke on the government’s view of schools as “public educational spaces” that are “not exclusive” to any one group of citizens. He assured the audience that the Rules and Regulations governing the Right to Education Act will be formulated in the coming months and expressed confidence in leveraging “private participation” in the universalization of education.

The second session – Graded Recognition System: Positive Regulation focused on the problem of school recognition. Right to Education Act, through Section 19, threatens to wipe out nearly 200,000 unrecognized (private) schools in the country serving mostly the poorest children. The speakers for this session – Mr Baladevan R, National Director, School Choice Campaign and Ms Molly McMahon, Program Officer, Gray Matters Capital presented two innovative solutions to overcome this hurdle. Mr Baladevan spoke of a ‘Graded Recognition System’ whereby all schools would be

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brought under the ambit of the government regulation and provided incentives to acquire a higher grade of recognition. He argued for the revision of unrealistic regulatory norms of “large playground and teacher pay parity” that are proving to be the major hurdles in the way of gaining recognition. Ms McMahon informed the audience of the ‘School Ratings Project’ that is currently being piloted in Hyderabad. Under this innovation, schools can be rated according to teacher qualifications, school governance, students’ performances and so



(L-R) Mr Raj Cherubal, Mr Sam Carlson, Dr Parth J Shah & Mr Kanwal Rekhi



(L-R) Mr Vijay Chadda, Ms Anu Aga & Ms Neelima Khetan



(L-R) Ms Molly McMahon, Mr Sridhar Rajagopalan & Mr Baladevan R



(L-R) Prof R Govinda, Mr Anders Hultin, Dr Karthik Muralidharan & Mr Amit Kaushik



Mr Gurcharan Das & Prof James Tooley

on. Such a system would provide the parent with best information to make the decision in choosing the right school. The session was chaired by Mr Sridhar Rajagopalan, Managing Director, Educational Initiatives who urged the government to take in to consideration such innovative practices and come up with “mechanisms, ideas and criteria that will assist schools to positively self-regulate” instead of the current recognition system which only provides opportunities for corruption.

The last session of the Conference - Strengthening Government Schools explored the different ways to increase community participation and involvement in running government schools. The session was chaired by Ms Anu Aga, former Chairperson, Thermax Foundation who shared her experiences in taking over the management of government schools in Pune. Adding to this presentation, Mr Vijay Chadda, CEO, Bharti Foundation spoke on the Satya Bharti Schools which looks after 49 schools that were taken over from the government, across Rajasthan. Ms Neelima Khetan, CEO, Seva Mandir outlined the challenges in decentralizing school management. Ms Khetan spoke of the social norms and community expectations in villages and expressed worry with regards to the working of the School Management Committees set up by Section 21 of the Right to Education Act.

The School Choice National Conference concluded with an enthusiastic discussion forum led by Mr Gurcharan Das, Author and former CEO, Procter & Gamble and Prof James Tooley, Professor of Education, University of Newcastle. Conference delegates reflected on the day’s proceedings and came up with suggestions to assist the implementation of the Right to Education Act. Mr Das and Prof Tooley identified the threat to unrecognized schools (mostly budget private schools) as the most immediate challenge to the education system. Both speakers wholeheartedly supported the increased participation of private players in achieving the goal of universal education (through Section 12) and hoped that government schools could be given greater autonomy and localized management. As a follow up, the outcomes and recommendations from the conference will be presented as Implementation Plans to the various government agencies involved with the Right to Education Act.

The objective of the Conference was to provide a platform for policy researchers, policy makers and practitioners to evolve best practices for the implementation of the Right to Education legislation. The upcoming year is fraught with great challenges to the Indian education sector. But, the greatest challenge would be to transform the promise of the Right to Education in to its fullest potential. The School Choice National Conference was one small step by the School Choice Campaign in working with the government and realizing the Right to Education of Choice!

For further information visit www.schoolchoice.in/scnc2009



Mr Amir Abidi



Mr T K Mathew



Ms Premila Nazareth



(L-R) Mr Vijay Thadani, Mr Ajay Jain and Ms Jaya Jha

Student First! Dialogue Series on Quality Education for All



(L-R) Mr Rajan Arora, Founder, NurseryAdmissions.Com, Mr Baladevan R, National Director, SCC & Mr RC Jain, President, Delhi State Public School Management Association

October: Panel discussion on School Admission Reforms: Why, What, How?

At the onset of the nursery admission season, a panel discussion on School Admission Reforms was organized in order to address the acute problems faced by the parents as well as the grievances of the schools in order to evolve long-term solutions to existing problems in school admission process in Delhi. Representing parents and schools during the dialogue were Mr Rajan Arora, Founder, NurseryAdmissions.Com- Parents for Parents Community, India’s first and biggest online community of parents dedicated to the issue of School Admissions and Mr RC Jain, President, Delhi State Public School Management Association respectively. Chairing the dialogue was Mr Baladevan R, National Campaign Director, School Choice Campaign.

Prior to the discussion the School Choice Campaign and www.nurseryadmissions.com (with over 15,000 members) formulated the Parent’s Charter through online voting on the basis of the common concerns in the admissions process with parental consensus. The objective of this Charter is to ensure greater transparency, accountability and standardization in the admission process. On behalf of the parents, Mr Rajan Arora presented the Charter to Mr RC Jain who agreed that his schools would abide by the following points of the Parents Charter:

- 1. Transparency of Results:** The schools must display the exact break-up points for each child when they release the admissions list and on the school website/ Directorate of Education website.
- 2. Transparency of Criteria:** The break-up of points must be based on ‘definitive’ criteria avoiding vagueness like – group discussions, national level achievements of parents etc.
- 3. Fee Refund and Deduction:** In case a child is not admitted to the school or the admission is cancelled, the portion of the fee retained by the school must be made clear in advance and should be in accordance with government guidelines.
- 4. Time-bound Fee Refund:** The refund of the fee deposited where applicable must happen within 3 working days of filing applications for refund.

The forum also saw the formal launch of Action for School Admission Reforms (ASAR) 2009, a helpdesk for parents to lodge complaints, even anonymously, against unscrupulous schools. ASAR was initiated in 2008 and is a joint project of SCC and www.nurseryadmissions.com.



(L-R) Ms Reshma Lohia, Correspondent for Lohia's Little Angels School, Hyderabad, Prof James Tooley, the Author, Mr Ashish Rajpal, CEO, idiscoveri & Mr Madhav Chavan, Co-founder and Director, Pratham

November: Book Launch “The Beautiful Tree”

The School Choice Campaign and Penguin Books launched Professor James Tooley's new book “The Beautiful Tree-A Personal Journey into How the World's Poorest People are Educating Themselves” on 11 November 2009 at the India Habitat Centre.

The launch of the book was followed by a panel discussion between the author, Mr Madhav Chavan, Co-founder and Director, Pratham; Ms Reshma Lohia, Correspondent for Lohia's Little Angels School, Hyderabad; and Mr Ashish Rajpal, CEO, idiscoveri. Mr Chavan spoke about the importance of the book in a time when the national parliament has passed the Right to Education Bill. Ms Lohia spoke passionately about the role of budget private schools in educating

children from disadvantaged communities. Mr Rajpal impressed upon the need for quality education and applauded Prof Tooley's work in this regard.

The members of the audience participated in a lively discussion of the educational challenges facing the nation in this day and age. This session was moderated by Mr Baladevan R, National Director – School Choice Campaign. The book highlights a wave of change sweeping the nation and the role of numerous small but inspiring private schools run by good samaritans from the communities themselves. The book tells us numerous stories of how the hope and aspirations of the poor and the enterprise of the new school owners come together to offer an alternative to the government education system.

December: Panel discussion on Challenges facing India's Education in 2010

The School Choice Campaign brought together three experts, Mr Vijay Thadani, CEO, NIIT Ltd and Chairman of CII National Committee on Education, Ms Rashmi Krishnan, Additional Director, Directorate of Education (Delhi) and Director, SCERT and Mr Oscar Fernandes, senior leader, Indian National Congress and Chairman of the Standing Committee on Human Resource Development for the December dialogue which focused on the assessment of the nation's preparedness for the Challenges Facing India's Education Section in 2010.



(L-R) Ms Rashmi Krishnan, Director, SCERT, Mr Vijay Thadani, CEO, NIIT Ltd & Mr Oscar Fernandes, Chairman of the Standing Committee on Human Resource Development

“How do we go from policy to action, how do we handle education as a concurrent subject, where will the resources come from and what do we expect the role of the private sector in order to ensure a win-win situation for all,” said Mr Vijay Thadani who expressed the need to create a new standard and structure which the rest of the world could emulate. Mr Rashmi Krishnan highlighted the need for vocational training, skill development, better teaching materials and teacher quality, technology upgradation and infrastructure development in order to address the acute challenge of poverty in India. Mr Oscar Fernandes emphasized on the role of the local government to ensure that every child in his/her district goes to school. He summed up with the belief that the role of the private sector was huge and that more public private partnerships would lead to a better educated India.

The highlight of the discussion, an interactive open forum saw mixed views from representatives of schools, NGOs, education consultants, government departments and the youth.

For details on all the dialogues visit : www.schoolchoice.in/sfdialogue

Q & A

Are there voucher programs running successfully all over the world? Which ones are they?

There are voucher programs running in countries like Sweden, Chile, Ivory Coast, United States of America, Columbia, Holland and others.

Findings:

- 15-20% voucher students are more likely to finish secondary education (Columbia)
- 5% less likely to repeat a grade (fail a class) (Columbia)
- More likely to take college entrance exams (Columbia)
- Parents satisfied with increased education opportunities (Cleveland)
- Voucher students in private schools had increased test scores in language and science. These students were among the most disadvantaged students (Cleveland)
- Test scores of non-voucher students increased with time (Cleveland)
- Rapid increase in demand for private schools and their number (Sweden)
- Good results, irrespective of home, neighbourhood and natural ability (Columbia)
- 7 out of 8 studies statistically show significant positive results (US)

FACTSHEET

Per Child Expenditure in Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, India: 2006-07

State	Per Child Expenditure (In Rs)
Madhya Pradesh	1071
Gujarat	291
Kerala	235
Arunachal Pradesh	3379
Uttar Pradesh	770
Jammu and Kashmir	1211
Rajasthan	918
West Bengal	666
Bihar	429
Andhra Pradesh	474
Tripura	1869

Source – Annual Status of Education Report (Rural) 2008

A Victory for Action for School Admission Reforms (ASAR)

Parents had a cause to cheer this admission season as the Directorate of Education, Delhi brought about a Common Admission Schedule in place for admission to pre-primary classes in private recognized schools of Delhi. The schedule released by the Directorate on 28 Oct, 2009 directs all schools in Delhi to start admissions from Dec 15 and has fixed dates for closing admissions, for releasing the list of selected children and finally the final date for closure of the admission process. Thus, schools can be flexible within the broad dates given, but have to keep the schedule, notably; the Directorate took action against a number of erring schools which had started admissions before the stipulated date. The Directorate has also activated an admission complaint mechanism to facilitate parents to address and dispose off complaints in 5 working days.

Please write to us at delhiasar@gmail.com or call us at 09952059097 to get assistance regarding any complaint in nursery admissions. You can log in at www.schoolchoice.in/nurseryadmission to file a complaint online and know more about the initiative.

Support the Campaign

All successful campaigns depend on good people and execution. We welcome ideas, participation and financial assistance from all well wishers to give millions of children in India a quality education of Choice.

For details on how you can join/support us/volunteer with us, email us at schoolchoice@ccs.in.

New Initiative

Google Group on School Choice: Policy Solutions for Implementing the RTE

To continue our dialogue with the delegates of the School Choice National Conference and to build on the discussions and ideas generated during the Conference, a Google Group has been created to provide a forum for interested educationists, policy makers and citizens to deliberate on the Rules and Regulations of the Right to Education Act and tracking its implementation.

We welcome your participation in the ongoing dialogue. Visit this group on the web by using the following URL:

<http://groups.google.com/group/schoolchoice-rte-solutions?hl=en>



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For comments and suggestions about the newsletter, email us at studentfirst@ccs.in.

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