

India growth story needs good quality education

Elementary Education Budgets:

In February last year, the finance minister took a bold stance by increasing the 2007-08 school education budgets by 35% to Rs 23,142 crore. This needs to be followed up this year with a similar effort. The key priorities in my opinion are:

- **Quality Infrastructure:**

To me, this is the most important equity issue considering that almost 85% of the children in our country are in government schools and they deserve much better schools. It is not acceptable that these children who don't have a choice are made to learn in dilapidated, leaky rooms sitting on the floor. In many schools, the current quality of access does not meet the government's own norms provided for in the Education Bill.

- **Teacher Pupil Ratio:**

Among the most crying needs for the development of the country is the quality of education. Several surveys, researches and reports have established the current poor quality beyond doubt. In my view, though several factors influence quality, the most critical factor that can influence quality is the teacher-pupil ratio. The current national average is 1:42. Our research has suggested that the quality is probably the best when the ratio is between 1:25 to 1:35. I am recommending an effective ratio of 1:35 with a rider that no single school will have a ratio of more than 1:40. And this is not a simple arithmetic average but needs deeper analysis to ensure proper implementation.

- **Mid-Day Meal Quality:**

The decision to provide mid-day meal to all children in elementary schools was the best thing to happen and has positively impacted health, attendance and reduction in drop-out rates. However, the current budget provision of approximately Rs 1.8 to 2.5 per meal in various states is unable to ensure achievement of the nutrition norms of the government itself. My estimate is that a decent, nutritious meal would cost at least of Rs 5. The government has to, therefore, double its current budget to bridge the gap considering that in many cases that is the only decent meal the child has. This will go a long way in making of a healthy, educated nation.

- **Separate Funds to Minimise Leakages:**

I feel it is absolutely critical to plug leakages through improving efficiency, rationalisation of utilisation and stoppage of misuse. I propose that a separate fund be created to ensure better utilisation of the current and enhanced budget. A budgetary provision of at least 2% of the total budget be made to monitor, research, evaluate efficiencies and rigorous audit of expenses incurred on key expense heads such as teacher attendance, classroom processes, independent assessment of schools, quality of teacher training, quality of school and classroom construction and quality of mid-day meal.

Further, the government should deploy some of the best public-private partnerships to ensure a meticulous, clean and transparent audit with a view to identify areas of inefficiencies and eliminate them. Through this budget, we need to take one more giant step forward to fulfill the commitment we have made to our children of quality universal education that facilitates a just, humane and equitable society.

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