

EDITORIAL

While only 22% of the world's population lives in India, a staggering 46% of the world's illiterates are Indian. Even with those in school, the drop out rate is currently 40.25% with an annual decline of only 0.6%.

In the face of such statistics, how is India going to achieve the goal of universal elementary education by 2010?

Money has poured into the country to provide primary schools in all towns and villages. Buildings have sprung up everywhere and teachers are being paid generous salaries. Yet the expected results have not occurred.

Kremer *et al* (2005) surveyed 3700 schools in 20 major states, paying three unannounced visits to every one. They found that 25% of teachers were absent from school on any given day and only half of those present were actually teaching. The rest were drinking tea, reading comics, eating peanuts or just sitting idly.

Facts and figures from a more recent survey conducted in 10 government primary schools in the blocks of Bania Khera and Bilari in the district of Moradabad, U.P. in February and March 2008 show that there has been little improvement since then. None of the observed schools opened on time or remained open for the whole of the school day. 20% teachers and 25% assistants were absent and not one teacher stayed for the whole school day. Just 45% of teachers were actually teaching. Of the total number of pupils on roll, only 20% were ever present and 90% of those arrived at the school before any of the teachers did. Interestingly, the number of pupils did not increase at the time of the midday meal.

Increasing evidence shows clearly that private schools are more efficient than government ones and lead to a much higher quality of verbal, mathematical and

cognitive skills. Private schools have a much higher level of accountability since they operate under a market mechanism. In government schools, there are no market forces at work and once appointed, teachers have a job for life with a top salary, an excellent pension and no worries about being sacked. Moreover, whereas 30 years ago, inspectors paid personal visits to every single school under their authority, nowadays nobody bothers.

Not surprisingly, teachers are the first to oppose any changes in the system, understandably so since they are the first to be affected by change.

But the present system is doing tremendous harm to rural areas where few alternative schools are available even for those who can afford them and none at all for those who cannot.

In Uttar Pradesh, for example, these areas have over 80% of the state's population. It is nothing less than criminal to continue with such a system and do nothing about it.

Change, therefore, is imperative. The 86th Constitutional Amendment Act of 2002 makes free and compulsory education a fundamental right for all children between the ages of 6 and 14. It seems that choice and competition are the way to give access to high quality education.

India's President, Pratibha Patil, has publicly stated that teachers "need to upgrade their knowledge, skills and competencies through professional preparation. Teacher training programmes need to reflect critically the multiple contexts in which schools function and come out with specific solutions relevant to teaching in schools in urban, rural and tribal areas and in disadvantaged regions.

The models of pre-service and in-service teacher preparation require critical review.

In pre-service teacher education programmes, there is a need for integration between theory and practice and between subject content and pedagogy.”

We would further urge that there must be new, up-to-date, relevant and practical teacher training and retraining for teachers. This training should include exercises for healthy bodies, healthy minds, ethics and awareness of social and economic issues. District branches of *Patanjali Yogpeeth* could be involved in the new training programmes.

The present teaching qualifications such as B.Ed. and B.T.C. should be declared obsolete and irrelevant for so far, they have failed to make any progress either in the quality of general education or in the attendance, punctuality and commitment of teachers.

Thus change is crucial. However, we have no ideal model to follow which will be a panacea for all our educational ills. We must be willing to proceed by trial and error. Only this way will we find a system which will work.

One system which is very much in favour at the moment is an education voucher scheme. Ms Mayawati, Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, recently announced that school vouchers will be introduced in all those areas of the state where access to a school is difficult. In the first phase, the project will be implemented only in those villages where the total population is 300 and where there are no primary schools within a kilometre.

Accordingly, poor children in Classes 1 to 8 will be given the opportunity to study in convents and Montessori schools. Parents in backward areas of the state will be given an educational voucher that will cover the cost of their child's entire schooling including tuition fees, stationery and related expenses. Private schools will be reimbursed only if the parents are satisfied with the quality of education their children receive.

This is an excellent start but on its own, it is unlikely to succeed. It presupposes that there are good schools just outside the one kilometre range. This is extremely unlikely. Convents and Montessori schools are almost without exception situated in towns and cities. At the most, there might be a government primary school within reasonable travelling distance for these children from backward areas. But since the nearest government primary school will only offer a very poor standard of education, we are back to square one.

To encourage the setting up of good primary schools in rural areas, we recommend that the focus be on the teachers.

It is not feasible to expect primary school-aged children to travel long distances to towns and cities to compete for the few good private schools that exist. We therefore propose a new education scheme which integrates education vouchers with teacher-entrepreneurship.

The following points highlight the most important aspects of this proposal which puts teachers at the centre of change.

Teacher-Entrepreneurs

- The scheme envisages qualified teachers becoming entrepreneurs and setting up their own schools.
- A well-run school with effective, committed teachers should attract lots of pupils with education vouchers. Thus good teachers running good schools should be able to earn attractive salaries.
- Teachers will have the choice to remain in their present jobs or opt out to become teacher-entrepreneurs.
- Unemployed, trained teachers who have been looking for government jobs could also join the scheme.
- Both existing teachers and newly trained ones should be offered

- suitable incentives to join the scheme.
- There should not be any compulsory redundancies from government primary schools. However, the recruitment of teachers could be put on hold for some time.
 - A state council for teacher-entrepreneurs should be set up to help implement the scheme. Such a council should have 50% of its members from non-government bodies and should include experienced educationists and civil society organisations, particularly those living and working in rural areas.
 - Teacher-entrepreneurs should be given interest-free loans to help them set up new schools where existing ones are not available.
 - Regulations for primary school buildings should be reviewed and where possible, relaxed, to help teacher-entrepreneurs to set up in problem areas.
 - The new scheme should be advertised widely in regional and national newspapers, on national and regional television and on the notice boards of all degree colleges.
 - All primary schools should be regularly appraised by committees of the state council and schools should be graded according to the results of their appraisals.
 - Panchayats and PTAs should be empowered to put pressure on poorly performing schools, whether government or private.
 - All schools, whether government or private, should be made accountable to the Panchayats and PTAs who should have the power to stop payment of teachers' salaries if they are performing poorly.
 - New rules and regulations should be passed to ensure that schools and teachers have to be accountable and transparent.
 - Provided their appraisal and grading are satisfactory, new teacher-entrepreneur schools should be given other facilities such as free midday meals, scholarships for uniforms, books etc.

Students

- Every primary school-age student currently attending a government primary school will be eligible to apply for an education voucher which he/she can use in a school of his/her choice up to a fixed amount of money.
- If they are happy with their existing government school, that is fine. However, they now have a choice.
- Where many pupils opt out of an existing government primary school, teacher-entrepreneurs should be allowed to rent the building.

Monitoring and Evaluation