

The Devil is In The Details

The education minister must back bold initiative with bold action, says **Baladevan Rangaraju**

The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act is historic, but has come with its fair share of controversy and confusion. Even as the left and the right were engrossed in branding the bill rightist and leftist respectively, the government silently pushed it through. However, there is confusion over a number of aspects of the Act, which are open ended, and many people are still unable to decide their stand on it. For instance, education is a concurrent subject and states have been legislating on it. The Delhi Directorate of Education would like to know, for example, whether the 15 per cent Economically Weaker Section (EWS) quota will be part of, or in addition to the 25 per cent reservation brought in by the RTE Act. Soon, the government has to come out with the rules of the Act, which is likely to close these open ends; this may turn some supporters into detractors and vice versa. Still, the 25 per cent reservation for poor children in private schools is one provision in the Act that one cannot but support. While the Left and the Right continue to look at the provision suspiciously (the Left sees it as bridging the gap between the elite and the working class, and the right as a roll back by the state), the poor will reap the gains. Government schools have for decades failed to provide the kind of education and exposure that private schools provide. Even if a fraction of the poor children get education in the private schools, it will amount to empowerment of the poor and is, therefore, truly laudable. The success of the government's policy will lie in the rules that it formulates for its implementation and the courage with which

The success of the 25 per cent reservation for poor children in private schools lies in the rules the government formulates and the courage it shows in tackling hurdles



it handles obstacles. Since many schools have already started their admission process for the sessions starting in April 2010, the HRD Ministry has to act fast to dispel some of the confusion over questions of who, when, and how the 25 per cent reservation for poor children in private schools will be implemented. The critical details that will need to be worked out are; the selection process for the children of the weaker sections, transfer mechanism for fee payment by the government on behalf of these students, a monitoring and evaluation mechanism, and developing an ecosystem that will absorb the shocks of this restructuring exercise.

Fairness in the selection process

It is important to design a selection process that is fair, appears fair, and is scalable in the future, especially since the government is not implementing a universal voucher scheme where every child gets a voucher to go to any school of their choice, and yet there is enormous

desire among the poor to give their children education in private schools. In India, one approach that the government could adopt is the one used in the selection of students for the two voucher programmes run by the School Choice Campaign. Our experience shows that the best procedure is a public lottery preceded by an awareness campaign. Poor parents need to be educated on what the new law entitles them to have; what the do's and don'ts are; what their new responsibilities will be, and how to apply for the scheme, among others. Technology might make this easier and more transparent later, but right now it is imperative that the officials who act as the interface with parents have a thorough knowledge of the scheme, are empathetic to the needs of the poor parents, and the scheme should not be misused by some opportunists. Otherwise there is a real danger that this too will become a government scholarship scheme that is used by some officials to dole out favours to their coterie.

A leak-proof payment mechanism

A leak-proof payment mechanism whereby the government can pay the fees for the 25 per cent reserved seats, is the next big challenge. With the poor track record of preventing leakages in government transactions, the danger of this scheme being leakage-prone is very real. Hope lies in using information technology to prevent this. In our School Vouchers for Girls project, with the help of Accor Services, we have used non-transferable secure vouchers (bar coded, printed on special paper with special ink) of a small denomination, as payment instruments. The government

need not give multiple instruments to the parents; it may simply need authentication inputs from the parents to transfer the money directly into the school's account. In future, this could be a feature 'baked' into the Unique Identification Card that the government is planning to issue. For now, even if one computer at each school is connected to the government's network, it will be sufficient. Upon feeding the necessary inputs, the money can be transferred electronically. If, however, the government decides to continue with the established procedure requiring the schools to submit reports to officials for processing the payments, there will be delay and corruption, which will render the scheme useless.

Monitoring and evaluation

When implemented, this will be the world's largest public-private partnership in the education sector. About two-and-a-half million poor children will benefit in the first year. Given its size and the fact that the central government has not run any pilots of its own, all the fine-tuning and recalibration of the implementation design will have to be done after the launch. This calls for an effective monitoring and evaluation (M&E) system. Besides, M&E will also ensure that poor children in private schools are not meted out differential treatment. As schools are bound to be apprehensive about batch quality and their ability to socially integrate children from two different strata of the society, a well structured, third-party M&E mechanism that will be uniquely suited to provide vital inputs for the development of new pedagogical techniques and to facilitate sharing and learning between institutions, will be essential. Otherwise, a great initiative might die early due to the lack of a self-cleansing system.

Ecosystem development

Each government-sponsored student in a private school displaces a self-paying student. This means that two-and-a-half million students with the capacity to pay for their education will not get access to schools of their choice; almost as if they were being punished for their parents' prosperity. So, in a country

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where the short supply of schools forces parents to book seats for their children as soon as they are born, a huge reservation for government-sponsored children can lead to a different kind of crisis. And, if the government goes about closing unrecognised schools, as the Act envisages, the crisis will assume gigantic proportions. Imagine a few lakh well-to-do parents in each city looking for a fake community or income certificate, and ready to bribe clerks to get their children admitted under the government quota! What is needed is immediate reform in the education sector to relieve it of the licence raj way of functioning. Unreasonable compliances, such as the need for an essentiality certificate from a municipal official that the school is needed, should be done away with. Education Acts of all the states of the union should be revised to weed out stipulations which are anachronistic and to create a favourable climate for enterprising people to enter the education industry. Further, the existing recognition procedure should be replaced with a graded recognition system, which will bring even the unrecognised schools into the legal ambit. If the government does not deregulate the school education sector immediately, it will destroy the existing education ecosystem. But, if the education sector is declared an industry, more capital will flow in to cater to the rising demands, more professional organisations will enter the business of education delivery and competition will benefit the subscribers, including the government in this case.

Ethical behaviour

These being the critical measures that the government needs to take immediately, stake holders in the entire country are waiting with anticipation for the HRD Ministry to announce its rules for implementation of the scheme. Education Minister. Kapil Sibal and this government will have to back their bold initiative with bold actions. They also need to exhibit courage and set examples in ethical behaviour. A critical piece in this 25 per cent reservation puzzle is the per-child expenditure that the government incurs in its schools. While it will never be as high as expenditure incurred by parents of children in high-end schools, independent assessments have revealed that some city governments spend much more per-child than budget private schools. Now, for the first time, when the government will be forced to quote a figure for its per pupil expenditure, it is quite likely that it employs a method of calculation that will result in a lower figure. Thus, it could be embarrassing for the government to say it is spending Rs 800 per month per child in a city where the average private school fee is only Rs 500 per month, even when the private school child will most likely be more knowledgeable than his peer in the government school.

Further, a lower per-child expenditure figure will benefit the government and motivate it to be dishonest in its calculations. This could result in another crisis: schools will begin to charge their self-paying students exorbitant fees to offset losses incurred by providing services to 25 per cent of government-sponsored poor students. In a way, this will be taxing the capable a second time. So in due course, those with the ability to pay will start protesting, and their children will look at their government-sponsored classmates as enemies. Also, the schools will manipulate numbers to increase their fees. This is surely not an outcome anyone wants from the RTE initiative. Since no amount of force can make anyone ethical, the government has to show courage in leading by example. ■



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