

Class war as many schools set to shut

- Will admit students from 1,000-odd unrecognised schools that'll close: govt
- Below-par rooms better than no classes: schools

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MORE than 1,000 unrecognised private schools across the Capital face imminent closure as the government gets set to crack down on private schools that have not applied for recognition following a High Court order.

The government says students affected by the closure can be adjusted in its own schools, but opponents of the February High Court order are unconvinced.

The exact number of unrecognised schools in Delhi is not known — 1,517 according to one report, over 10,000 in another — but the High Court placed all under one scanner: within six months, the Directorate of Education (DoE) should identify each such school, which must then apply for recognition.

But among the key criteria for recognition are ample space, qualified teachers and fixed pay scales (see box), and many unrecognised schools — largely catering to the economically weaker section (EWS) — look set for closure.

Surveys of unrecognised schools are now underway, and Delhi's Education Secretary Rina Ray told Newsline that many such schools are "running (from) above chemical factories, or in basements. Such schools should not exist. But once they are closed down, students can be accommodated in government schools, and also private schools, through the EWS quota."

A DoE official said that based on a preliminary analysis up to 400 unrecognised schools could be recognised following some minor changes — extension of land, for instance.

On in full swing

But for now, unrecognised schools are in full swing. On the winding lanes of Govindpuri, a house-turned-school is busy luring students for the new academic year every several metres. Dipanshi Public School, a two-storey house on Lane 8 in Govindpuri, also doubles up as the home of its principal, Sunita Goyal, and her family.

As a domestic help stacked tiny tables and chairs in one corner, Goyal explained how 30 nursery students

can be accommodated in this ground floor classroom, in a space approximately 10 metres squared.

"Cramming students into a small space in dangerous environments and offering a sub-standard education are what we are fighting against. What about child rights?" asked advocate Ashok Agarwal, who first moved the court against ill-equipped unrecognised schools in 2005.

But for a growing group of activists, education in a substandard classroom is better than no education at all. Counsel for unrecognised schools, R M Sinha, said such schools cater primarily to the "poorest students". "Inflicting regularisation will deprive students of even basic education," he said. Their homes in slums are not safe, and we are not expecting them to become doctors or lawyers."

RC Jain, president of the Delhi State Public Schools Management Association, said unrecognised schools "run only until Class VIII", after which students go onto recognised schools, mandatory for Board examinations. Jain is now preparing to challenge the High Court's verdict in the Supreme Court. "Where will students go when the schools close down?" he asked. "It can't be denied that these schools fill a gap the government's failing to meet."

At Dipanshi, for instance, Goyal said many students are children of migrants from Bihar and UP. "Without official documents, a ration card or birth certificate, they can't get admission in a government school."

Education at what cost?

Sanjay Malhotra, manager of La Bella Public School, a recognised school in Lane 9, Govindpuri, said approximately 20 unrecognised schools have sprung up in area over the past five years. "Schools have a moral responsibility to provide hygienic surrounds and space, which most in this area lack. I'm against those unrecognised schools that are teaching shops, not schools."

But without empirical data, it's difficult to measure outcomes for students, economist Jishnu Das said. He calls for a similar study along the lines of the NGO Pratham's annual report of rural education in India. Such a study in an urban environment is challenging, said Shailendra Sharma, head of programmes at Pratham, as many students are enrolled in both government and private schools.

But, he added, "Even with its added costs, we have found that parents trust private schools more than government schools; students are indeed learning."

Requirements for school's recognition by DoE as per Delhi School Education Act, 1973:

LAND (Minimum of)

- 4000 sq m for senior secondary school (up to XII)
- 2000 sq m for secondary school (up to X)
- 1000 sq m for middle school (up to VIII)
- TEACHERS MUST hold minimum of a graduate degree and a Bachelor's in Education
- FIXED PAY scale for teachers
- SUBJECT TO INSPECTION at any time

Requirements for school's recognition by MCD

- Minimum 200 sq m (to be increased in upcoming revision to norms)
- Minimum 150 sq feet for classrooms
- School must have principal's room, computer room, library with at least 1,000 books
- School must have at least 125 students
- Classroom should not have more than 40 students
- Fixed pay scale for teachers