

National Independent Schools Alliance (NISA) School Leaders Summit

Thursday and Friday, September 26-27, 2013
India International Centre, New Delhi

Compendium of Proceedings



Even after more than three years of enactment of the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (or more popularly the Right to Education or RTE) Act, many issues continue to remain unaddressed. Time and again, questions are raised, debated and more often than not, some suggestions that could possibly improve the state of education in India come up. Has the RTE Act, with all the good intent and over a thousand days of enactment in the country made quality education accessible to all?

The debate on whether to allow affordable (or low fee / budget) private schools (which may or may not fulfill all criteria mandated by the RTE for a school to be allowed to function) is an old one. However, with many studies revealing the success of such schools in improving learning outcomes of students and the growing interest of parents in sending their children to such schools with arguably less facilities over government schools with many attractions, the affordable private schools have a strong case.

The second edition of National Independent Schools Alliance (NISA) School Leaders Summit (SLS) held at India International Centre in New Delhi on Thursday and Friday, September 26-27, 2013 discussed a few issues from different perspectives of policy and practice.

Team NISA reports

The second NISA SLS was organized by Centre for Civil Society (CCS) with the support of Acumen Fund (AF), Friedrich Naumann Foundation (FNF) and Gray Matters Capital (GMC). The two-day event, which comprised of a national

conference on the first and a workshop on the second day, saw the participation of 186 delegates from 18 states of India.

Introductions and welcome

The conference was declared open by **Harsh Shrivastava** from CCS. Introducing the thought behind NISA, he explained how the alliance took shape in aftermath of the success of CCS' school vouchers programme. Harsh announced the plans of registering NISA as a trust, and emphasized that NISA members should come together and be able to -run schools better. He also mentioned the need of forming a pool of service providers, which will facilitate better learning outcomes in affordable private schools.

Harsh touched briefly upon the objectives and projected takeaways from the conference, as he explained the format of the sessions, which were richly mixed panels of policymakers and influencers, researchers and practitioners.

Section 1

About NISA: The NISA Impact

Bibhuti Bhardwaj from CCS gave a brief snapshot of NISA and toured the delegation through a brief history and development of the alliance. Sharing his own experience of establishing and growing NISA in different parts of India, he introduced NISA members who had gathered from various states of the country. Bibhuti shared how affordable private schools are dealing with multiple issues and how it is increasingly becoming difficult for them to operate. He also highlighted the success of CCS in being able to reach out to areas where there are no associations.

The keynote address of the alliance was delivered by **Kulbhushan Sharma** from NISA. He summoned the audience comprising of school owners, management, principals and teachers of affordable private schools and underlined that "NISA is a platform that will enable children to receive good quality education in affordable private schools". He argued that it is impossible for the bigger, expensive schools to provide education to all because of sheer spending limitations of many sections of parents and therefore, affordable private schools should be protected. Kulbhushan quoted various rules which impose financial burdens on affordable private schools and make it difficult for them to function, and contrasted such policies against research that shows that quality of education is much better in such schools.

Reasoning why the government is against affordable private schools, Kulbhushan emphasized that parents are willing to spend half or more of their income in educating their children and the government is eyeing that money. Adding that the Right to Education doesn't allow direct corruption, he mentioned that 40-50% of the total children in India go to affordable private schools, many of who have demonstrated greater learning outcomes. He also argued against the idea of giving government aids to affordable private schools for sheer probability of money-siphoning.

In his conclusive remarks, Kulbhushan said that NISA is a strong, robust national platform, which will empower the affordable private schooling lobby of India to send out their messages to the central and state governments.

Section 2

Address by Chief Guest

The second NISA SLS had **Madhu Goud Yashki**, Member of Parliament from Nizamabad, Andhra Pradesh. He shared examples from his constituency and shared how government schools function. As he put forward the State's perspective on education and the reach it enjoys in the remotest parts of the country, he emphasized upon the need to strike a balance between the government schools and the affordable private schools.

He congratulated NISA for the second SLS and expressed gratitude to the organizers for extending an invitation to him for an important summit like this, which discussed some crucial matters related to education of choice in India.

Section 3

Barriers to Choice of Education

The first panel of the day was moderated by well-known educationist **Amit Kaushik**, formerly with Ministry of Human Resource Development, who expressed disappointment with the fact that affordable private schools do not enjoy government support. Throwing the discussion open, he called the much-debated RTE to be “the last barrier to choice of education in India” mentioning that as many as 23 clearances are required to establish a school in Delhi.

He also put forward a few questions like “should the states impose regulations to restrict private unrecognized schools?” and “should a committee, like in Tamil Nadu, decide on what would be the fees in such schools?” to the panel, which comprised of Sridhar Rajagopalan from Educational Initiatives (EI), Geeta Gandhi Kingdon from Institute of Education, University of London (IoE, UK), Tejpal Singh from Punjab Private Schools Organization (PPSO) and RC Jain from NISA.

Quoting research from Hyderabad and building upon his own experience of setting up and running the Eklavya School in Ahmedabad, **Sridhar Rajagopalan** argued that quality education, irrespective of the cost, should be accessible to all. Building further a case for a system that ensures quality in education at a reasonable cost, he advocated that edupreneurs and affordable private schools should be allowed to exist and function. Sridhar highlighted an example from Gujarat, where the state committee met such schools to understand their problems and rules were made keeping in mind that affordable private schools imparting good quality education in the state would not have to close down.

Sridhar also suggested ideas to improve and maintain quality in the affordable private school education. He suggested a system where every year, around 25% schools would be assessed and granted permissions to continue to function, if they met the requirements on learning outcomes. Emphasizing that a school is only as good as the learning it imparts to children, he stressed upon the need of children to be able to perform well in diagnostic tests like TIMMS, PISA and ASSET. He also explained the importance of the right benchmarking, assessments and remedies to improve the quality of education in school education, with a brief mention of why vernacular language and contextualization play an important role in learning.

Bringing to the table some surprising findings from Uttar Pradesh’s state of school education, researcher **Geeta Gandhi Kingdon** cited some interesting studies. She reasoned that lawmakers at the Centre frame laws keeping in mind the schools in Delhi, while the realities are different on the ground. Geeta quoted examples from Uttar Pradesh, where there are less than 150-200 children in government schools, and more than 30% of the total rural children attend affordable private schools. Geeta questioned the basis of prescriptions made by the RTE on the qualifications of teachers and their salaries, and the provision of school inspection by any official of any department. She argued how contract teachers deliver better learning than the regular teachers.

Making a strong case from her research findings in favor of the rural edupreneurs, she argued that most of such schools operate on very low budgets with salaries of teachers which are to the tune of 5% of that of government school teachers in the same area. She also shared research to show that running an affordable private school in India doesn’t really leave the edupreneur with many profits, and that low salaries, humble infrastructure but generally qualified, passionate teachers and quality education form the backbone of such schools. She concluded with the argument that discouraging private edupreneurs will add to the number of out of school children in the country, which would be difficult to manage given India’s population.

To add some practical groundwork flavor to the discussion, **Tejpal Singh** shared the ground realities from his state of Punjab. He mentioned that the RTE imposed a lot of unfavorable implications on affordable private schools in Punjab. Explaining the concept of associate schools in Punjab, he argued that the association should be allowed to have contractual teachers and give them honorariums instead of salaries.

Tejpal posed a few pertinent and important questions to the audience – “why do the parents and students refuse to go to the government schools offering free mid day meals and free education?” and “why do they come to our affordable private schools, which sometimes don’t even have the basic facilities?”, he asked.

He put his views against the mandate of the RTE prescribed teacher qualifications, which may now restrict the entry of passionate and committed teachers who do not match the government qualification criteria. He said, “teachers are born, not made”. Tejpal also quoted the government’s recent take on the *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan*, an initiative for

universal basic education, which was due to be complete by 2020 and is now is likely to go on till 2030. Tejpal concluded by asking a straightforward question to the government – why does the government give itself 75 years to educate the nation, and give us only 3 years to implement the RTE act?

The following panel discussion after the presentations discussed in detail some crucial points. Some of these discussed the gaps in RTE while others suggested policy reform measures:

- RTE and Policy – (a) the government isn't very serious about education in India. Policies are formulated in closed rooms with no heed to actual ground realities; (b) does RTE aim to bring in standardization?; (c) why can't the government try to support affordable private schools instead of trying to regulate them?; (d) why can't there be autonomy by means of light touch legislations?
- Schools and teachers – (a) the RTE focuses on 1.35 million schools in India, 85% of which are run by the government. Should government have restricted its rules around RTE only to the government schools?; (b) there is a huge gap in salaries of teachers due to the pay commissions; for example, teachers in Bihar get 17-18 times higher salaries than the per capita income of the state, the figures for Uttar Pradesh stand at close to 12 times; (c) Delhi needs around 17000 more teachers to fill in vacancies in schools, where as many as 150+ children have to attend school on alternate days to study.
- Learning Outcomes – (a) better is not enough since the tests aren't testing for quality; (b) why can't there be a performance-linked pay for teachers?; (c) can't there be a training system within affordable private schools to improve the quality of teaching and learning, and thus, the outcomes?

Section 4

School Leadership Training

The second session was moderated by **Azad Oomen** from Central Square Foundation (CSF), who shared his own experiences of working in the education sector. Azad emphasized upon the importance of good school leadership in ensuring a healthy, conducive learning environment for children, which eventually forms the basis of how much and how good they grasp knowledge, retain and replicate it and are able to apply it in real-life conditions. The panel comprised of Aditya Natraj from Kaivalya Education Foundation (KEF) and Mohd Anwar from Empathy Learning Systems (ELS).

Drawing a close parallel between the Indian epic Mahabharata and the ongoing tussle on education between the government and affordable private schools, **Aditya Natraj** focused his talk around the importance of a good teacher in shaping the life of a child. Taking examples from his own experiments and experience of working with school leaders and teachers, he described the role of a teacher as an impactful, influential agent of change in children's life, which could transform them into thinking, able citizens or otherwise.

Aditya talked about the various aspects of delivering quality education to all by way of a 'meaning – pride – learning – joy' concept cycle, where the relationship between the teacher and-taught relies primarily on these core values, and has a better chance of delivering outcomes if there is a right balance of all the four elements in any learning activity. He also annulled the question of assessing quality of teachers by their qualification, testified by degrees or certifications. Aditya argued that is a war on quality – whoever delivers it, will have a winning edge in the long run.

Mohd Anwar also shared similar views as he made a neat, elaborate presentation encompassing the broad issues around training of school leaders. He took cues from the earlier analogy between education and Mahabharata as he shared his own example narrating his background, being born in a low income family and the various challenges related to educating children in such families.

Anwar also shared his experience of setting up and running affordable private schools in Andhra Pradesh and the need for affordable service providers, which eventually led to the establishment of Empathy Learning Systems along with the support of Professor James Tooley.

Section 5

Running of Great Low Fee Private Schools

The third panel discussed the various factors that go into running 'great' affordable private schools across the world. The panel was moderated by **Amitav Virmani** from Absolute Return for Kids (ARK), who congratulated NISA and CCS for doing a good job in choosing the word 'great'. He opened the session with a few questions (answers in parenthesis) to the audience – (a) how many people run or work for affordable private schools? (80%), (b) how many believe that affordable private schools can deliver quality education? (90%) and (c) how many believe that quality means where the child learns? (100%). He argued that RTE presents quality very differently, and it is all infrastructural and administrative.

Amitav threaded common things across schools of all types and shared the ARK example of the 27-school chain in UK. Putting down six pillars of great teaching, he mentioned (a) depth before breath, (b) focus on numeracy and literacy, (c) knowing the child, (d) longer working hours, (e) excellent teaching, and (f) exemplary courage, as the most vital aspects of education in affordable private schools.

The panel comprised of Siddharth Ajith from Gray Matters Capital (GMC), Ashok Thakur from Muni International Schools and Sheeladitya Ghosh representing Ashish Rajpal from iDiscoveri.

Siddharth Ajith opened his talk with the belief that two things will make a difference in the education sector in the near future – (a) the right technology and (b) the right analytics. He drew parallel to an example from the health care and hospitality sector. Siddharth said that the use of data to develop optimum learning enhancement solutions would be the thing of the future. Sharing examples from GMC's work, he explained that the teacher in the near future would acquire the role of an enabler, and each child will have its own pathway and pace of learning.

Contrasting and challenging the traditional style of teaching and learning through the medium of textbooks and classrooms, **Ashok Thakur** put forward a unique pitch to new-age education on the table. Through his internationally recognized and awarded no-books model at the Muni International Schools. Citing a host of anecdotal examples which demonstrated how application-based knowledge of concepts comes in handier and opens up avenues for a better life than text-book based theoretical *gyaan*, Ashok made a substantial point towards imparting learning that is useful against learning that serves no real purpose.

Sheeladitya Ghosh took the audience to the fundamentals of learning. Touring the delegation through the experience of learning to ride a bicycle, he tried to address the "what happens in a classroom?" question. He brought the audience into discussing the common things happen in a classroom or any other such learning environment. Sheeladitya then explained the 5A process of any teaching and learning activity from the iDiscoveri experience – aim, act, analyse and apply and assess – relating it to learning how to ride a bicycle again. Sheeladitya concluded the session with a suggestion to adapt from a viewpoint of good (and bad) teachers to good teaching.

Section 6

School Financing Models

The last session of the second NISA School Leaders Summit dealt with the various finance options available for affordable private school leaders. The panel comprised of Neeraj Sharma from the Indian School Finance Company (ISFC) and Lokesh Gupta from Spice Global (SG), and was moderated by Harsh Shrivastava from CCS.

Harsh Shrivastava started the discussion on the most important part of the game – money. He invited the panelists to share the available avenues with the affordable private school owners and also invited the delegation to put forward individual queries.

Two important questions surfaced almost immediately. These were (a) how to open an affordable private school? and (b) why do banks lend out huge amounts for higher education to individuals, but not for primary education to established schools?

Addressing the questions, **Neeraj Sharma** said that banks don't prefer to fund or lend funds to schools or the social sector, attributing it to a number of reasons – lending criteria are often conditional (subject to number of students and other variables), more than 99% affordable private schools collect fees in cash and thus, their audited balance

sheets are often not in order or suppressed etc. However, Neeraj argued that banks should keep primary education on a priority and institutions like National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD) which directly develop and fund schools should be promoted.

Lokesh Gupta threw light on the finer details of money lending in the primary education sector. Quoting his own experience, he shared that the amounts that Spice Global works with would involve INR 50L and above and they would ideally want to work with organizations with established record of successfully running affordable private schools. He also explained that investing in such a domain is more like a *bhagidari* venture (than a lending-receiving equation), where buying into shares of a school means buying into its profits or losses.

The panel also discussed the gray areas of lending in the domain, primary ones being the repayment of loans and differential funding patterns and mandates across states. Many individual queries from the delegation were answered by Neeraj and Lokesh. The session concluded with a consensus that if the cost of running affordable private schools could come down, the possibilities of lending will go up automatically.

Experiences from Gujarat

Umesh Singh Sodha from Jamnagar shared his experience spanning over 40 years in education, beginning with running coaching classes for 20 years, and then an affordable private school in 2005, which has now grown to 5 schools catering to 8000 children in Jamnagar. Umesh mentioned how private aided and semi-aided schools in the largest towns of Gujarat (Ahmedabad, Surat and Vadodara) failed, but affordable self-financing schools did well. He also explained a time when private schools in Gujarat charged as high as INR 40,000 for grades 11th and 12th and a school in Rajkot charged an exorbitant INR 150,000 per year for one class.

He concluded by congratulating NISA for the second year of SLS and said “NISA is a two year old kid today – it will have to grow into a 5, 10 and 20-year old tomorrow. If you have more members, we would be able to generate a better impact!”

NISA’s **Ekta Sodha** also congratulated the alliance for soaring higher and becoming bigger, clearer and better organized. She said, “NISA came because the government failed. We challenged it and started facing the challenge, too. Let’s stop blaming the government”. Ekta stressed upon the need to improve quality across all schools in the alliance, specially emphasizing upon the need for contextualizing inputs for better learning outcomes.

Ekta also mentioned about picking up the right fights directed at the right cause. She argued that there is a longer way to go than just winning over the government schools in imparting quality education. She concluded by saying that it is a failure as a school leader if you can’t reconstruct your assessments, and summoned the NISA members to commit to quality of education in the utmost sense, learning from failures and building upon successes.

Closure and vote of thanks

The closing remarks were given by **Nandini Sood** from CCS, who congratulated NISA for a successful year of growth and new establishments, and sent out wishes for years to come. **Bibhuti Bhardwaj** and **Mehek Rastogi** from CCS gave the vote of thanks as a fruitful day came to an end with a memorable evening.

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The second NISA SLS enjoyed a generous coverage by prominent media houses, which is available at <http://nisaindia.org/sls20113>

Photos are available at www.facebook.com/ccsindia

Check out the tweet-cast at www.twitter.com/ccsindia

For more information, please write to Mehek Rastogi or Bibhuti Bhardwaj