

Speech for Hon'ble Minister, HRD for Inaugural Function of COBSE Conference on 24th August, 2009.

Introductory Remarks

I am here at the invitation of the Council of Boards of School Education (COBSE) in India, the acquaintance of which, though new to day, would hopefully be closer in years to come. I understand that in the past at the instance of my Ministry COBSE readily took up projects and programmes on concerns like De-stressing Examinations, Grading System, Teaching of Science in Schools and more recently a Programme on Adolescence Education. I am, indeed, very happy to be here to inaugurate the National Conference of all the State Boards of School Education in the country. This National Meet provides an excellent opportunity for stake holders in the school sector to interact with each other, share experiences and discuss matters of common interest.

I would prefer to confine myself to discussing issues and concerns that have an important bearing on the role and functions of Boards of School Education.

Universalization of Secondary Education (USE)

At the outset I would like to mention 'Expansion, Inclusion and Excellence' as the overarching principles to guide us in our efforts to revamp the school education in India. Encouraged by the success of the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) in creating a growing demand for secondary education, the Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India adopted the Universalization of Secondary Education (USE) as our future vision. . By USE we mean all girls and boys in the country should have an access to secondary education as per principles of justice and equality enshrined in the Indian constitution. That would mean all girls and boys in the age group of 14-18 years should be studying in some secondary school. Besides being a goal, USE should essentially be seen as a strategy for further development of the Indian society into knowledge / learning society, vibrant with innovative ideas as well as capable of ensuring a sustainable quality of life.

Secondary Education in Education Commissions' Reports

There has been consistent endeavour to bring about changes in the examination system and curriculum transaction from time to time. The indication of changes has been reflected in the reports of many commissions and committees including the National Curriculum Framework [NCF] developed by NCERT as well as National Policies on Education announced by the Government of India from time to time.

The decade of 1970's is remembered for the introduction of the 10+2 pattern of schooling and the decade of 1980's for initiating the National System of Education with a Common Core Curriculum in all schools of the country as a

follow up to the National Policy on Education, 1986. We are a multi-religious and multi-cultural society with a bewildering variety of beliefs, customs and practices. Hence, the efforts were largely directed towards two major challenges; one, how to build multicultural harmony out of diversity, and two, how to strike a balance between meritocracy and inclusion, between excellence and equity.

Secondary education is of great importance in the educational hierarchy. It impacts the quality of higher education and world of work in a very large measure. The first attempt by the Government of India to address the issues related to secondary education was made through the now well known Mudaliar Commission way back in 1952. As a consequence, several issues and concerns including the question of improving the evaluation system and the need to strengthen the school-based assessment came to be highlighted. More than a decade later the Kothari Commission [1964-66] played a vital role in shaping the school education in the country. It was this Commission, which made an effort to give secondary education a distinct status. It recommended that each State should have an independent board of school education; thus ensuring an autonomy of secondary education from the university system. In fact, many State Boards came into being as a consequence of this recommendation. Many States enacted statutes to create State Boards of School Education. It was further, suggested by the Kothari Commission that Boards would look after the entire spectrum of school education. However, to achieve this objective, the Boards need to be strengthened by State governments with the help of the Central government, especially in view of Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan (RMSA) being operationalized.

School boards exist in almost all States, but their autonomy varies from State to State. State governments in some cases continue to play a dominant role in the functioning of the Boards. I am told the Council of Boards of School Education (COBSE) provides a forum for the Boards to interact with each other frequently. As a result, various Boards have been able to initiate reforms in the content and process of education which includes evaluation as well. I understand COBSE has also worked considerably in strengthening the Continuous and Comprehensive Evaluation [CCE] including the introduction of the grading system. Many of the COBSE's recommendations which were evolved in consultation with its Board members, have been implemented by different State Boards.

The objective of these efforts was to ensure access, affordability and quality. WE know good quality education not only ensures a reduction in poverty and powerlessness, but also creates choices and aspirations. That is why my Ministry has recently announced a few initiatives to reform school education, with a special focus on de-traumatizing examinations and on making learning a happy experience. It is in this context that I would draw your attention to the National Curricular Framework, 2005 which suggested that there be no Board examination up to class VIII. The Framework further, recommends that class X Board examination be made optional. As a priority my Ministry wants to urgently take steps to make Board examination for Grade 10 level optional. This initiative of ours has received very positive response from parents and students. In order

to dispel some misgivings on the initiative, let me make it clear that to begin with we will first introduce the idea in CBSE-affiliated schools. The CBSE model, I think, will serve as a practical example for State Boards to either adopt if they like or adapt with modifications as per their local needs and requirements. Let me also mention it here that making Class X examination optional does not imply that class 10th examination would be abolished altogether. We do not advocate this idea for all the schools or for all the students. Such students and schools as would like class 10th examination to be conducted by the Boards should be allowed to do so. The idea is to concentrate more on teaching/learning process rather than on examinations. To me, examination should be an integral part of the teaching/learning process. This culture of integrating evaluation with the teaching/learning process needs to be developed. We should continue to bring reforms in the field of examination with a view to improve the quality of education. There is a need to make examinations more meaningful. They should not merely test students' ability to remember facts. It should test students' ability to analyze and apply knowledge in different contexts. Unless related to socio-cultural and physical environment, education would be meaningless. A good examination system can ensure relevance of education to student's environment. In order to make this happen we will have to ensure capacity-building of teachers and greater trust in their ability to objectively assess their students. It would also require Boards to strengthen CCE. We need to work with schools and teachers to enable them to make CCE or School-based Evaluation more credible and reliable.

I am informed COBSE has been proposing a much greater flexibility in the evaluation system. It has taken initiative to introduce and strengthen school-based evaluation and grading system. The quality of schools widely differs in our country. We have some schools managed and run by private bodies. There is a general perception, though this may not necessarily be correct, that education imparted by privately managed schools is qualitatively better than by schools managed by government. We need to look into the reasons for this and ensure that all children receive quality education, irrespective of the fact whether they are in the private or government schools. We need to develop a mechanism for better interaction between privately managed and government-managed institutions. We have to ensure that there are different models of evaluation system developed by Boards to make them more meaningful. The added advantage in your National Meet is the sharing of mutual experiences with some foreign Boards such as Mauritius, Nepal, Pakistan, Bhutan, Cambridge and France as well, which are COBSE's associate members. We have to ensure attainment of minimum common standards by students. We have also to look towards what is happening elsewhere in the developed countries.

Concluding Remarks

While seriously attempting to revamp the school education, we can't lose sight of matters of huge concerns for all of us. One study found out that 25% of public

sector teachers were absent during the survey. Absence rates ranged from 15% in Maharashtra to 71% in Bihar. Another study found that only about half were teaching in their classes. It is a matter of great satisfaction that we have increased the enrolment for both girls and boys tremendously, but the dropout rates for classes I – X being 63.88 for girls and 60.41 for boys are very disturbing in deed. The enrolment at the secondary and senior secondary education is rising steadily, but the enrolment ratio or the transition rate is still under 50%. A wide gender gap still remains as only 1/3rd of students are girls. 2003-04 data by the National Institute of Educational Planning and Administration revealed that only 3.5% of primary schools in Bihar and Chhattisgarh had toilets for girls. An additional disturbing factor is that rich-poor, minority-non-minority and urban-rural gaps have not narrowed to our satisfaction. There is a significant mismatch between demand and supply at the secondary level. To put it in terms of quality, we have not yet significantly moved from the current information-driven approach to a skill-driven and value-driven approach.

I have picked up this selected data only to highlight the enormity of the challenges before us. We have to work together to meet these challenges head on. There is a need for all the bodies dealing with school education, like NCERT, SCERTs and the Boards to interact with each other to sustain the quality of school education. We specially require cooperation of all the bodies functioning in the field of school education to strengthen the quality of teacher training programme, which, to my mind, is the most important input for sustaining the quality of school education in the country.

All of us are now convinced that the investment in secondary education today will bring huge economic and social benefits. The spin-off will be in the form of lower Total Fertility Rate, better health and intergenerational, inter-caste and inter-class mobility especially in view of the growing number of educated women. I wish very fruitful deliberations in this Conference. It is often said that, "It is any time better to discuss a problem thoroughly without arriving at a solution than to arrive at a solution without discussing the problem." But I am sure you will come out as a result of your deliberations with meaningful suggestions and recommendations for future action.