



# Subir Gokarn: Strategy and structure in education

**Sibal's proposals can be viewed as the end game of a complete overhaul of the primary education system**

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Sibal's proposals can be viewed as the end game of a complete overhaul of the primary education system, says Subir Gokarn.

The recent proposals by Human Resources Development (HRD) Minister Mr Kapil Sibal to dramatically change the structure of school certification are, hopefully, the beginning of a purposive debate on reforming the primary education system. Much attention was paid to the suggestion that the 10th standard board examination be scrapped (or made optional).

This is not surprising, since it is the most visible manifestation of the system as far as the “consumers” — kids in school and their parents — are concerned. Receiving a little less attention but equally significant in their implications for an overhaul of the system were suggestions about a common national examination board and common entrance examinations to post-secondary courses.

But, little purpose would be served by piecemeal changes that pander to consumer sensitivities (assuming that they can be implemented). The appropriate structure and coverage of the school certification system must be seen in the broader context of what the system is trying to accomplish. To use business historian Alfred Chandler's terminology, “strategy” should drive “structure”, not the other way round.

No one would seriously question the assessment that our primary education system is seriously inadequate in terms of access and coverage. Way too many kids either do not go to school at all or drop out much before they reach the certification stage. There is also great concern, although much less consensus about alternatives, with what is being taught in schools. The scope of reform has to encompass both these dimensions — capacity and content. As far as timing is concerned, while we certainly should have begun the process earlier, it is not yet too late, because the constituency for the reform will remain enormous for some time to come.

This can be gauged from the trend in number of kids in the age group 5-14. According to the United Nations Population Projections (2006 series), India will have 248.3 million of them in 2010. This will grow slightly to 248.5 million in 2015, before starting to decline gradually. It will, however, still be 247.3 million in 2020. In other words, there will be enough consumers for the service for some time to come. But, the fact that the number is showing signs of plateauing implies that the benefits of a major re-structuring will not be neutralised by a massive increase in numbers. The situation lends itself to radical change now, followed by a period of stabilisation and consolidation.

The goals and strategy of the primary education system must be defined in terms more fundamental than passing a board exam. What attributes do we want our kids to enter adult life with? I would submit that there are four “core” and two “elective” attributes. The former should be imparted to every student, implying that they constitute the focus of the first few years of primary education, with a largely common curriculum. Two of these attributes are behavioural, which I would label “values” — ethics, appropriate conduct in a social context, respect for law and institutions — and “teamwork” — individual responsibility and accountability within the framework of collective effort and outcomes. The other two are the more conventional literacy and numeracy, each with an appropriate component of IT.

I think that about five or six years of exposure are adequate for this phase, implying that this is the right time for the first formal certification. This need not be in the form of a board exam; it can merely be a certificate of completion, indicating that the kid has been exposed to the content mandated by the “core attributes” strategy. The great virtue of this is that it largely de-stigmatises the unfortunately labelled “drop-out”. On the basis of this certification, the kid is now in a position to move to the “elective” phase of the process. If he chooses not to, he at least has something to show for the five or six years that he did spend in the system.

The elective attributes are based on the traditional distinction between academic and vocational streams. The former is closest to what kids are currently doing in the higher classes, including the 11th and 12th standards. It would provide domain knowledge in an inter-related set of disciplines as a foundation for university or equivalent education subsequently. The latter would focus on marketable skills, which would allow the kid to seek employment immediately after the certification. But, besides these distinctions, there would be a common foundation to both streams, reinforcing the value system, creating some general awareness about history, culture and so on and imparting some practical skills like personal finance, driving and so on.

At the end of this process, a formal certification is clearly required, which goes beyond mere completion and differentiates the young adult in terms of proficiency and competence. How this is done — by percentages, grades or percentiles — is less important than its ability to provide a broad national comparability. This is the premise underlying the minister’s proposals, but with the added refinement of having two separate streams with distinct clientele — universities and employers.

In short, the two most prominent aspects of the plan for change are, logically speaking, the end result of a process that re-orientates the structure of the education and certification systems so that it is aligned with their goals and strategies. To see them as ends in themselves is to achieve little more than cosmetic change.

From a political economy perspective, while the constituency for the change is large, it needs to be mobilised. On the other hand, the potential sources of resistance are entrenched and well-organised. School managements and teachers need to be persuaded that the new order will not prove to be terribly disruptive. Building up the capacity to provide vocational education, for which the majority of students is likely to opt, will require a large commitment of resources as well as choices with respect to where it is to be housed — in existing institutions or in new ones. Finally, the centre-vs-state issue on the right to certify high school students will have to be addressed. But then, these are battles that all reformers fight before they succeed. It is not just the future of the 250 million 5-14-year-olds that is at stake here.

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