

School Choice: Assuring Quality Education to All

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Over the years, India has tried varied approaches to improve enrolment and quality of school education. However, as some recent surveys and data show, there is a huge gap between our aspirations and actual achievements. In the process, we have created a two-tier system of school education. Those who can afford fees go to private schools and those who cannot, go to state schools. This gross inequality in schooling opportunities is the result of our current approach to education.²⁵

India is not the only country where state schools perform poorly. In fact, most of the people across the world are unhappy with the performance of state schools in their countries. The US spends one of the highest amounts per student in the world but education usu-

ally ranks as the second major issue of concern after the economy among her people. In a typical Western country, a vast majority of students go to state schools (almost 90% in the US). What are these countries doing to reform their education systems?

Each national education system is unique in some way and each one tries to fix its problems in its own way. However, one common theme underlying many of the reforms is the empowerment of parents, giving them more voice in the system. State schools are commonly accountable to the Education Department or Ministry. One reform goal is to increase the accountability of schools towards parents—restructure the system so that schools are at least as much accountable to parents as they are to the education officials. There are many ways to achieve this goal: Put parents on school boards or District Education Councils; give powers to Parent-Teacher Associations; create something like our Village Educa-

²⁴ Andre Beteille (2005), "The School as an Institution," in *School, Society, Nation, op cit.*

²⁵ website: www.schoolchoice.in

tion Committees. One new idea in this bucket is that of school vouchers. Several countries have undertaken pilot projects. Sweden has actually converted its school education into a universal voucher system where every child, irrespective of parental income, gets a voucher to go to a school of their choice among private or government schools.

School Vouchers: Making Schools Accountable to Parents

The voucher is a tool to change the way governments finance education, particularly of the poor. It is a coupon offered by the government that covers the full or partial cost of education at the school of the student's choice. The schools collect the vouchers from the students and deposit them in their bank accounts; the banks then credit the school accounts with equivalent money while debiting the account of the government. No money actually changes hands, only the vouchers move from the students to the schools, and back to the government.

 In the present system, the schools are accountable to the government. The voucher system makes them accountable directly to the students and parents since they pay for their education through vouchers. If a parent does not like her child's school, she can take the voucher to another school. Under the voucher system, money follows the student. In the present system, money follows the school. The school voucher provides:

Choice for students: The voucher empowers poor students so that they can attend a school of their choice. If the school does not meet their expectations, they have the power to change the school.

Equality of opportunity: The scheme satisfies the basic human right that all children are treated equally and equal opportunity for education is provided to all irrespective of cash, caste or creed.

Competition among schools: Today, only private schools compete for students with money. With the introduction of vouchers, government schools will also compete for students, both rich and poor.

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Performance-based payment: The revenue of a school depends on the number of students it has, including both, who pay directly and those who pay through vouchers. Schools therefore have an automatic incentive to improve quality that will increase enrolments and retain students.

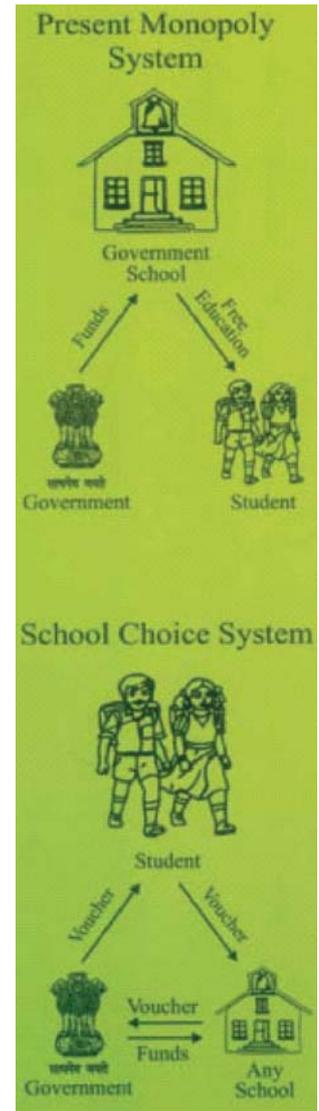
Win-Win outcome: Those government school students who get a voucher are able to change schools and do better for themselves. Evidence suggests that even those students who stay in government schools perform better. First, the student-teacher ratio improves and second, the schools become more attentive to stop student numbers from going down further. All students achieve better learning outcomes.

In a voucher system, instead of funding schools, the government funds students. The resultant choice and competition, working together, provides universal access to as well as improvement in quality education.

Critics and Skeptics: The Ideal School Ecosystem

There are many arguments against school vouchers—from encouraging privatization of education, increasing stratification and discrimination, to being anti-teacher unions and absolving the state from its responsibility to provide education to all. These are

serious charges and if they are true, we should indeed look for better alternatives.



In view of limitation of space here, I offer only two points for consideration. One, we should not convert the whole education system overnight to vouchers. Like any good public policy idea, we should do pilot projects, assess them vigorously, learn and re-design them, and then scale them up over a period of time. In the judgment of many well-read and well-meaning people, there is enough power in the idea as well as in the experience of diverse countries to try pilot projects in India. We should in fact conduct pilot projects in urban, rural, and tribal areas. That is the first point for the skeptics' consideration.

The second proposition is to outline an ideal school ecosystem that would indirectly answer some of the concerns. It is true that no one can predict with utmost certainty what would be the final ideal system, but it is feasible to imagine an intermediary ideal system. In that scheme, I envision state and private schools existing together; with more autonomy in pedagogy, curricula, and learning assessments; having teachers' unions, probably more in the shape of professional associations across government and private schools; government teachers' salaries being decided by the government (as now) but teachers hired and supervised at the school level (not as now); given the vastness and diversity of India, having 5-7 affiliation boards; and finally, a system where no school gets money directly from the state, instead all schools get their funding from parents (who either pay themselves or through vouchers given by governments).

Vouchers do not annihilate state schools; they make them more accountable to parents and compel them to compete with other schools to which parents can take their children. Most government schools are better equipped than the budget private schools (that charge Rs 50 to 300 per month per student) that the poor use—in terms of infrastructure for libraries, labs, and playgrounds, amount of funds they have per student, and qualification and training

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of the teachers. On head-to-head competition, government schools should out-compete budget private schools. That does not happen today, but vouchers provide the missing ingredient that will change the incentive structure towards better performance of state schools.

Voucher Pilots in India

The idea of school voucher is similar to that of democracy—each comes in many shapes and sizes. More than 100 countries in the world are known

as democracies. Each one is similar in some and very different in other ways, but they are all democracies. Each voucher pilot is similar to other pilots in some manner but different in some other areas. The idea can be adapted to address varied problems and situations.

PAHAL in Uttarakhand: An Innovative PPP (private-public partnership) initiative has been providing school vouchers to children (6-14 yrs) who are rag-pickers, scavengers, snake-charmers, or orphans. The eligibility criterion is that the child should have never enrolled or has been a drop-out for at least a year and that there is no government school/EGS centre (Education Guarantee Scheme) within a kilometer of the habitation. The scheme was started in 2007 in Dehra Dun city and based on its success, a year later, was expanded to Nainital and Udham Singh Nagar with a total of 651 children.

Delhi Voucher Project: This privately-funded programme started in 2007, and is managed by the Centre for Civil Society (CCS) (of which the author is President). CCS awarded school vouchers worth up to Rs. 3,600 per year to 408 students in 68 wards of Delhi.

In these 68 wards, more than 50 School Choice Activists reached out to more than 12 lakh parents. All students studying in Class V or below in government schools qualified for the programme. Over 1.2 lakh parents applied. As a fair and transparent method of selecting students from the large number of applicants, a public lottery was held in each ward



where the local Ward Councilor picked 12 students—6 for the first list and 6 for a buffer list, in case some of the students in the first list had eligibility or acceptance problems.

Those who did not win the lottery submitted a petition to their Ward Councilor demanding school vouchers from the government. More than 2.5 lakh parents submitted voucher demand. On July 26, 2007, the vouchers were awarded to the winners in the presence of the Delhi Chief Minister, Sheila Dikshit, and the Education Minister, Arvinder Singh Lovely.

Gyanodaya Yojana, Rajasthan: The Yojana is meant to facilitate opening up of new schools for Classes VI to XII under Public-Private Partnership on a BOO (Build, Operate and Own) basis. In the first phase, a maximum of five such schools will be set up in each district. Fifty per cent of the seats in these schools will be sponsored by

the state government through school vouchers. The scheme has inbuilt monitoring and evaluation mechanisms and gives preference to girls and under-privileged children.

Shikshak Ka Apna Vidyalaya, Rajasthan: Under this scheme, particular emphasis has been given to the role of trained unemployed teachers. It aims to enhance the access to and quality of primary schools by enabling these teachers to adopt government-run one-teacher primary schools or open new schools in Public-Private Partnership (PPP) in the rural and backward areas of the state. All children living within an area of 3 kms can access these schools with government-sponsored vouchers. Such students will constitute 50 per cent of the school strength, while the remaining students would pay their own fees.

Both the Rajasthan schemes have been announced and are awaiting implementation.

In addition to these models, the following are some of the ways in which voucher pilots could be designed with private or government funds:

- Targeted vouchers could be introduced for specific under-served groups such as migrant children, out-of-school children, street children, girl children, ST/SC/OBC, Muslim children, differently-abled children, orphans, children from economically backward families, children of refugees, migrating tribes, and prisoners, and those living in peri-urban areas (e.g., resettlement colonies). Vouchers could be used to reward better performance of government schools. When a government school attracts voucher students, who could also go to a private school, the voucher amount could be given to the school/teachers as an incentive.
- Mobile schools for children of migrant populations could be supported by vouchers where one of the educated members of the community runs a school and gets rewarded with the vouchers. This would ensure that children of such communities receive education throughout the year.
- To encourage establishment of

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community schools, vouchers could be introduced specially in areas where there are no or very few government schools.

- School vouchers could be used to provide opportunity to enterprising principals/teachers to compete with the best in the industry. Such principals and teachers could opt for more managerial and financial autonomy with 100 per cent funding through vouchers.
- A city or state could decide that all new government schools would be funded through vouchers. The government would fix the voucher amount per student and the school would get money depending on the number of students it attracts and retains. A part of the payment could be tied to learning achievements of students.
- In educationally and economically poor areas, where there are no or very few government schools, universal vouchers can be given to all the children.

Private money is additional money in the system; so, the idea would be fully tested only if the pilots were funded by public money. A state can find money under the Innovations Fund of the SSA or by tapping the incremental part of the education budget, that is, by using the new money added over the last year's budget for voucher pilots without impacting the existing state schools.

Among the many ideas that are being considered to improve school education, vouchers deserve a try. There is sufficient theoretical and empirical evidence to sug-

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gest that vouchers could be the tool to expand choice for the poor, to put genuine pressure on state schools to perform, and to build a system that would strive to offer improved quality of education over time.

Let me end by referring to the 1948 UN Declaration of Human Rights, which also forms the basis for the current Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The Article 26 of the Declaration that deals with education says:

- Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory; technical and professional education shall be made generally available; and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit.
- Education shall be directed to the full development of human personality and to the strengthening of

respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance, and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace.

- Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children.

The Right to Education enshrined in the first two sections becomes meaningful only when it addresses the third section, that is, when it becomes the Right to Education of Choice! 