

New education prescription

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The Planning Commission's approach paper on education for the 11th Plan (2007-12) has advocated what is popularly called the 'voucher system', to attain the goal of universalisation of secondary education, gain academic excellence and create competition.

Simply explained, the voucher system would entail that government would give to parents "suitable entitlements reimbursable to the school" - public or private - chosen by them for their children. The commission feels this would "be a more powerful method of enforcing accountability to enable parents to choose the schools where they will send their children."

The commission also feels this would lead to creation of competition among schools. Therefore, the approach paper advocates that the voucher system be "tried in pilot schemes".

However, the votaries of the new scheme have not been able to showcase the success of the voucher system in any part of the world, developed or developing.

The commission justifies the voucher system on the ground that it would lead to academic excellence. To prove its point, it cites NGO Pratham's annual Status of Education Report, which painted a grim picture of the learning abilities of Class I to V school children.

However, the commission disregarded a more rigorous survey of learning abilities of rural-urban school children carried out by NCERT that showed a different picture.

At the root of the Plan panel's enthusiasm for the voucher system, is the research done in Hyderabad by James Tooley, professor of education policy in the University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, in just 15 schools serving children of low-income families.

Based on his study, Tooley suggested creation of the voucher system. In fact, his project even created a small scholarship scheme with a donation of \$10,000 to provide scholarships for 20 children in each of the 15 schools, to show the efficacy of system.

The poorest parents were selected by the schools and given a voucher to cover most, but not all, of the monthly fees.