

National Education Choice Campaign

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The National Education Choice Campaign promotes reforms that deliver quality education to all through a revolutionary new agenda. A radical new thinking is necessary to save one more generation of our children from being lost to the failing education system. The Campaign invites all to broaden the dialogue and to work towards immediate implementation of reforms.

Conventional Reforms

The Free and Compulsory Education of Children Bill 2004 is the latest effort by the government and education experts to bring elementary education to all. The Bill represents outdated thinking and is completely disconnected from the ground realities of today's India. It attempts to move the country towards a Common School System, where the government would decide which school the student should attend with the ultimate goal that all students from a given area must attend the same 'common' school.

The Common School System is a type of system that the western countries established more than a century ago. Has nothing changed in our understanding of how to provide quality education in a century? Should we look at what these countries had done a century earlier or what they are doing today to improve their education system? They are in fact moving away from the regimented, bureaucracy-ridden system that has come to represent the interests of teacher unions and administrators rather than of students. Let's learn from their mistakes, not repeat them.

Another common proposal is to increase government spending on education to about 6 percent of GDP. The almost doubling of government expenditure on education is bound to have some positive impact. The question is whether the impact would be in any way proportionate to the increase in spending. It is evident that unless we reform the delivery system, the extra money is unlikely to match our expectations of improvement.

Several of the countries that achieved high literacy rates in the post-war era have rarely spent anywhere close to the 6 percent of their GDP. South Korea has spent about 3.2 percent; Japan spends around 3.8 percent, and China 2.6 percent. Student expenditure in the United States is one of the highest but student performance is far below world standards. International evidence suggests that it is not how much the government spends but how it spends that determines the quality of the education system.

Geeta Gandhi Kingdon's study of Uttar Pradesh (in 1996) documents that expenditure per student in private unaided schools is Rs 999, in private aided schools Rs 1827, and in government schools Rs 2008. The learning achievement is however in the direction exactly opposite to the amount of spending. The government spends more than twice that of private unaided schools and provides half as much education.

New Agenda for Reforms

It is widely recognised that government is inefficient in producing economic goods and services. The world over, governments are getting out of the business of steel, cement, bicycles, bread. We are trying to do the same through disinvestment and privatisation. What magic makes the government efficient in providing complex services like education when it is inefficient in producing simple goods like fertilizers? The government that performs poorly in tilling the fields, how well would it train the minds?

What has been done for the economy needs to be done for the education system—deregulate, depoliticize, decentralize. Make schools and colleges accountable not to education bureaucrats (licensors) but to parents and students (customers). Increase choice and competition.

We should combine the core competency of the private and the public sector. Let the private sector produce education—manage schools and colleges—and provide it to all who can afford to pay. For those who cannot afford to pay, let the government finance their education through scholarships, education vouchers, and loans. The government stands as a guarantor of education, not by producing it but by financing it. Instead of focusing on the inputs to education, the government ensures the output—meaningful, high quality learning. This approach combines the efficiency and accountability of the private sector with the equity and independent supervision of the public sector.

High prices in terms of tuition fees and donations and long queues for admissions are signs of shortages. The same paucity of supply existed for consumer goods before the 1991 liberalization. That license-permit-quota raj still exists in our education system.

To start a new school, one must first acquire an Essentiality Certificate (EC) from education authorities. In evaluating the application, one factor that authorities take into account is the number of existing schools in the area and the extra demand for education. How do they estimate this demand? Is it the same method that was used by the Planning Commission to estimate the need for industrial licenses? The Planning Commission created high prices and long queues for consumer goods and education authorities are doing the same for education.

In addition to the Essentiality Certificate, the government has detailed specifications for classroom size, playground facility, to hiring, firing, and salaries of staff and teachers. Undoubtedly all these regulations are well intended. But the outcomes more often are perverse. Deepalaya, a school for slum children in Delhi, has been refused recognition by the government for more than 10 years on the grounds that it does not pay the stipulated salary to its teachers. The private and NGO schools for the poor cannot afford to pay these salaries. Most of them get their teachers to sign for the government-required amount while actually paying what they can. Deepalaya refuses to be dishonest. All the evils of the license-permit-quota raj that we experienced in the industrial sector still haunt our education system.

Reforms under the National Education Choice Campaign

Remove the license-permit raj to expand the supply of education
Decentralise and depoliticise decisions about syllabi, textbooks, and examinations
Grant autonomy to government schools and colleges without reducing financial support
Transfer management to local governments, communities, and NGOs
Link government grants with performance for all education institutions
Convert departments of education from producers to financiers and supervisors
Establish independent evaluation and certification agencies
Fund students, not schools: Help the poor by scholarships, education vouchers, and loans
Pass private university bill and allow openly for-profit education institutions
Declare education an 'industry' so that edupreneurs can access credit and venture capital

The rules mean well but they overlook the reality that by passing a law the government cannot guarantee high salaries for teachers. Not to mention the unintended consequence of promoting those who are dishonest and punishing those who are honest. Similar outcomes occur of the requirement

that only a non-profit trust or a society can run schools. More time and efforts are spent to hide and distribute what the Supreme Court permits itself to call 'surplus.'

The role of the government is to liberate the supply side, fund the demand of the poor, and monitor the access and quality of education. Let the private initiative and entrepreneurship—for profit and non-profit—govern our schools and colleges. Scholarships, education vouchers, and loans would offer the same freedom of choice to the poor as the rich enjoy today. Governments and NGOs should evaluate schools and colleges and publish the results so that parents can make informed decisions.

All individuals and organisations that support the direction of policy reforms proposed here must come together to form an effective coalition for these reforms. Please contact us to take the reform ideas further:

National Education Choice Campaign,
Centre for Civil Society,
K-36 Hauz Khas Enclave, New Delhi 110016
Tel: 2653 7456/ 2652 1882 Fax: 2651 2347
Email: educationchoice@ccsindia.org