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Bangladesh-children : Giving children a voice in education

By Tabibul Islam

Three years away from a goal to universalise primary school education, the Bangladesh government has adopted a new strategy to ensure children stay in school and learn how to read and write.

After years of telling communities what it thinks is best for them, the government has decided to share control of education and ask students, parents and village elders to assist in running primary schools and help decide curricula.

The project called the IDEAL (acronym for Intensive District Approach to Education for All) School Project was launched in a few schools in 1995 by the government's Mass Education Division, and has already produced amazing results.

Apart from a high enrollment rate, drop out rates which have in the past consistently frustrated every government effort to increase the rate of literacy, have sharply fallen in the 2,800 schools spread over 10 thanas that are being run in the new way.

Also more excitingly for

child rights advocates, for the first time, children in Bangladesh are exercising their right to decide what and how they should be taught—a right enshrined in the Convention for the Rights of the Child, which Bangladesh was among the first to ratify in 1990.

Says Selim Ahmed, UNICEF programme officer, "One has to see it personally to believe how enthusiastically people are embracing the IDEAL school concept... everyone is cooperating in the running of these schools."

One of the world's poorest countries, Bangladesh has a serious problem of illiteracy: In a country of 120 million, only 32 percent of its men and 26 percent of its women read and write.

Though there is a school run by the government or non-governmental organisation (NGO) in nearly every village and enrollment rates in 1996 were 92 percent, drop out rates have stayed high. Only one out of every five children who join primary school, reach the

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fifth grade.

Government officials are now banking on the IDEAL school project, which is going to be introduced in all public primary schools, to strengthen the school system. A senior official in the education department here, who did not want to be identified, also pointed out that by involving local people in the running of schools, the project planners have ensured that parents now share the responsibility for the success of the project.

Already, the government has redrawn its goals for education to be met by the year 2000. Apart from raising the rate of enrollment in primary schools to 95 percent, the government wants to make sure at least 70 percent of students finish school.

Other goals are to raise the quality of education—a new primary school curriculum was introduced nationwide between 1992 and 1996—and reduce the gap between the number of boys and girls who finish school. According to UNICEF, Bangladesh has taken some initiatives to make teachers sensitive to gender issues, but there is a lot that still has to be done.

By deciding to keep 60 percent of teaching jobs for women, the government has raised the enrollment and retention rate of girls in primary school. "Gender disparity in primary school enrollment has virtually disappeared," the government says in its State Party Report submitted to the Committee monitoring the implementation of the Child Rights convention, held in Geneva last week.

From a ratio of 34 girls to 66 boys in 1980, enrollment

in primary school has risen to 50 girls for every 51 boys in 1994. But with only one-third of primary school graduates entering secondary school, only one out of three enrolled are girls. Like in India, girls are discriminated against in Bangladesh. They are the first to be pulled out of school in times of family crisis.

Another reason is the absence of toilets for girls in most village schools. In secondary school, girl students are teenagers and they cannot go out in the open.

Part of the 72 million dollars given by UNICEF to the government's IDEAL school project, will go to build toilets, renovate or rebuild schools and put blackboards in every classroom. A 1994 study by UNICEF and UNESCO found that apart from a high teacher-student ratio in schools most lacked even the basic facilities to encourage school attendance.

Primary school education was made compulsory in Bangladesh in 1993. Text books are free, and in some schools, free writing materials are also distributed. For girls, the government has also waived the fees for the first two years of secondary school, and is paying them a monthly stipend during grades 6 to 10.

Roughly 80 percent of Bangladesh's development expenditure has been financed by foreign donors. Education has been a major beneficiary, but traditional teaching practices and a curriculum that did not reflect the need to provide children with livelihood skills meant that most poor parents felt schools were for the rich. More than half of Bangladesh's 120 million people survive in absolute poverty.