



**GUEST EDITOR**

# Making the system respond

By Rohini Nilekani

It's been a good year in Bangalore and Karnataka for primary education.

The Right to Education Bill will soon become law and the state is gearing up to put mechanisms and resources into place to get the last child into school. The numbers of children enrolling into class one, has shown continuous improvement. Some infrastructure development – addition of classrooms, toilets etc., has taken place. Much more is needed but it will happen.

We are seeing a much greater focus on learning outcomes and teaching quality in the recent past. Several stakeholders have partnered with government to make this happen. NGOs prominently have been able to improve the quality of demand on the public sector by mobilizing parents and communities. When people begin to ask the right questions with confidence, the system

begins to respond. What are the children studying? Why is the teacher not in school? Why can't my children read? Why is there no toilet in the school?

In the Bangalore Mahanagara Palike (BMP) too, the education department has come increasingly under the public scanner in the past two years. And it is responding. Many school facilities have been upgraded. The BMP is working actively with both NGOs and the corporate sector to improve infrastructure as well as academic scores, which still lag behind the average state school performance. The BMP is about to face a much bigger challenge. The state government is very keen that the municipality should take on

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the running of all state schools within its jurisdiction. This is in keeping with the spirit of, and the laws for, decentralized government. Right now, the BMP is playing ostrich, its head firmly in the sand. But it will have to come up soon for air and face reality.

These are all positive signs of social mobilization around the idea of universal access to primary school, which has been late in coming to our country. Until now, there has not been enough outrage that generations of children have remained without schooling, without the empowering joys of reading and writing and sharing the knowledge of the world.

All that is changing and we are on the threshold of declaring that more than 90% of our children are in school (Even in the most developed countries, it is rare to find 100% enrollment).

This success itself breeds other problems of far reaching consequence. If all the children enrolling in class one wanted to continue beyond the 7th standard into high school, does the system have enough capacity to absorb these children? Unfortunately not. And even where there is access to a high school, the children's performance at the 10th standard exams shows that we are not developing sufficient functional literacy.

Today, the ugly truth is that there is a sharp drop-off in attendance at around the fifth and sixth standard. Maybe the system is dulled into complacency, thinking this is how it will be. There is no need for it to be so. We need public outrage now.

Let's not make the mistakes we made about primary schooling for all.

Let's look ahead and plan now for universal high school access, and beyond. Let's start to build the constituencies around this idea. Unless all stakeholders – government, parents, teachers, elected representatives, future employers and the children themselves are actively involved, the creation of a quality secondary school system will not happen anytime soon.

It's time for new resolutions. This might be a good one to make.

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