School Choice National Conference

19 December 2015, New Delhi

Centre for Civil Society
National Independent Schools Alliance

Introduction:

School Choice National Conference (SCNC) is an annual event that provides a much needed platform to identify critical issues in the education sector, review existing programs, to explore strategies to face the challenges ahead and ideate on ingenious solutions to provide quality education to all children in India. The objectives of SCNC are two-fold:

1. Bring together educationists, planners, policy experts, activists and government officials to discuss and debate various dimensions of education policy in India.
2. Showcase innovative models that foster an enabling education ecosystem.

School Choice National Conference 2015

India is gearing up for its New Education Policy after 23 years since country's education policy was last reviewed. A lot has changed during this period in terms of status and social and economic context of school education in India. In recent years discourse on quality of education along with access and equity of education has gathered momentum, particularly after reports such as ASER 2014 and NAS 2014 brought to fore the learning crisis that exists in our country. In light of this, our 7th annual School Choice National Conference aimed to discuss important contemporary issues in education such as Learning Outcomes, Right to Education or Right to Learning, and School Autonomy and make some concrete recommendations for the New Education Policy.

Ensuring quality education to all is the key to taking India into the league of superpower. Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD), Government of India is working on developing New Education Policy (NEP). The last NEP was brought out in 1986 and later amended in 1992. MHRD aims to make India a knowledge superpower by equipping our students with the necessary skills and knowledge to eliminate the shortage of manpower. The objective of the upcoming NEP therefore is to meet the changing needs of quality education, innovation and research. In this context, the 2015 School Choice National Conference was dedicated to debating challenges and merits and proposing improvements to the New Education Policy.

The conference had 19 Speakers as panellists to contribute in 4 thematic sessions. It had 250 on site participants working in the field of education representing educationists, policy analysts, school principals, teachers, researchers, media and NGOs. The conference was live streamed and more than 100 people watched it online on the same day. Conference also had real time social media updates using #SCNC2015 giving opportunity to people, present in the conference and outside, to contribute to the discussion happening in conference. The conference also received 19 coverage in print and online news platforms.

The conference was divided into four sessions.

Session 1: New Education Policy – Depoliticising Education
Speakers: Prof Kamal Kishore Sharma, Prof Geeta Gandhi Kingdon, Ms Ekta Sodha, Mr Shantanu Gupta, Mr Rohan Joshi

The depoliticisation of education was discussed under broad themes of "Minimum Government, Maximum Governance" and curriculum influences. It was generally agreed that complete depoliticisation is not desirable but a balance needs to be achieved. The reimagining of the role of government from that of the current controller-producer-inspector towards a future facilitator-financier-informer in the education sector is required for achieving this balance. This is primarily because the power structure among stakeholders is heavily lopsided in favour of teachers and the bureaucracy at present. Data from several studies across the world point towards relatively better learning outcomes arising from privately managed schools with government funding (than government-run schools or privately-run schools). This also helps us understand the new role of government in education, by presenting an alternative stakeholder relationship in which parental choice is improved.

The need for withdrawal of government from the production of education was further stressed upon with data cited from primary studies conducted by Geeta Gandhi Kingdon in Uttar Pradesh which implied inefficient spending by the government in relation to the learning outcomes government-run schools achieve. The repetitive political interference in government school teacher accountability matters is one of the primary reasons for such low learning outcomes. Depoliticisation in the form of deregulation was also acknowledged as important for

making the education sector easier to invest in for individuals who are currently hesitant to do so due to redundant processes and numerous overreaching laws. The removal of these roadblocks to investment is necessary in the face of increasing parental preference for privately run schools. The government must thus differentiate between public provision and public production of education to realise that while the former is definitely its moral duty, the latter is better performed by private actors. This pubic provision could be effectively done primarily by financing through any per-child funding model like vouchers or Conditional Cash Transfers. In conclusion, the panel stressed how the New Education Policy needs to move away from ideologies towards data-driven policy points.

Session 2: From Right to Education to Right to Learning

Speakers: Mr Murlidhar Koteshwar, Ms Megha Pradhan, Mr R C Jain, Mr Vikram Jain, Ms Premila Nazareth Satyanand

The conception of education and laws regarding education continues to exclude the most important stakeholder in the process – the student. The transfer of knowledge, skills and values from one generation to the next requires the focus to be shifted from what the current generation wants, to what future generations need to enable learning. *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan* has made massive leaps in improving access to education but most of education policy so far has operated under the highly flawed assumption that staying in school ensures learning while data from several studies provide evidence on the contrary. The impact of programs in education is currently not assessed based on the improvement in learning outcomes achieved by these programs. Teaching at the right level needs to be identified as important for learning,

and technology-aided learning needs to be effectively integrated in the curriculum (with clear outcomes and teacher training) to improve learning. A revolution of the idea of education to improve learning is required in a scenario where even the parents who are willing to pay have to rely on underperforming government schools due to current regulation. The necessity of identifying and addressing each student's learning needs was emphasised and improving Early Childhood Education especially in rural areas is vital to achieving this. Proximity of school is just one of many factors including teacher quality, child happiness and learning that parents are concerned about and this needs to be addressed in the New Education Policy.

Session 3: Ensuring School Autonomy
Speakers: Ms Vyjayanthi Sankar, Mr Arvind Patel, Ms Meeta Sengupta, Mr Kulbhushan Sharma, Mr Rohan Joshi

The importance of school autonomy can be understood by examining the management structure of government and privately run schools – the distance from the student/parent ("client" in management theory) to the decision-makers in the system is much larger in a government-run school. Examples from across the world (like charter schools in the UK/US) provide evidence that greater school autonomy improves student learning by providing the opportunity for greater localised problem-solving/interventions through decentralised decision-making. Even in India, the higher learning outcomes from lower expenditure that private schools have managed to achieve was attributed in part to the greater autonomy they enjoy compared to government-run schools. A systematic mapping of current models of school autonomy to identify their strengths and weaknesses is necessary to create accountability

measures. Accountability systems are necessary to ensure that school autonomy is based on data-driven decision-making with actionable feedback, which is both continuous and locally dynamic. The panel agreed that school principals will need to abandon the current "middle-manager" mindset and embrace the idea that they are the CEOs of their schools for school autonomy to yield better results. School autonomy and supplementary accountability systems also hold significance for improving teacher quality, recruitment and performance, based on the localised needs of students. It was also pointed out that the autonomy of private, unaided schools is severely limited under the current complicated webs of government accountability regulation and it was suggested that schools should be accountable to parents and students rather than to the government. Autonomy needs to be conceptualised as the freedom to serve students, by understanding that each student learns individually and that improving school choice requires customised learning rather than standardised education. The panel in conclusion stressed that merely providing schools autonomy without necessary support functions/training, especially in the transition phase, would lead to implementation-related failures of a robust idea like the current state of Continuous Comprehensive Evaluation in India.

Session 4: Fixing Up Accountability in Education System

Speakers: Mr Amitav Virmani, Mr D Shashi Kumar, Mr Merajuddin Syed, Mr Amit Chandra

The foremost problem with setting up system of accountability is that there is lack of proper understanding of accountability among the different stakeholders. This was underlined through anecdotal evidence from Bhopal which suggested record-keeping and administration processes were failing students. The expectations from students need to be re-evaluated to serve as a

pointer in accountability measures. A 2007 McKinsey study across 20 countries provides evidence that the current Indian system has already implemented interventions that are required for countries which have poor education systems to move towards fair education systems (mostly focused on getting children into school). To move from a fair system to a good system, we need better, timely data collection coupled with improved access to this data, decentralisation and independent monitoring. Capacity-building and student learning assessments are central to a functioning accountability system in education. The fact that accountability and autonomy go hand-in-hand was further stressed by the need for schools to engage in self-evaluation and implement localised interventions once the data is collected and provided. Performance-linked pay and changing the management of underperforming schools was suggested as means of improving accountability in government-run schools, while the government accountability systems in place for private schools were criticised for not being linked to actual running costs in most states. This was because lower-fee charging schools were being held to the same parameters as higher-fee changing schools which provide more facilities and can pay teachers better. It is also pertinent to note that government accountability systems are currently in place only for privately run schools, despite the fact that government schools are spending more money and achieving lower learning outcomes. Measures such as school fee regulation laws are creating bottlenecks for Budget Private Schools which charge lower fees than the government's per-child expenditure, to meet standards that government-run schools are not held to, while continuing to provide better learning outcomes than government-run schools.

Recommendations from SCNC 2015 for NEP

Below are some prominent ideas that came out of the conference as recommendations to be incorporated in New Education Policy:

1. Fund Students, Not Schools

Government funding in education needs to take a new approach in which the unit of fund allocation and spending is a "child" and not "schools". Currently, while making budgets, the government calculates costs per child but while allocating and spending budgets, funds are routed through institutions such as the Education Department and Schools.

    a) There are number of benefits of funding students instead of funding schools

- In the current system schools are accountable to the government and not to the parents, since the funds are coming from the government. In a per-child funding model, funds are allocated to students (through Education Vouchers, Direct Bank Transfers, Scholarships etc), and students pay for their own education. Naturally schools are obligated to be accountable to students and parents. If the student does

not like the school, she can take the voucher to another school. Under the voucher system, the money follows the student.

- In addition to bringing more accountability and transparency in expenditure, funding students also facilitates healthy competition between different schools to attract and retain more students. Net outcome of the competition is improved quality of education.

b) Traditionally School Vouchers are used as an instrument for per-child funding, however along with vouchers, a number of other options such as direct cash transfers, scholarships, education credit accounts etc can be explored. In India, in some government welfare schemes Direct Cash Transfers are pilot tested and the outcomes, as shown by independent research reports, are highly positive.

2. Third Party Assessments

Third Party assessments can be described as a Health Check-Up of the education system. They hold the potential to provide clues for multiple non-performing and performing factors within the system.

One of the foremost benefits of third party assessments is availability of per-child learning data which provides important clues for higher level policy decisions as well as classroom level education delivery strategies to be implemented by teachers and principals.

In the current system, scope of National Achievement Survey (NAS) can be expanded to cover all schools and all children enrolled therein to execute third party assessments.

3. Outcomes-Based Regulation

One of the main challenges in current approach to regulation of school education is that it is highly inputs-driven, i.e. focus of regulation is on infrastructure, teacher salaries, compliance with various norms laid down by the central and state governments etc. Many of these norms have little connection with actual learning outcomes of students. Global research has shown that inputs in education including government expenditure have little to no connection with learning outcomes.

We must introduce a system of regulation where learning outcomes become the key factor in regulation of schools, both government and private. RTE Rules of Gujarat is one model where school recognition and regulation are both driven by learning outcomes.

Outcomes-based regulation does not mean no input norms at all, it means higher emphasis on learning outcomes in comparison to input norms. Once these norms are established, those should be applicable to both government and private schools to ensure all the schools in the

system are regulated on the same grounds and consequences of non-compliance are the same for both government and private schools.

4. Autonomy (Principals as Leaders)

In the current system school teachers, principals and school management committees have very little autonomy in terms of planning, budget and actual delivery of education in classrooms which includes pedagogical decisions, use of teaching aids etc by teachers.

One of main problems with lack of autonomy is lack of motivation, restricted scope for innovation and limited incentive for teachers and principals to perform.

It is important that school principals and teachers are given greater decision making powers and control over resources such as school finances to be able to innovate and improve their schools and classrooms respectively. Principals in particular should become leaders of their schools and play a pivotal role defining and driving quality of education in their schools.

5. Choice to be Profit or Non-profit

It is mandatory for schools to be a non-profit entity in India. While in most states unaided private schools pay electricity, water charges at commercial rates, they are not allowed to make profits out of schools since education is a non-profit activity by law.

It is important to start considering education as an important component of service industry similar to health, telecom and electricity where entry of for-profit entities has immensely benefitted the sector in terms of both access and quality of services enjoyed by common citizens.

The idea is not that all schools must become for-profit entities but the option to choose between non-profit and for-profit model should be available to the existing as well newly opening schools.

6. Governance Model: Separate Regulation, Finance and Delivery

Currently government plays a role of regulator, financer and provider of education, all at the same time. Some of the key challenges with this structure are: lack of independent and neutral monitoring of government and private schools, favourable treatment to the government schools, and lack of accountability in financing education.

It is important that these three roles are separated and ideally handled by three separate entities.

7. Education Data in Public Domain

Education data in India is collected by central agencies (at state and/or state level) periodically. While the data quite often is made available in public domain, the time lapse between data collection and publishing the data poses serious challenges in terms of validity and utility of the data. Similarly, the data collected under census surveys such as DISE is restricted to government schools. Private unaided schools and other independent schools are not covered in these surveys.

The data made available in public domain is often in formats not understood by common citizens, particularly parents who could use the data most effectively while selecting schools for their children, to demand accountability from schools etc. Also, data collected through DISE is collected through self-reporting which poses severe questions in terms of validity and reliability of the data itself.

It is important that Management Information Systems are created in each state and entire school data including enrolments, infrastructure to learning outcomes is available in vernacular languages in uniform formats at all the time on websites. The data could be self-reported however validity of the data should be checked through sample surveys, inspections, community monitoring, parental participation in school audits etc.

8. Technological Innovation in Pedagogy and Evaluation

Current policy for use of technology in education largely looks at technology as an innovative teaching and learning tool. Technology in education has gone much beyond classrooms and gamification to include other areas such as teacher training and certification, school management, assessments, tracking of students etc.

It is important that current policy for ICT in education is revisited to include latest technological innovations in education. Similarly other policies which might be restricting the scope of technological innovations such as teacher autonomy in syllabus delivery need to be revisited to ensure enabling policy environment is created for advancement of technological innovations in education.

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