

Dated 3 February 2008

Dear Mr. Prime Minister,

As you have repeatedly emphasised, ensuring quality school education to all is the foundation upon which any further advances towards a knowledge society must be based. Noting the crucial importance of school education, the National Knowledge Commission (NKC) held a series of workshops and consultations around the country involving a very wide range of stakeholders, to discuss issues of quantity, quality and access in school education.

NKC recognises that the primary responsibility for school education is borne by the state governments, and therefore any policy changes must be with the full participation and involvement of the States. Nevertheless, NKC believes that positive changes in systems of schooling will require the active involvement of the central government as well state governments, not only in the matter of providing resources but also in promoting organisational and other changes.

We have a number of suggestions and recommendations covering the different aspects of school education, but the essential thrust can be summarised in terms of **more resources, more decentralisation and more flexibility**. The full set of recommendations, with details, is provided in the accompanying Note. This letter summarises the most important areas of possible intervention.

**1. Central legislation for the Right to Education, backed by financial commitment:**

NKC endorses the speedy enactment of a central legislation that will ensure the right of all children in the country to good quality school education up to Class VIII, supported with financial commitments of the central and state governments. This obviously requires substantially increased public spending for both elementary and secondary school education, which must be seen as a priority area for spending. Currently school education is highly segmented, even in government-run institutions, as a result of the parallel track of “education centres” in some states. These separate systems must be integrated to give all children access to schools of acceptable quality, which will obviously require additional spending.

**2. More flexibility in disbursement of funds:** However, there is a strong case for changes in the manner in which such expenditure is incurred. The current norms for central government disbursement to states of funds for , including for Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), the planned SUCCESS program for secondary education and other central schemes, are too rigid and must be made more flexible. NKC strongly recommends a system of funds transfer and accounting that will allow for regional and other differences as well as changing requirements over time, and thereby allow state governments to use the resources in the most effective way. There should also be greater flexibility in disbursing funds down to the school level and a greater degree of autonomy of local level management in the use of funds. The norms and rules should allow schools to adapt to local conditions and meet particular requirements of their students.

**3. Decentralisation and greater local autonomy:** Community participation is an important instrument to ensure accountability and improve the day-to-day functioning of schools. This in turn means that the management of schools, including the use and management of funds, should be decentralised to local authorities as far as possible, whether they be panchayats, Village

Education Committees or municipalities, and to School Boards that have representation of all stakeholders including parents.

**4. Expansion of functional literacy:** NKC would like to stress the continuing importance of a focus on expanding functional literacy among the population. Illiteracy remains a major problem, even among the age-group 15-35 years, and therefore literacy programmes must be expanded rather than reduced, and given a different focus that is directed towards improving life skills and meeting felt needs, especially (but not only) among the youth.

**5. Planning for school infrastructure:** It is important to remember that land is an essential requirement of schools, and this requirement is likely to increase in the near future given the expansion implied by demographic changes and need to ensure universal schooling. Therefore urban master plans and local development plans must explicitly incorporate the physical requirements for schooling, including provisions for play grounds and other school facilities.

**6. Enabling and regulating mechanisms for private schools:** Since private schools play an important role in the provision of education, there is need for both enabling and regulating mechanisms to be developed and strengthened for them. There should be transparent, norm-based and straightforward procedures for the recognition of private schools, to reduce harassment and bureaucratic delay. There should also be transparent criteria as for the disbursement of aid from the government to some self-financing schools, especially those which cater to underprivileged children, and clear norms with respect to the ability of school managements to raise resources from other sources. The monitoring of private schools, in terms of ensuring a transparent admissions process, regulation of fee structures, as well as meeting minimum set standards for quality of teaching and infrastructure, also requires attention. The possibility of greater exchange between schools, including mentoring of one school by another, should be allowed and encouraged.

**7. Database on school education:** Educational planning and monitoring are made much more difficult because of the lack of comprehensive and accurate data on schools, school-age children and actual attendance of both students and teachers. The collection and speedy dissemination of accurate and current data on schooling must be made a priority. It is necessary to create a complete database on schools and school-age children so as to track the actual coverage and quality of schooling at different levels, and to make it widely available in a timely manner. Such data collection may be made an essential part of the fund allocation for school education, with appropriate institutional mechanisms.

**8. More co-ordination between departments:** The multiplicity of management structures and government departments that currently governs schooling creates confusion, unnecessary replication and possibly inconsistent strategies across different schools. There must be greater co-ordination between different departments of government on school education policy, even while ensuring more autonomy to the local management of schools.

**9. National evaluation body for monitoring quality:** Educational administration also needs to be more conscious of actual learning outcomes at different levels, which will determine both policy and functioning. NKC therefore proposes a national evaluation body to monitor the quality of both government and private schools, using a results-based monitoring framework based on a short list of monitorable criteria that include both process and outcome indicators.

**10. Revamping school inspection:** The system of school inspection needs to be revamped and revitalised, with a greater role for local stake holders and greater transparency in the system. The solution does not lie in simply expanding the system – rather, we need to develop systems to ensure meaningful monitoring, including provision of greater facilities to school inspectors, a separation of inspection of qualitative and administrative aspects, transparency in the criteria of inspection, and greater involvement of local stakeholders.

**11. Teachers and teacher training:** Teachers are the single most important element of the school system, and the country is already facing a severe shortage of qualified and motivated school teachers at different levels. It is urgent to restore the dignity of school teaching as a profession and provide more incentives for qualified and committed teachers. Non-teaching official duties such as electoral activities should not be allowed to interfere with the teaching process. Forums that allow and encourage teachers to exchange ideas, information and experiences, including a web-based portal, should be developed.

At the same time, there should be transparent systems for ensuring accountability of school teachers. As far as possible, teachers should be recruited to particular schools.

The training of teachers is a major area of concern at present, since both pre-service and in-service training of school teachers is extremely inadequate and also poorly managed in most states. Pre-service training needs to be improved and differently regulated in both public and private institutions, while systems for in-service training require expansion and major reform that allows for greater flexibility.

**12. Reforms in the curriculum and examination system:** Curriculum reform remains a critically important issue in almost all schools. School education must be made more relevant to the lives of children. There is need to move away from rote-learning to understanding concepts, developing good comprehension and communication skills and learning how to access knowledge independently. This also requires substantial changes in the examination system, especially at Board level but also earlier.

**13. Use of Information and Communication Technology:** Wherever feasible, ICT should be made more accessible to teachers, students and administration for learning, training, research, administration, management, monitoring, etc. This requires the provision of more facilities such as computers as well as connectivity and broadband facilities. Computer-aided learning also requires training of teachers and other staff in order to make the best use of the technology.

**14. English language teaching:** Proficiency in English is widely perceived as an important avenue for employment and upward mobility, which also greatly facilitates the pursuit of higher education. The incorporation of English into the curriculum through the teaching of English as a language in Class I and teaching of one other subject in English medium in later classes requires making pedagogical changes to contextualise language learning, increasing the availability of English language teachers and providing more bilingual and supplementary teaching materials.

At the same time, multilinguality must be promoted and language issues must be explicitly taken on board in designing school curricula and methods of pedagogy.

**15. Interventions to ensure access of educationally deprived categories:** Special interventions are necessary to ensure greater access to education of educationally deprived categories, and some proposals for this are developed in more detail in the accompanying Note. Obviously, specific measures are required to ensure greater enrolment and retention of girl students.

Education of SC children must be a priority, which necessitates both flexibility of approach and avoidance of discrimination. The access of children from Scheduled Tribes requires more flexible and sensitive schooling strategies. Language issues must be explicitly taken on board in designing school curricula and methods of pedagogy. Special strategies are required to ensure greater access to schools for children in backward regions, remote locations and difficult terrains. Official strategies for ensuring better access of Muslim children to schooling are excessively focussed on madrassas which cater to only a tiny minority of such children; the emphasis should be on creating enabling conditions for Muslim children in the general school system. Children of seasonal migrants require special conditions and efforts to ensure continuous access to schooling. Similarly, labouring children require incentives and bridge courses. The needs of physically disadvantaged children, as well as teachers, have to be factored in more thoroughly in provisions for school education.

We realise that there is wide diversity across states in terms of progress towards achieving universal elementary education, and also diversity within states with respect to the quality of school education. But we believe that these proposals, which require the active involvement of the central government as well state governments, will go some way in terms of ensuring universal access to elementary education, wider access to secondary education as well as better quality and greater relevance of all schooling. Given the strong synergies between this and other areas such as libraries, translation, knowledge networks, etc., these suggestions should be seen in conjunction with other recommendations that have already been made in these other areas, as part of a systematic set of knowledge initiatives for the young.

We look forward to being engaged in taking these ideas forward.

With warm personal regards,

**Sam Pitroda**  
Chairman,  
National Knowledge Commission

Copy to

1. Sh. Arjun Singh, Minister Human Resources Development, Government of India
2. Sh. Montek Singh Ahluwalia, Deputy Chairman, Planning Commission, Government of India