

# SUPERMARKET EDUCATION

Teaching vulnerable kids, one voucher at a time

by Rohit Viswanath

Eleven-year-old Arshi Khan wants to be a doctor when she grows up. "I will treat people for free," she says. Two years ago, the little girl couldn't have dreamed of being a doctor. She dropped out of school because her father could not support a family of eight on his restaurant waiter's income of Rs. 3,000 a month. Now, Arshi Khan attends Sneha Doon Academy, a private school in Dehradun. A big step-up from the government school she used to study in, this is possible because of Pahal, an Uttarakhand state government programme launched two years ago in partnership with private schools.

Part of the *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan*, Pahal tries to get urban slum children, aged 6-14, into private schools. As of August 2008, 651 children from the four districts of Dehradun, Nainital, Udham Singh Nagar and Haridwar have enrolled in private schools. And now, Human Resource Development Minister Kapil Sibal wants to take the scheme national. Pahal does not fund disadvantaged students. Instead, it attaches students to private schools in the area and directly pays the schools via education vouchers.

Parth Shah, president, Centre of Civil Society (CCS), an NGO based in Delhi, is a happy man. CCS has been campaigning for education vouchers for four years now. But Sibal's predecessors in the ministry opposed the idea that introducing free market principles in education could actu-

ally lower costs and improve accountability. More than 80 percent of all children go to government schools. The voucher system wasn't a viable alternative to a government school network, they said.

But Shah was sure they were wrong. Four years ago he noticed a number of budget private schools set up shop in New Delhi. He saw poor families ready to spend money so their kids could get better education than the badly run government schools could provide.

Simply disbursing funds would not work. Giving money to parents raised the possibility that it would be misused. Giving it to the schools wasn't viable either. The best option was going the supermarket way and handing out vouchers that could not be exchanged for cash. And since private schools with good facilities were the preferred choice, there would be no extra expenditure on infrastructure.

Since March 2008, CSS awarded vouchers worth Rs. 3,600 a year to 408 students in 68 wards of Delhi. The students for the pilot were selected through a transparent public lottery system. The results have been encouraging: The voucher beneficiaries showed significantly improved academic performance and the number of drop outs has come down sharply as well.

"Our intention is not to annihilate the government schools. All we want is greater accountability," says Shah. And ac-

countability works both ways. Based on contracts signed with schools, Pahal pays Rs. 3,000 per child in three instalments and these are linked to the student's progress. The first instalment is made within one week of enrolment. The second instalment depends on attendance and improved performance, which is evaluated by an external agency. The final instalment is made on the basis of higher achievement levels indicated in the annual exams.

Getting the kids to school is not simple.

While most parents wanted their kids to study, some were apprehensive. "The resistance stemmed from the fact that the children did odd jobs and contributed to the family income. We had to talk to them and convince them in simple words," says Shailendra Negi, a Pahal co-ordinator.

Another problem was the culture shock between these students and the other kids at school. Pahal started holding bridge courses that focussed on personal hygiene, time management, etiquette and behav-

our, apart from basic linguistic and math skills. To make sure students didn't bunk classes, Pahal appointed an escort in every slum whose job was to bring the children to school.

One of the kids who has benefitted from Negi and his team's persistence is Rahul. He used to sort garbage with his ragpicker parents. Now he attends bridge classes at Dayanand Vedic School. Munnabai, his mother, says, "We are proud that he is now able to read in English." ■

## CAMPAIGN FOCUS

### FUND STUDENTS NOT SCHOOLS

#### WHO'S SPEARHEADING IT?

Parth Shah, president, Centre for Civil Society in Delhi. The government-bought into his idea and started the Pahal scheme in Uttarakhand, under the *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan*.

#### WHAT ARE THEY TRYING TO DO?

Get vulnerable students enrolled in private schools.

#### WHAT'S NEW ABOUT THAT?

No funds are disbursed to either the schools or the students. Instead the school is given educational vouchers that can be redeemed to cover the cost of students' education.

#### WHY ARE THEY GOING THE SUPERMARKET WAY?

Under the Pahal scheme, per capita spend on a student is Rs. 3,000 a year. In comparison, the government used to spend more than Rs. 10,000 per child in government schools. There is also less chance of funds getting misused.

#### IS IT LIMITED TO UTTARAKHAND?

Orissa, Jharkhand, UP and Rajasthan are adopting similar programmes.

**BUDGET HIGHLIGHT:** Tax exemption to trusts engaged in providing education to the poor.