

Publication: The Asian Age

Date: 28 June 2009

28 June 2009, Delhi

Sunday special

THE AGE

Ne

HRD minister Kapil Sibal wants to throw mugging out of school education. We ask experts why this is important and how it can be achieved.



PHOTO: S. SURENDER

From rote to learning



ASHISH RAJPAL

SINCE HIS appointment four weeks ago, human resources development minister Kapil Sibal has been receiving a lot of free advice and attention. The reason is simple — he has commenced a new innings with bold action-talk that is atypical of people in his position. He has spoken of a lot of change: deregulating education, reforming higher education, investigating deemed universities, revamping vocational education, scrapping the dreaded Class X board exams and introducing GRE style tests. All are ideas in his "100-day action plan". But what will he do first?

Without it being said explicitly, school education rightly seems to be Mr Sibal's first priority. There is already sufficient evidence that our new education leadership has some empathy for the challenges of the school's harassed trinity: the children, the

parents and the teachers. Mr Sibal wants "cramming and relentless mugging" to go so that schools become centres of "joyful learning". He has also talked of a more progressive grading system with more emphasis on internal assessments as opposed to one-time annual high-stakes examinations that further the cult of mindless memorisation. Sweet melody to any sensible ear.

But most schools are not like this. The "system" is built around accumulating vast amounts of information as quickly as possible and testing, at annual intervals, what a child's "retention" capacity is. The teacher in turn runs classrooms to efficiently "cover" as much syllabus as possible in the shortest possible time, does all the talking and routinely tells children to "keep quiet". Children are reduced to passive learners. Certainly not fun, and a poor preparation for work as well as life.

The dream and vision of a meaningful and rounded school education that is relevant to real life is not new. J. Krishnamurthy spoke of education without fear, Sri Aurobindo advocated "free progress", and Mahatma Gandhi's *Nai-Talim* emphasised vocational skills and dignity of labour.

Recently, the NCERT's National Curricular Framework 2005 made a substantial case around two common sense principles: make the classroom content more useful to children in real life; shift away from tiresome rote learning to methods that make learning enjoyable.

Yes, classrooms can be fun. This year when I taught fourth graders about "water", we explored the water cycle through condensing water out of steaming kettles in class, practiced ways of purifying water through sedimentation and filtration, and a visit to the Sonia Vihar water plant helped realise what it takes to get clean water at home. An abstract concept like "surface tension" comes to life when children play

with bulging droplets on 50-paise coins or watch open-mouthed a live demonstration of an insect "walking" on water.

In a rapidly changing world, "knowledge" itself has a shorter shelf-life. What will remain more useful to children is the ability and hunger to learn. This is better achieved by a more active-learning process which involves doing, discussing, questioning and cooperating with one another. Just as children will have to do when they get to the workplace. If you visit Kiran Sethi's Riverside School in Ahmedabad, or Mary Roy's painstakingly created Pallikoodam in Kottayam, or the Yenepoya School in Mangalore, you will see all this and more. Many new and progressive schools in large and small towns are taking important steps towards a child-centered education. However, these are a tiny minority, often one of privilege, run by inspired personalities. So why don't we have more schools which are about real learning? The truthful answer is because

100-day plan

- ▶ Scrap Class X boards as they are an unwarranted source of anxiety in a system that's overloaded anyway.
- ▶ Replace marks with an evaluation system based on percentiles and grades in classes IX and X.
- ▶ Do away with state boards and have a single uniform board across the country.

"zero cram" teaching is hard to do. And it is harder for poorly motivated, poorly paid, and poorly trained teachers. At an education conference I attended at Harvard a few years ago, a research suggested that teaching "well" meant that teachers would end up spending up to three times the time in preparing lessons in their first year. Executing in class, continuously and consistently, would be hard too. Further, open learning environments where students question more and have more free-

dom are harder to manage. So the only thing that will work is a better mousetrap. A complete last-mile solution that shows each teacher how to teach each child, in each class, to each child; that specifies assessment, activities, text, resources and gives them training and coaching, and over time lets them become the experts. iDiscoveri is doing it in 150 schools across the country and seeing results. Our research over the past few years shows up to 20 percentage point difference in the learning results of children when taught through a detailed hands-on curriculum in science and maths. Once this begins to happen everywhere, we'll have a generation of bright, curious, creative and confident learners. Children who will say: "Let's figure it out", and not "It's not in my syllabus!"

ASHISH RAJPAL has an Ed.M from Harvard University and is co-founder and MD of iDiscoveri Education. He can be reached at rajpal@idiscovr.com