

A tutorial for the minister

Purke's desire to improve the quality of school education may be good, but he could end up harming the very cause

Vasant Purke, Maharashtra's minister for schools, is an honourable man. And like most honourable men, he has honourable intentions.

He wants to improve the quality of school education in Maharashtra. He is horror-struck by the data non-government bodies have put before him. He is livid that educational standards have slipped below even those of Bihar. And he is willing to crack the whip. His views are commendable. But most academics fear that the minister may be cracking the wrong whip, at the wrong place and at the wrong time.

Hence this tutorial, which may be useful for the minister.

First, that education begins with the teacher. If the teacher is good, students learn. If the teacher is bad, students don't. Expecting students to learn from private coaching classes, from surrogate 'guides' and *kunjis* brought out by ensnaring pub-

licity than a freshly recruited teacher? Do such measures enhance the teacher's respect?

Shouldn't someone enlighten the minister that good teachers are bound to opt for better-paying jobs, than opt for the miserable wages offered by the government in schools? The solution: increase the salaries of teachers, but only of those who agree to annual recertification. Start baseline tests (linked to generous salary hikes) for teachers, not students. Wean good teachers back to the teaching profession.

And one more thing. Abolish mass promotions at the primary school level. Nobody seems to have explained to the minister the disastrous consequences of such a policy. Here are some of them:

1. When a student knows that he (or she) cannot be failed, the pressure on him to meet the minimum benchmarks also gets eased. That encourages many students to take their studies and tests less seriously.

2. When a school or a state does not filter out students who should not be allowed to proceed to the next higher class (normally between 10% and 25% of total students enrolled at any given time), this could mean an unwelcome load of almost 40% to 60% of the students in Class VI (see table).



Class acts

The people most happy with the minister for schools today are publishers of guide books and *kunjis*, and the owners of tutorial classes

Maintain standards, but first of teachers, then of the educational environment

Only then will it be fair to crosscheck with students whether they have actually learnt

lishers is not the solution. Therefore, to help students learn better, it is imperative that the minister first looks at the quality of teachers.

Second, that learning becomes easier when the environment is conducive to learning. And this starts with classrooms that are not next to toilets that stink terribly. These classrooms should not leak during the rains, are well-lit, and do not have all their windowpanes shattered, leaving students to play hide-and-seek with the rain and the sun when actually they ought to be studiously listening to the teacher.

Someone should inform the minister that an environment conducive to learning means other things as well. Like, upholding the dignity of the teacher. He needs to be treated with more respect than in the recent past. The minister should ask the education department why a freshly recruited peon in a government school gets a higher

What filters help achieve

Class	Min. avg. failures	No of students who are 'passable'
I	10%	90
II	10%	81
III	10%	73
IV	10%	66
V	10%	59

3. Since few school managements and state governments have the political will to detain 40-60% of the students at one go, at the class V level, the results are predictable. 'Bright' students find that good teachers are compelled to repeat even simple topics for the benefit of the 'weak' students. The result: 'weak' students fail to understand, as their basics are in a bad shape; 'good' students lose interest as teachers are compelled to stoop to the level of students who are 'backward'.

The solution? Insist on stricter examinations year-on-year. Abolish mass promotions. And give school managements the power of detaining students who do not perform well. Somebody ought to advise the minister that the rot must never be allowed to reach the top.

It is also imperative to buttress this with remedial classes for genuinely weak students; and to improve the text books students are compelled to study.

Finally, do maintain standards, but first of teachers, then of the environment. Only then will it be fair to crosscheck with students whether they have actually learnt.

If that is not done, the minister may actually end up increasing the sales of guide books, *kunjis* and even enrolments to tutorial or coaching classes. Not surprisingly, the people most happy with the minister for schools are publishers of such books and owners of such classes. That would, sadly, make Mr Purke a minister for tutorial classes and publishers of guide books or *kunjis*.